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I SHALL
SURVIVE USING
POTIONS!

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– Potion-danomi de Ikinobimasu –

- VOLUME 9 -

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[J-NOVEL CLUB]

Ah...

*There was
no way Munō
would accept
such terms.*

"Bring the lord here at once! Once that's done, you'll hand this shop's products over at a discounted price. Then I'll merge this shop into my own and I'll let you work for me again!"





CONTENTS

- | | | |
|---------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Chapter 71 | * | Battle of Trading Companies |
| Chapter 72 | * | Trader Shop |
| Chapter 73 | * | Kurth Trade Company |
| Chapter 74 | * | Legitimate Company Head |
| Chapter 75 | * | Contact With Nobles |
| | | |
| Side Story 1 | * | The Children's Day Off |
| Side Story 2 | * | KKR |

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CHAPTER 71

BATTLE OF TRADING COMPANIES

Muno and his two companions grinned with their heads bowed, their expressions hidden from view. They would pledge loyalty to their employer, but only if said employer was deemed worthy.

It was likely that Drane planned to temporarily promote Muno and place him under his second son, Roderich, then have him go back to being a branch manager when Roderich returned to the royal capital. However, Roderich couldn't stand the idea of being nagged by Muno and the others, so he had demoted them to employees without titles in order to replace them with his associates and run the show himself. Once that was done, he'd tried to make them swear their absolute loyalty to him, so that he could make them do all of the work and then discard them.

Anyone who made an enemy out of the Relinas Trading Company wouldn't be able to work in-country as a merchant, and even if they tried to work in another field, there were an infinite number of ways to harass them. Roderich didn't think there was any way they would consider quitting.

It was likely Roderich had done this all on his own, and that the head of the company, Drane, didn't hold any ill will toward Muno and his crew. If Drane had offered to rehire Muno's team at the main branch along with several dozen gold coins as severance, a bonus, or even a token of apology, Muno and his men wouldn't have held Drane and the Relinas Trading Company responsible, and would have instead considered an amicable solution with them.

However, the only thing Drane ended up providing them was a cheap apology that didn't cost him a thing. He didn't offer to help them find new work, or to write a letter of recommendation, or any payment as an apology. The betrayal Muno and his team felt therefore overshadowed any sense of obligation they had incurred up to that point and felt this was reason enough to cut Relinas and Drane loose completely.

As such, they chose to move forward with the original plan. To move on to the next step, they were to obtain a statement in writing that would explain that Muno and his team were not at fault for what was to come. Such a document would make them

immune to any complaints Relinas Trading Company might raise later on. If they were subsequently reproached by other merchants, that document would clearly show who had truly acted in bad faith.

Muno's team was earnest and sincere, but they weren't fools or cowards. They had no intention of being disposable tools for anyone who betrayed or mocked them, and they were capable of getting as angry as anyone else. Yet, under normal circumstances, they might have simply taken the abuse without doing anything to save their skin. But if they had the powerful backing from the household of an earl and local lord, the three merchant houses representing the territory, and noble girls who brought in high-ticket items and sold them wholesale at low prices, they could come out on top. There was no need to roll over and take the abuse with such a golden opportunity in front of them.

Of course, they'd had the option to avoid risk by simply getting hired at some other business and starting over from the bottom, especially those who had wives and children to take care of. But as single men with little to lose, Muno and his team had instead decided to go for broke. They hadn't wanted to live their lives as lowly sycophants, getting betrayed and trampled upon without doing anything about it.

Muno and his men accepted the document from Drane, then bowed and thanked him. Drane was nodding with satisfaction as they left him behind.

"That went just as expected," one of Muno's men said.

"Yes... I would have considered making accommodations for him and his eldest son, Russel, if he had shown some good faith, but it seems there's no need for that," Muno replied.

"I agree. Favors should be repaid with favors, and courtesy should be repaid with courtesy in kind. If he intended to discard us without recompense, there's no need to give him any consideration," the other subordinate noted.

"Exactly," Muno concluded.

Muno and his two subordinates were all in agreement. And so, the business direction for Tavolas Trade Company and its branch in the royal capital was set. Now they just had to secure a storefront through a realtor, submit paperwork to the Commerce

Guild, then hire staff and furnish the interior. Preparations for shipping out products should have been underway at the Tavolas main branch, which would include various specialty products, normal items, and exotic imports from distant lands provided by Little Silver.

These three and the staff member who had stayed at the main branch had been working tirelessly at the Relinas Trade Company head office before being assigned to the Tavolas branch. They had built up connections with business partners and acquaintances in the capital during that time and were well-known within the Commerce Guild. They weren't starting from nothing in an unfamiliar line of work, but were rather reopening a business in a field where they were already firmly entrenched. They knew the suppliers, the buyers, and the types and market prices of the products that big-name shops carried like the backs of their hands, and would be dealing with business partners who knew them as honest merchants. They would have a supply of products made in Tavolas and sent cheaply from that main branch office, as well as rare imports through Little Silver. Moreover, they weren't restricted by regulations that didn't allow them to sell goods in a package deal.

A few days later, Muno received confirmation that the royal capital branch had secured good prospects for a storefront and employees. That done, he left his two team members to handle things and departed for the royal capital.

"The royal capital branch should be ready to go soon, huh... I'll start shipping out products in three days or so, then. They should be ready to receive the goods by the time they arrive. Even so, I should probably send only non-perishables for the first shipment, just in case," I decided after hearing Muno's report.

That said, most of Little Silver's products didn't really go bad anyway. After all, we handled foodstuffs that we processed here and non-perishable products sent from our "distant homeland." The dried goods that weren't completely dehydrated were more likely to go bad, but we wouldn't be sending those to the royal capital. Dried goods could go bad more easily than one would think; unless refrigerated or frozen, they only lasted for about two weeks. Since we couldn't vacuum pack or use a refrigerator here, we couldn't take any risks.

During Muno's absence, the branch manager from the Relinas Trade Company Tavolas branch visited the Tavolas Trade Company many times, but he was told the company

president was absent and turned away each time. Of course, the Tavolas Trade Company employees were doing exactly what Muno had told them to. The new branch manager didn't know any of the former employees who had quit on the day he had taken up his position, so there were no arguments there. It seemed the new branch manager hadn't met the local lord yet either. Supposedly, he'd tried charging into the lord's manor once and nearly got cut down... He hadn't tried visiting after that, since the lord's guards put their hands on their sword hilts whenever he approached.

Muno's new Tavolas Trade Company had completely taken over everything that the Relinas Trade Company's Tavolas branch had been handling, including placing orders through the lord and other ordinary transactions. I mean, of course that would happen if all of a company's business contacts transferred to another company under better terms and working conditions. The only ones left at Relinas Trade Company were either useless, had a bad attitude, or were hated by their business partners because they aggressively demanded better prices. The people who originally stayed because they had family to take care of realized they were on a sinking ship and pretty much all of them had requested transfers. Other than Roderich and the associates he had brought from the capital, that only left the truly hopeless ones, whom Muno had never invited in the first place. Even those people had requested to join Muno's new company, but he had turned them all down. There was no reason to bring bad apples into the bunch, after all.

Enough about Relinas Trade Company. I just needed Muno and Tavolas Trade Company to operate normally. Even if there was a feud between the stores, it would just be a business matter for Muno to handle. Even if Relinas Trade Company wanted to resort to illegal means, there wasn't a single thug in town who would mess with us or our associates, so it wasn't like they could hire goons to do their dirty work. The other powerful merchants and even the local lord were on our side, so they couldn't reach out to the powers that be or the Commerce Guild. Yup, Relinas Trade Company had a tough road ahead...

"Okay, it's time to explore other routes!" Roderich, the branch manager of the Relinas Trade Company Tavolas Branch Roderich who was now in dire straits, shouted suddenly.

"What do you mean, sir?" one of his men asked, puzzled.

This place was an average port town, abundant in seafood, and was generally stocked with ordinary products, beyond the rare and expensive goods that had been coming in recently through the local lord. Other than making money normally through buying and selling goods consumed locally and in surrounding territories, the company's main branch and its owner, Drane, intended to make big profits through oceanic produce and imported goods. The regular products, which included wheat, grains, vegetables, and meat, cost time and money to transport and were perishable. This meant they should mainly be obtained in and around the royal capital, where they would be consumed, and not purchased in bulk in a provincial city like this.

However, he couldn't get into the distribution channels for maritime products or imported goods at all. In fact, he could barely even get his hands on the general goods to be consumed locally, even though his branch had handled them all the time before he joined.

This is all Muno's fault!

That was the natural conclusion he came to, and so he had gone marching into the Tavolas Trade Company to give them a piece of his mind. Once there, though, he wasn't given the time of day. The store was clearly run by a gang of dishonorable thugs who had betrayed their employer of many years and stolen all of its employees and customers.

Roderich even tried reporting them to the Commerce Guild and the guards for illegal activity, but they simply turned him away. After that, he had suddenly started talking as if he had a plan to get him out of this desperate situation. Although his men were somewhat hopeful, they couldn't help but feel a bit skeptical. Even so, they had to do something or they would be branded as incompetent fools who had inflicted heavy damage to Relinas by instantly destroying a branch that had been running smoothly before their arrival, ruining Roderich's chances of taking over as the next president of the company. Not only would that mean all of their efforts serving Roderich had been in vain, but the moment the first son Russel became the successor, he would get rid of them as part of his opposition. They had no choice but to cling to the glimmer of hope before them.

"While I was in the royal capital, I picked up a piece of intel through a certain lead," Roderich continued. "Supposedly, there's a small upstart store in a certain city selling various unusual products, and the owner is a naive young woman. The residents there are scared of her because her parents have her back, but that's not going to stop us. If

we can negotiate a deal where we have a monopoly on her goods at wholesale prices and thereafter get to buy up all of her stock... Why, she'd make a profit and sell out her inventory, so it would be a win-win for both of us. In fact, she'd make even more money just by purchasing more goods to sell!" Roderich said confidently.

However, one of his retainers had a question. "Are there any stores from the royal capital operating in that city, sir?"

Indeed, just as Relinas Trade Company was the only major store from the royal capital operating in Tavolas, there was usually only one big-name shop in each provincial city at a time. There was an unspoken agreement between major businesses headquartered in the royal capital to avoid multiple shops cannibalizing each other's sales in small markets. So in such places where "one city, one branch" was the norm, disturbing the market without any prior discussions with the major store already operating in the city could cause a big problem, even though there were no official agreements or ordinances against it.

"I hear Hawkes has a branch there, but that won't be a problem... It's not as if I'm going to establish a branch or start doing business there in a big way. I'm just going to purchase some goods from one store and sell them in the royal capital. I wouldn't be causing trouble for that branch," Roderich argued in response.

The group was silent. Roderich's men were somewhat worried, but they had no choice but to agree.

"Relinas Trade Company?"

Kyoko (Salette) tilted her head after hearing the explanation from a group of men that had suddenly showed up without an appointment.

"Yes. My name is Roderich, heir to the Relinas Trade Company, a major business with its head office in the royal capital. I'm here today to ask you to do business with our branch..." Roderich said.

He had heard the shop was owned by a young woman, but she didn't look like an adult yet. She gave off a kindly, soft impression, with attractive features. According to his intel, the shop had been acquired in a lump-sum purchase. Her parents must have been wealthy investors, considering they had given her funds to open a business so

easily. Clearly, she was just a naive rich girl with a personal route for purchasing rare and expensive items.

Roderich knew he had what it took to control her with ease. If he played his cards right, he wouldn't just make a successful deal here, but he might get to do other things too. The thought made him want to chuckle to himself, but the girl returned an unexpected response.

"Oh? But I thought Muno was the branch manager of Relinas Trade Company's Tavolas branch..."

"What...?" Roderich asked, confused.

"The manager of that branch is Muno, isn't he?" she asked again.

Roderich was taken aback to find the girl knew the branch managers of other businesses in provincial cities, but clearly she simply had outdated information.

"Ah, there was a change in management just the other day," he said. "I was transferred in from the royal capital and became the new manager. I would love to do business with you moving forward..."

Kyoko cocked her head.



"I believe the Hawkes Trading Company has a branch in this city, and they coordinate transactions with the major stores that have their head offices in the capital. That's what the Industry Guild's guild master told me, if I recall..." she said.

"Oh, no, there actually aren't any official regulations like that. Things just happen to be that way right now because not every major store can have a branch in every town and village... A merchant should always do business with a good client if they find one!" Roderich responded.

There was a flash of panic on his face when Kyoko voiced her doubt, but he figured it would be easy to smooth talk a young girl like her and made up a rejoinder on the spot.

Kyoko's personality problems aside, she was no fool. Assuming the branch manager really had changed, Kaoru would have let her know that the new manager would be contacting her for whatever reason. She hadn't returned to Little Silver during her previous holiday because she was busy having meetings with the Industry Guild and her employees, so it had been some time since her last check-in, but she still should have received some sort of notice through their transmitter.

Not to mention, Kyoko was acquainted with the employees of Relinas Trade Company's branch store. There was no way Kaoru and Reiko would have let members of that branch store meet her as Salette. They couldn't risk anyone finding out about the connection between Salette, her shop, and Little Silver—or even the city of Tavolas as a whole. Even with the optical disguise bracelet, one slip of the tongue involving something specific to Tavolas could blow their entire cover.

Such were Kyoko's thoughts, but she couldn't imagine Kaoru and Reiko would think, "We shouldn't tell Kyoko unnecessary things when she's out of our sight."

"Pardon me, but please give me a moment... Bring our guests some tea and snacks!"

After giving the order to her employee, Kyoko stepped away to head upstairs. Roderich's group had just been greeted at the storefront and were still standing there, but they were quickly led by an employee to a table to sit down.

A few minutes later, Kyoko returned to the expectant Roderich to give him the bad news.

"I've confirmed the acts of injustice that you committed against the former branch

manager and the plight that the branch is in. We don't do business with merchants lacking in honor or stores that are on the verge of going out of business. Please leave."

"What...?"

Roderich couldn't understand how a girl like her had received such detailed information in a city so far from Tavolas.

Meanwhile, Kyoko was thinking, "*Now that I've met these people as Salette, I won't be able to go back to Little Silver in peace until their branch goes out of business!*"

"There's nothing more to discuss here. Good day," she said.

"W-Wait, please!" Roderich pleaded. "That's a completely groundless rumor! Muno and his team were dismissed on disciplinary grounds..."

"Oh? So you're saying Relinas is an incompetent company that can't even manage its own branches? Or is it such a *wonderful* company that its management goes around speaking ill of its employees who've provided years of loyal service? Shall I send someone to Tavolas to confirm what really happened? We could hold off any further discussion until then."

Kyoko stood up, but no one raised their voice to stop her this time.



"Ahaha, good work. I'll talk to you later then!"

I ended my conversation with Kyoko over the transceiver, then raised a cup of tea to my lips. The conversation was on speaker mode, so Reiko could hear too.

"I can't believe he tried to make a deal with Kyoko's shop... I mean, her business is basically the same concept as ours except on a bigger scale, so it *was* the best option after losing us. Actually, I'm impressed he knew about her shop, and that he had the good sense to go talk to her in person. Aside from his terrible personality, attitude toward his employees, and way of thinking, maybe he's not such a bad businessman after all," I said.

"Anyone with a bad personality, attitude, and way of thinking couldn't be considered a good businessman!" Reiko shot back.

She was right, of course.

"Anyway, I'm surprised that word of Kyoko's shop has traveled to the capital already," she continued. "She's off in some rural town that's even smaller than a border city like Tavolas."

I was surprised about that too. Kyoko's shop hadn't done any business with the royal capital yet. Maybe some merchant had stopped by the area, then bought something at her shop and resold it in the capital, and Roderich had caught wind of it through that merchant. It seemed unlikely that he'd found out through the major store that had a branch in that town, since there was no reason for them to give that information to a competitor.

"I mean, even if civilization isn't that advanced here, you have to be capable to reach the top of any industry. It's not as if they're dumb or anything. I mean, how many Japanese people could claim they're as smart as Socrates or Leonardo da Vinci?" I asked.

"True..." Reiko agreed.

Although we had modern knowledge, we didn't have anything more than raw data. When it came to scheming, plotting, brainstorming, and psychological warfare, our skills couldn't hold a candle to the specialists in this world. We were just pressing on with brute force and our cheat powers. If we kept relying on that tactic, someone would get us sooner or later.

We had to be wary of anything related to religion too. I had gotten into a world of hurt in “Season 1” because I got involved in religion-related trouble, after all...

“It’s a good thing we decided to prepare a multi-layered disguise. Still, it looks like Kyoko won’t be coming home for a while...” Reiko mused

“Yeah, there’s no telling what tiny slip-up could bring us down. I feel bad for Kyoko, but it’s for the best... For now, we need to put Relinas’ branch store out of business and chase the second son and his men out of the royal capital, since he met Kyoko as Salette,” Kaoru replied.

We had intended to let things run their course and wait for Relinas Trade Company’s branch store to go out of business on its own, but that would mean Kyoko would have to wait for a long time. Instead, we decided to go on the offensive... in a merchant-like way, that is.

“How did that rumor get out?!” Drane shouted at the sales clerk who had brought him the news.

The sales clerk was just relaying information that was going around town, so there was no way to answer his question. Drane understood this, of course, but he couldn’t help but yell at someone after hearing the rumors:

“The second son of the Relinas Trade Company destroyed the branch he was appointed to in just one day.”

“He fired the previous branch manager and all of the rest of management as soon as he arrived and declared he would treat the employees like slaves. Then, most of the workers quit and he was unable to keep the business running.”

“The local lord, other merchants, and everyone else in the territory won’t even give him the time of day.”

“Every merchant that worked with that branch took their business to another shop.”

“Relinas Trade Company doesn’t receive local products from that city anymore.”

And sure enough, the shipments that had been regularly coming in from the Tavolas

branch had stopped.

"Urgh..."

The damage and loss of credibility with Tavolas was one thing, but as it stood, there was no way his second son, Roderich, could be appointed as the successor of the business. Drane's eldest son with his rightful wife, Russel, was an earnest and honest man, and the obvious choice as successor. In order to have Roderich, the son of his second wife (a concubine) become his successor over the objections of his first wife's family, he had appointed him to the Tavolas branch, which was already on an upswing. It would have been easy to give all of the credit for the branch's success to his second son, but rumors of the branch being run to the ground in just a day because of the second son's idiotic actions had spread like wildfire.

"But Roderich only reported that he had arrived and hasn't mentioned anything since! Just what is going on? And these rumors have spread far too quickly! It's almost as if someone spread them on purpose... I can't imagine Muno and his team would do this, judging by his demeanor. Besides, he'll be looking for a new job, and he's not foolish enough to make an enemy of me or to go around speaking ill of his previous employer. They were always a straitlaced bunch, after all... They were laid off by Roderich instead of quitting voluntarily, so they aren't at fault for any problems that arise at that branch. Then... could this be the work of those who are trying to improve Russel's status? But they wouldn't do something that could damage Relinas' reputation and trust... Maybe this was devised by a competitor, or some small-to-mid-sized company... Or did we fall victim to people who simply enjoy seeing major businesses fail? Damn it..."

The rumors had spread around nicely, so all I needed to do now was wait for the royal capital branch of Muno's business to bring in some results. I had taken a ride on Kyoko's ship to the capital, then spent all day going to places like the waiting room in the Commerce Guild and fancy restaurants, speaking loudly about the events in a certain regional city to whoever would listen. There was no way an entertaining story like that wouldn't spread like wildfire.

Kyoko had picked me up at Little Silver before dawn so I could go to the royal capital, then gave me a ride back once it got dark, so she hadn't stayed in Tavolas or the capital. She was just acting as a taxi driver, since we couldn't have her running into Roderich

and his crew in Tavolas. She would still have the same height and build, even with a disguise, and she could always slip up with mannerisms or the way she talked, so it was better to be cautious.

Besides, Kyoko couldn't take much time off from running her business, and she didn't really want to leave the shop to the orphans for an entire day. It would be asking a lot of the kids to handle the place by themselves when it had many expensive products on display. It would have been one thing if her shop was in Tavolas, but their city wasn't quite as safe.

Reiko stayed at Little Silver to keep an eye on things. We couldn't fly the airship without Kyoko... well, she had taught us some basic controls just in case, but it was too scary to fly that thing unless it was absolutely necessary. And leaving Kyoko with the kids by herself was even scarier, so it was better to give the right person the right job.

In any case, our job was done.

It's all up to Muno and his team now!

"What? Muno's team started their own company?" Drane asked, raising an eyebrow. It had been a few days since Muno and his men had visited him when one of his head clerks brought him the news.

"Well, I suppose those four are capable enough to start a small trading company. We've taught them plenty, and they gained experience and connections while working here. I was wondering which company would hire them, but that's certainly an option. If they're running their own shop, that's even more reason they won't be standing in our way. As long as they behave, I'll consider giving them some business. Let me know if they aren't doing well financially and we can toss them a bone. They did give us many years of service, after all. They had to pay the price for Roderich's sake, but it wasn't as if they'd done anything wrong."

Drane was drunk on his own words, thinking he was being benevolent toward his former employees. Although he said he would give them business, it wasn't as if he was going to give them preferential treatment in terms of price. In fact, he would drive a hard bargain with them. They would still get some slim profit, and would naturally be grateful to be able to move their products. Their business would get some exposure

as well, so it would be a win-win for both parties. And if they did business with Relinas, it would send a public message that they weren't at fault and that Muno's team had left on good terms.

No one would call Drane a charitable merchant, but he had some consideration for his loyal workers, and although he considered Muno's team an annoyance with their overly serious and righteous attitudes, he didn't hate them. Drane understood Muno and his men had been loyal to him and had done what they thought was best for the company, and knew that such men were important in business. That was why he had kept them far away and entrusted Muno with the position of branch manager in a remote area.

"Understood, sir. I'm sure they'll be able to handle themselves..." the head clerk said, smiling.

He knew Muno's team as well and was glad to see Drane wouldn't be treating them badly. The way Drane took care of former employees was one of the reasons he had many loyal followers despite his minor flaws, after all. It was good to see he was a respectable man despite being the president of a major company.

"What...? Muno's company is selling Tavolas' products? But we stopped getting shipments completely..." Drane said in disbelief.

"Yes, and we haven't heard from Mister Roderich since... The men who accompanied him have sent private letters to his family to confirm he isn't injured or sick."

"Hm... If even a portion of the rumors going around the royal capital are true, it would make sense why Roderich hasn't contacted us. In that case, he won't be able to report back until he fixes the situation enough to save some face... But I can't let this nonsense about Muno's company carrying Tavolas' products pass. When a merchant leaves an employer to start a business, pulling former clients to their new store is an unforgivable act of ingratitude, and considering how much damage they've caused us, this is an unmistakable act of betrayal. Damn that Muno... to think, I had praised him for being an honest man... Someone head to Muno's shop as my messenger, now!"

"I'm sorry, but this is just a branch of the Tavolas Trade Company, and we're just the

hired branch manager and assistant. We don't have the authority to promise such a thing. You'll have to take it directly to the president of the company..."

"What?"

"Besides, I should point out that we didn't take clients from Relinas Trade Company's Tavolas branch. The local lord provided a portion of the funds needed to establish the company. In other words, you could say the lord owns this business. Moreover, the Tavolas products your branch used to purchase were being distributed between the royal capital and local trade companies by the lord. Now that the lord has his own company to sell products in the capital, why would he sell a portion to other companies? The profits would go to that company's main office in the capital without benefiting his own territory. We're not doing business with the lord, but this is the lord's company, which he established so he could sell products from his own territory in the capital. So, I'm afraid you're completely off the mark when you claim we stole your clients, and no matter how you try to convince him, there's no reason for him to distribute his goods to other companies."

"Wha... Whaaat?!"

The head clerk that had been sent as a messenger from Relinas Trade Company was in shock. It was true; if the lord had funded the company even partially, (part of) the company would be considered to belong to him. From the way the branch manager had worded it, the messenger falsely assumed the Tavolas Trade Company's owner was the local lord, and Muno was nothing but a hired manager... Of course, the branch manager had deliberately worded his statement that way for that exact reason.

"What?!" Drane couldn't help but raise his voice after hearing the messenger's report.

"Then there's nothing we can do... No matter how hard Roderich tries, we won't get our hands on Tavolas' products again. Even if we could acquire a small quantity of goods, we won't make the same profits selling them for the same price as the lord's own shop, and no one would bother buying from us when there's a branch from their local store at hand."

Indeed, even if the price had been the same, it was unlikely that anyone was going to buy from their store over the branch of their local store owned by the lord himself.

They simply couldn't compete in terms of credibility, trust, or product freshness. It was reasonable to assume products from the store managed directly by the local lord would have the best prices and quality.

"Did the lord establish his company at this time by coincidence? Or did he suddenly start it up to cut us off because Roderich angered him somehow? Well, I suppose the obvious answer would be the latter..."

Drane hung his head.

"The Tavolas branch is done for... It's made an enemy out of the local lord, and he doesn't need us anymore. I should send someone to investigate, and if the rumors are true, we should just withdraw from that city..."

"Sir, does that mean...?" the head clerk started, but Drane knew what he wanted to say.

"Yes, this is an enormous blunder by Roderich, and it will be extremely difficult to name him the successor. But it won't be impossible. If we don't cut our losses quickly, the wound is going to fester. As a merchant, it's more important to have good judgment when losing money than when making it."

"Thank you for the lesson, sir!"

Drane, the president of the Relinas Trade Company, was a competent man in his own right.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Roderich yelled.

A lone clerk had arrived in Tavolas from the main office in the royal capital. He had been sent by Roderich's father and was of course part of his faction. That was why Roderich had given him a lavish welcome at an expensive restaurant, as well as a monetary gift, so that he would send back a good report. But on the morning of his third day there, the head clerk had suddenly broken the news: "The Tavolas branch of Relinas Trade Company is being shut down. The branch manager is to complete the withdrawal procedures and return to the royal capital."

That meant Roderich was judged to have failed so badly that the branch itself had to be abolished.

“Why?! You’re supposed to be on my side! Why didn’t you report back defending me?! I can easily hire new employees as long as I have some time. We’re the Relinas Trade Company, damn it! The bumpkins here dream of working for us!”

The head clerk gave Roderich a cool stare.

“There seems to be a misunderstanding here. I am the head clerk of the Relinas Trade Company main office and work under Mister Drane, the head of the company. Under his orders, I was providing my assistance to get you appointed as the next president. So, if Mister Drane desires an accurate report, I will give him one. I report to him as the current president and no one else.”

“Wha...”

Roderich froze, his face pale.

The head clerk had given an honest report of the current situation and was only trying to carry out his orders. If he’d determined that it was a lost cause, he was to have Roderich close down the branch immediately, then bring him home once the process was complete. But Roderich had assumed this meant his father had abandoned him, even though Drane was still working on another plan to help him recover from the blunder with the branch store.

He had thought the “second son’s faction” were his allies, who had gathered around him believing he was the rightful successor over his older brother Russel, but as the realization that they were only following his father’s wishes hit him, he assumed his father had given up on him. He had just been using his father’s authority with no ability of his own. And once he lost his father’s support...

Roderich panicked. He was going to fall from the next president of the company to the incompetent child of a concubine. There was no way he could accept this.

Then, suddenly, one of his employees came to him with a report...

“Sir, Muno has returned to the store!”

Muno wordlessly read the letter a shop boy had brought him with his brows furrowed.

It read: "Come see me, now!"

The messenger left as soon as he handed off the letter without waiting for a response. Even though the messenger was a lowly shop boy, he was still working for Relinas Trade Company's branch store. It was hard to believe he would have behaved that way of his own accord... which meant he had been ordered to do so. Whoever had sent the messenger believed Muno would never disobey him, and his orders took priority over all else...

"Why the hell didn't you answer Mister Roderich's summons?!"

Muno's former subordinate, one of the employees who had stayed at the Relinas branch store, came barging into the Tavolas Trade Company head office.

It wasn't a shop boy this time, but a sales clerk.

"What...?"

Muno stared at him blankly.

"I asked, why didn't you...?" the clerk started, but was cut off before he could finish his sentence.

"Oh, no, it's not that I don't understand what you said. I'm just astonished by your idiotic and rude attitude," Muno said.

"Huh...?" Muno's former subordinate froze.

"You're the employee of another company, are you not? What makes you think you can behave that way toward the president of this company? Are you stupid? You must have thought you had the right to yell at me because your branch manager ordered you to, but I'm not an employee of Relinas Trade Company, nor do I work for Roderich. Which means you, a mere branch store employee, pompously insulted the president of another business. Go tell your boss that you've upset me and got sent away because of your disrespectful attitude."

The man turned pale. It was hard to imagine that Roderich would laugh and forgive failure due to his subordinate's foolish mistake, especially when he had no more room

for mistakes. That was why Muno didn't think his message would be delivered as-is. The messenger would likely tell him that Muno yelled at him for no reason, even though that would only make the situation worse.

Still, Muno figured it was none of his concern. There was a reason he hadn't invited that sales clerk to join him when he had left his previous company.

"In any case, we don't talk to or negotiate with employees who are disrespectful toward the presidents of other companies. Please leave."

Unable to do anything as Muno dismissed him, the sales clerk had no choice but to leave.

"Where's Muno?!"

Roderich and his men suddenly stormed into the Tavolas Trade Company main office without an appointment. Well, someone had stopped by about thirty minutes previously to inform everyone about the impending visit, but it was a one-sided notice, not a meeting set by mutual agreement. They were still dropping in uninvited, but at least it gave Muno's side some time to prepare.

An employee who had been given orders in advance guided Roderich and his three companions to a VIP meeting room in the back. Inside, Muno and one of his trusted retainers who hadn't been transferred to the royal capital awaited them.

Kaoru and Reiko were dressed like servants and standing behind Muno's seat, but they weren't considered part of the headcount. They were there to listen in on the conversation and step in as bodyguards if Roderich's crew decided to resort to violence. It would have been rude to prepare mean-looking security guards without provocation, so they had opted for this instead. Although they were physically fifteen-year-old girls, they would be facing untrained merchants while armed with bracelet stun guns and rings with built-in tranquilizer needles. Moreover, they had Reiko's magic and Kaoru's potions in case of an emergency. They were certainly able to serve as adequate guards; perhaps it was even overkill.

Kaoru and Reiko planned on keeping their mouths shut unless something unexpected happened. They merely wanted to be present to get an accurate assessment of the situation and to make sure Muno and his team were safe.

Although things were different now, Roderich was Muno's former boss. As such, Muno stood up to greet his guests and gestured for them to take a seat.

For his part, Roderich spoke immediately after sitting down. "Bring the lord here at once! Once that's done, you'll hand this shop's products over at a discounted price. Then I'll merge this shop into my own and I'll let you work for me again!"

Ah...

There was no way Muno would accept such terms, but now that Roderich was out of other options, he could only think about brute-forcing his way through the situation. Muno no longer worked for him, but he had still been an employee at his store. In Roderich's mind, it was only natural for Muno to obey his orders.

It seemed he had forgotten that he was in this situation because Muno hadn't obeyed his orders in the first place. There were fools who mistakenly believed that power relationships from their student days would continue forever even after they entered the workforce... fools who tried to use their juniors like a free taxi service... and fools who tried to call up their former subordinates after retirement and boss them around. Any sane person would find it hard to believe such idiots could possibly exist, but they did... even in modern Japan.

In every world, there were those who couldn't—or wouldn't—even try to understand that their situation had changed long ago. And so, it was inevitable that such people were somewhat common in a world that wasn't as culturally developed.

"No, thank you," Muno said.

"Huh?" Roderich was dumbfounded. He hadn't even imagined Muno wouldn't do as he was told.

"Our company was established with funds from the local lord. There's no reason or need for a merger with a mere branch store of an unrelated business. Moreover, we have no intention of doing business with a store that has employees who disrespect the presidents of other companies. I believe I made this clear to your messenger who picked a fight with me and upset me. Did he not tell you what happened?" Muno said.

"Wha...?"

When it came to business, Roderich was no fool. He had no qualms about bowing

down to customers and suppliers, and he had the sense to treat people differently depending on the situation. However, he had an arrogant attitude when it came to dealing with anyone of a lower standing than him, such as employees. He wasn't as rude to those who flattered him, those who were useful, and those who offered him something; he even lined their pockets and took care of them, in his own way.

Muno and his team knew their place, and although they had disagreed with their boss when it came to work, they still respected their superiors and worked diligently. That was why Roderich thought they weren't fools—indeed, he thought they were actually quite useful—but did nevertheless believe them to be difficult to control. They had put out the same work performance whether they were watched over or not, even though they were difficult pawns who wouldn't always do exactly as they were told. His father Drane would have positioned them appropriately so they could still be useful, but Roderich wasn't quite as wise. And so, instead of achieving success by making good use of Muno's team as Drane would have done, he had decided to try and take credit for all of their achievements. He had thought of them as stepping stones instead of co-workers; not as subordinates who deserved his favor, but as servants who he could abuse without repercussions. That was why he had started bossing them around as soon as he arrived.

Even now, Roderich believed that the prior hierarchy hadn't changed and still assumed Muno was his obedient little servant. He had no idea that it had already been over for him for a long time now. "Y-You little worm! Do you realize what will happen if you deny me?!" Roderich spat.

"Oh, but I've already been fired. What more do you intend to do? Do you intend to kill me or something?" Muno replied.

"Urgh..." Roderich was at a loss for words. Dismissal was the greatest legal punishment an employer could inflict, and he had already played that card. "Y-You think a small startup company can run a successful business after making an enemy out of Relinas?"

"It may be a different story in the royal capital, but in this city, we are backed by the local lord, and we have strong relationships with the other companies here. I believe our business is in a far better position than yours. We've secured supply routes for specialty products, and we can acquire products from the royal capital without issues, so we're doing just fine without Relinas," Muno responded coolly.

"Ugh..."

That was the very problem Roderich had been facing. Now, even if Roderich bowed his head and apologized, there was no way Muno would let him off the hook. If Muno went easy on him now, Roderich would surely betray him later. There were any number of things Roderich might do, like counterfeiting contracts or spreading false rumors to other clients... In fact, Drane and Roderich had occasionally done those things in the main office in the past.

However, Muno knew that wouldn't happen. Roderich thought nothing of bowing down to customers and suppliers, but he would never apologize to a former employee.

For his part, at that moment, Roderich realized Muno wouldn't obey him no matter what he said. Even he wasn't that much of a fool. Roderich took his companions and left without uttering a word.

"Well, that's that..."

Their ties with the Relinas Trade Company Tavolas branch had finally been cut. A few days ago, the head clerk sent by Drane to investigate had visited Muno to tell him their branch store would be closing and they would be withdrawing from this city. Therefore, Muno had actually heard the news before Roderich... and now he knew that Roderich also knew.

So, whatever terms Roderich might have proposed, there was no way Muno was going to agree to them. Having lost his final hope of preventing the branch from closing down, Roderich returned to the royal capital with his followers. Despite the setback, Drane would doubtless come up with another way to prop up Roderich's achievements somehow... with a method that was completely unrelated to Muno's crew.

Now that Muno and his team had cut ties with the Relinas Trade Company, their succession conflict, the bickering between factions, and even Roderich himself didn't concern them any longer. Kaoru's group didn't know much about this country and its merchants, so she trusted Muno's judgment on this issue. At the very least, he would have more insight into the topic than they did. After all, he had a deep understanding of how the merchants in this country thought, including those at Relinas.

But Kaoru and Reiko had overlooked one thing: Muno's team had no interest in the

conflict between factions, and they weren't the type to play dirty. Indeed, Muno and his team didn't think at all like the upper management of the Relinas Trade Company.

On the day in question, Nine-year-old Mine and seven-year-old Lucy had been put in charge of delivering the dried fish, while the others were working on the next batch of dried goods. That wasn't the issue. Instead, the problem was that the two children were in a narrow, secluded street with four men blocking them, two on either end. The children were on their way home after delivering the dried goods, so they were fortunate in having finished their mission already. Although their sense of duty had been satisfied, it didn't change the fact that they were still in danger.

The men slowly closed the distance, still blocking the way so the girls couldn't escape.

"Um... Can we help you?" Mine asked, looking terrified.

"You two are from Little Silver, aren't you? Come with us..." one of the men answered with a less-than-friendly smile.

"Rules of engagement, cleared!" Mine shouted.

"Roger that!" Lucy responded.

As the men stood in confusion, the two children reached into their pockets. The attackers might have been more cautious if the girls had stuck their hands into the bags they were carrying, as those could have contained something like a knife, even though they were flat and seemingly empty. There wasn't any way those little pockets could conceal weapons, so they approached the girls without worry, when suddenly...

Fsssh!

"Aaahhh!!!" the men screamed in unison.

Mine and Lucy had pointed whatever they had taken out of their pockets at the men in front of and behind them, then activated them without hesitation. The items in question were the security devices Kaoru had given them, and the chemicals they projected landed directly in the men's eyes, causing them to scream and cover their faces with both hands.

“My eyes! My eyes!!!”

“Eek! A d-demon! It’s a demon!”

Mine’s device didn’t use CN gas, but rather OC gas. In other words, it was a capsicum-based pepper spray rather than a weapon that used poison gas. It was less damaging to the environment, but still quite effective in causing pain in the target’s eyes, as well as making them tear up and cough uncontrollably. Anyone from the modern world would have known they’d been hit with pepper spray, and while they wouldn’t be able to overcome the symptoms, they wouldn’t necessarily be scared. These men, however, had no idea what had happened to them, so it was no wonder that they thought they had been attacked by a demon.

As the men stood there, crying out defenselessly without their sight or wits about them, Mine and Lucy kicked them in the backs of their knees to bring them down, then repeatedly kicked them in the face.



They weren't inflicting pain out of malice. Even though the attackers had temporarily lost their vision, they were still four grown men. If their vision was to return even slightly... or, if even while blinded, they stopped panicking or grabbed one of the kids, the girls wouldn't be able to break free. If the children had fled without doing anything else to their would-be abductors, the men would have just attacked them again as soon as they were able.

These men hadn't just happened to come across Mine and Lucy and decided on the spur of the moment to attack them. No, they were clearly after Little Silver employees. Their next target could be Aral, Ellie, or Fria... or even Kaoru, Reiko, or Kyoko. The girls couldn't allow that to happen. Their mission now was to incapacitate the men so they couldn't roam around for a while, buying Kaoru time to deal with them. They also had to mark them clearly to make them easier to identify later, and they didn't mind putting themselves at risk to do it. They could focus on their duty without worry because they knew that even if something happened to them, Aral, Ellie, and Fria would protect Kaoru and her friends.

And so, they kicked. They were frail girls, so they used their legs, which were many times stronger than their arms. With the sturdy shoes gifted to them by Kaoru, they kicked, kicked, and kicked some more.

Kick, kick, kick, kick, kick, kick, kick, kick!!!

And once they determined they had left enough of a mark that would identify the attempted kidnappers...

“Run!”

“Roger that!”

They left the scene, leaving four men on the ground with broken teeth and swollen faces.

“So that's what happened.”

“Hmm...”

Kaoru was deep in thought. She had no idea who would have possibly picked a head-

on fight with Little Silver. The individuals in question were far from professionals, and so pathetic that they had lost against two girls, nine and seven years old, despite being four grown men.

"I guess those guys you beat up won't be reporting us to the authorities... If they did, they'd be the ones getting arrested for attempted kidnapping, while you two were just defending yourselves. Plus, their reputations would be ruined if people found out that four men got their butts kicked while trying to attack two little girls. The only thing we need to worry about is another attack... Aral or the other kids could be targeted next, and the attackers know about the sprays now, so they might go for an ambush without providing an opportunity to use them. Assuming they're not stupid, that is."

That was the biggest issue at hand, which was why Mine and Lucy had left marks on the attackers.

"All right," I said. "Starting tomorrow, you kids aren't going out to town without me or Reiko for a while. I'm also going to make a report at the guard station now, so they'll be quick to respond if something happens again. Things could get complicated if the attackers talk to the guards before us, though I really doubt they'll do that. I'll make sure the local lord is notified, too, and we'll spread the word around town. The locals and powerful people around here are all on our side, so we might as well make use of them. There's no point in having money and connections if you don't use 'em, after all. And one more thing..."

"Yes?" the kids chorused.

"Tomorrow, we're gonna go find those four guys with beat-up faces!"

"There they are..."

The culprits were easily located.

The girls' shoes, made on Kyoko's mothership, were very comfortable but had a special alloy in the toe area—a strong, lightweight one. They were basically like safety shoes from modern Earth. They actually had a built-in blade that popped out when the wearer hit the ground hard with the heel, but the girls hadn't needed to use that feature in the previous encounter.

After getting kicked to a pulp, the attackers would have obviously had to get treatment from a doctor or apothecary. We were planning on investigating those places the next day, but there was no need. On our way to the doctor's, we found Roderich's crew with their faces all swollen...

It was you guys?!

I mean, some of the employees had stayed behind at the branch store, so anyone could easily have found out that Little Silver was the imported products' supplier. I gave him kudos for confirming this information, then going after us instead of Muno's Tavolas Trade Company... But, on the other hand, I was going to bury them for daring to go after the kids.

I had a feeling he wasn't done messing with Muno's business, but I also believed it wasn't an issue because it was only going to be a few days until the head clerk from Relinas' main office made Roderich close up the branch store and return to the royal capital. Afterward, I figured Roderich's dad would move on to the next plan to give his son undeserved credit for something and they'd be done with this region and Muno's shop. We didn't have any interest in the succession conflict over some stranger's store in the royal capital... or so I thought.

This Roderich guy had made a huge blunder here, and he assumed he wasn't out of the succession conflict yet. But unbeknownst to him, he had crossed the line... and he was going to pay for that.

I'll crush 'em!

“We'll crush ‘em!”

“What?” Reiko asked, unsure why that was the first thing I had shouted as soon as I returned to Little Silver.

“Roderich and his gang. We’re gonna smash them so hard that Roderich won’t even be in the running to succeed his father anymore,” I clarified.

“Ah... so they were the culprits. I thought they were only going to mess with us in an economic sense... Guess I gave him too much credit,” Reiko said.



I also thought they would've come at us like a merchant, by applying economic pressure, bringing some other powerful people or businesses into it, getting the Commerce Guild on their side, making fake contracts or certificates of employment, things like that. As long as they used legal means to harass us, we would also have retaliated within the bounds of the law. If they went slightly beyond that, we would have responded in kind. That was how I expected this to play out, and I had only assumed they would pester us as merchants... Instead, they ended up opting for a much more direct method. Not only that, but they'd done it themselves instead of hiring thugs to do it for them.

Well, even if they had wanted to hire outside help, the thugs and criminals in this city would never accept a job that would make them our enemies. Everyone knew what had happened to people who messed with us, and it was common knowledge that we were close with the local lord and the other merchants. And, above all else, they knew that we were an organization that helped orphans. There were orphans among the criminal gangs, and some of them had even grown up in the orphanage that had preceded Little Silver. They considered us off-limits, so if Roderich wanted to hire someone to attack us, he would have had to find them in another territory or country. If they tried recruiting around here, they'd likely end up losing their advance payment, then getting reported to us, the local lord, or the guard station.

I wasn't sure if they knew all that; they had ended up doing the job themselves regardless. Maybe they had tried to hire someone already without success, or maybe they thought kidnapping a couple of girls who weren't even ten years old would be an easy job for four adults.

Roderich probably thought they wouldn't get into much trouble because they weren't actually planning on hurting the girls, just using them to threaten us. He was both the son of a big-name merchant and a branch manager in this town in his own right. Maybe he assumed he could talk his way out of things as long as they gave the kids some candy and sent them home unharmed after things were said and done. That may have worked if it had happened before Little Silver had been established here, or before we joined forces with the lord and merchants, or even before we were completely accepted by the local residents, but it was far too late now.

We were the ones in cahoots with the authorities here, not the bad guys; Roderich's crew were the weaklings with no one to protect them. We had put a lot of effort, planning, and laid the groundwork to get us to this point, after all. The whole point of our business trips was to secure this sort of position, not just in this city, but

throughout the entire country. We had to settle things soon, because I felt really bad for Kyoko, who had been out there for a long time now.

"Should we report this to the guards, then?" Reiko asked.

"Nope. They'll just deny everything and make a fuss about not having proof. It's too much trouble to keep questioning them while they play dumb, and just handing them off to the guards at the royal capital won't have enough of an impact. So..." I trailed off.

"So?"

"We're going to catch them in the act, plain and simple," I said.

"So it's a sting, huh..."

Reiko was quick to catch on.

"But I'm sure they're going to be more cautious now, so a sting operation could put the kids at risk... They know about the sprays, and even if we keep an eye on them, we won't be able to stop them if they throw a punch or pull a knife suddenly. The kids may act tough, but they're not even ten yet. They could be traumatized if something happened... Besides, Roderich is definitely going to hire someone after his guys got beaten up by the girls last time. Even if we catch some hired goons, they're just going to play dumb," Reiko said.

Normally, she'd be right, but...

"We're going to wait until after they kidnap their target, so don't worry about that," I said.

"What? But the kids!" Reiko said, flabbergasted. "What if they take out their frustrations from last time on the kids and hurt them?"

I knew that was a possibility, of course.

"Don't worry," I told her. "The person acting as bait will be able to handle themselves."

"I think we're a little too old for that..." Reiko replied.

Well, she was right, but we still had an ace up our sleeves. Someone who looked under

ten years old, was related to us, was important-looking enough to be enticing bait, but was also completely reliable.

"Oh!" Reiko finally realized who I was talking about. "Leia the money drain!" she shouted.

"Yup," I said. "She's been taking our money every week, so it's about time she makes herself useful. She may look eight years old, but she's actually an entity that's been around for thousands or millions of years, so there's no need to worry about child endangerment or abuse. I mean, she's not even human!"

I mean, I had to admit, it did make me feel bad due to her appearance, but... that didn't matter! Besides, it wasn't as if sting operations were illegal. Sure, enticing someone to commit a crime when they hadn't originally intended to would be problematic, but simply providing an opportunity to someone who already has criminal intent was perfectly acceptable; furthermore, it would keep potential victims safe. Why wait for a criminal to claim another victim before making a move?

"Would she help us out, though?" Reiko asked, concerned. Leia may have been uninterested in the trivial matters of lower life forms, but I was absolutely sure that she would help us.

"Don't worry!" I said. "If I tell her I'm gonna decrease her weekly funds unless she helps us, she'll agree for sure. I'll just tell her she won't be able to buy nearly as many snacks."

"How evil are you?!" Reiko shouted.

"Did you get all that?" I asked.

Leia nodded.

And so, we had a deal. Leia had asked me to increase her allowance while she was assisting us, but the amount was within acceptable limits, so I agreed.

"Now then, I just need to make sure the employees at that branch store hear about the relative of Little Silver's owner staying at an inn all by herself..."

The opposition knew our employees were dangerous, and a relative of the owner staying at a luxury inn was a lot more valuable as a hostage than a regular employee. Moreover, most people would generally assume a young girl from a rich family wasn't the type to kick the crap out of a grown man's face.

You couldn't expect "normal" from Leia, though. She was always roaming around town in search of tasty or fun things, so she was never just cooped up in an inn. She liked to walk around even after it got dark out and often wandered into secluded alleys without a second thought. She would even leave the city sometimes. However, there was no need to worry about her, so we didn't.

The delinquents around town knew Leia was connected to Little Silver. It was common knowledge that we were the lord's favorites and that anyone who messed with us ended up getting horribly burned. Besides, there weren't a lot of thugs who would lay hands on people committed to helping orphans or those who were associated with such people. Many of them had grown up as orphans and their children could one day walk that path too. Of course, even if anyone had ill intentions, it wasn't as if a mere human could actually harm Leia.

Anyway, we didn't have to do anything special for our little "night fishing" operation. We just had to lay out the bait. First, we'd casually tell an employee at the branch store about our precious Leia. It would be an indirect approach, and we wouldn't necessarily be lying. Even if they looked into it, the staff at the inn and the townspeople would corroborate our story. The news would eventually travel to Roderich, at which point I was sure he would start his plotting. He would consider orphans—or rather, former orphans—dangerous, and go for the seemingly helpless yet highborn Leia instead.

Roderich didn't make his move right away. Four men with beat-up faces walking around together would have been far too conspicuous, and it'd be game over as soon as someone saw them. Plus, if a resisting child flailed around and hit their injured faces, they'd end up writhing on the ground in pain. It didn't seem likely that they would be getting their own hands dirty this time.

The head clerk from the capital had told Muno that the company president had ordered their branch store to be shut down, so there was no changing that, but Roderich's crew had been putting off their return to the capital. All Roderich had to do

to buy some time was tell the head clerk that he still had to say his farewells and tie up some loose ends with his clients. In reality, all of his clients had gone over to Muno's new business, so there really wasn't anything left for him to do here. I wished he would just give up and go back to the capital already...

Roderich was likely hoping to secure a supply route for the specialty products from here directly to the main office and thereby repair his tarnished reputation. If successful, he could claim something like, "I've secured a supplier who will send directly to the royal capital, thus removing the need for a branch store and massively cutting back our overhead costs!" That would turn his blunder into a giant win... if he was successful, of course.

A few days passed without incident. For my part, I needed them to make a move eventually. I couldn't send the kids on deliveries by themselves as things stood, and I had to limit their play area to inside our premises. Not only that, but Reiko and I now had to accompany the kids for deliveries, so we were affected too. One might think it would make more sense for me and Reiko to do the deliveries ourselves, but the kids were absolutely adamant about going. According to them, they couldn't stand the idea of us having to do deliveries on their behalf because of their situation. It was like they thought this situation was a threat to their very existence...

In any case, the kids seemed stressed out that we had to accompany them and it was clearly starting to take a toll on them. Reiko and I didn't like how the deliveries were taking up our time either. Besides, we had to keep paying the premium on Leia's allowance until this case was settled. She wasn't even doing anything different than she usually did, yet she demanded I compensate her for the duration of the request instead of just providing a one-time payment. She knew this situation would take a while to resolve...

Damn it, I messed up!

A few more days had passed...

"There we go..."

It was starting to get dark out and all the good boys and girls had gone home. I had been wearing glasses for a while now, usually starting in the morning and going until

the evening, when Leia returned to the inn. They weren't normal glasses, of course, but the Searcher glasses I had worn back when I was looking for the cause of that epidemic. After using it to find the pathogen, I renamed it to the Hot Springs Sensor and used it to search for hot springs... It really was too bad I couldn't find any new hot springs anywhere near Tavolas.

I had since calibrated the glasses to detect Leia and the four goons. I mean, I couldn't just sit by and let Leia handle this whole case by herself... mainly because I had to make sure the culprits were still alive, prevent any damage to the townspeople and buildings, and keep our secrets from getting exposed. If they ended up hiring someone, the glasses wouldn't be able to detect them. As useful as they were, there was no way to calibrate them to find anyone who harbored malicious intent toward Leia.

But if I specified certain people beforehand, they would appear as a marker on the glasses as long as they were within range. I wasn't sure exactly how it worked, but it probably identified people based on bioelectric frequencies, brain waves, auras, or something. It used technology from a lifeform that had evolved into a godlike being, so there was no point in thinking about it too deeply. The targets were supposed to show up as markers when they approached Leia, and when they did, Reiko and I would make our move. Leia was staying at a high-end inn and I had generously tipped the staff there for some special requests, so things should be fine while she was in there.

But now, four red markers were approaching Leia's blue marker as she walked around outside the inn.

"Four red markers are quickly approaching," I reported. "Launch the interceptors immediately!"

"Roger that!" Reiko replied. "Mine, Ellie, take command of the others and defend Little Silver!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the two girls said energetically. Mine was nine and Ellie was ten, and things may have been different at the orphanage, but Mine was now the senior employee here at Little Silver. More to the point, Mine had a straightforward personality and didn't get hung up on things. That was why I put her in charge in our absence, with Ellie acting as her support.

Whether in the military or in society at large, age had nothing to do with hierarchy. All

that mattered were rank and position, pecking order, years of training, and ability. Mine was our one and only veteran, who had overcome enemies with her own efforts and made it to our place with a recruit in tow. I knew wholeheartedly that I could trust her to watch over our home without worry. Well, the odds of Little Silver being attacked were pretty much zero, since we were the ones going out to face the danger head-on, but even so.

“All right, move out!” I shouted.

“That’s weird. They’re not moving any closer...” I muttered. The four red markers had stopped approaching Leia after getting within a certain range. “Are they waiting for the right time or something?”

It was already quite dark, but Leia was almost close enough to see with the naked eye, which meant those near her would be able to see me too. And, at the same time, someone who I wasn’t aware of would also be able to see me.

“Ah!” I blurted out.

“What’s wrong?” Reiko’s voice asked.

“Oh, um... Nothing!”

How stupid of me!

There was no one walking around at this hour and we were already in close proximity to Leia... Which meant I could set the Searcher to detect *anyone*, not just Leia and any potential culprits. Anyone within range now would be relevant to this case, anyway. If I had used it on the main boulevard in the middle of the day, the sensor would have been filled with human markers and therefore unusable, but there would be hardly any people to detect in a fifty-meter radius around Leia now. And so, I changed the settings for Searcher, and...

“There they are!”

It detected three people around Leia.

But we still have to wait...

We had a bite, but if we rushed to reel it in right away, there was a chance we would let the fish on the hook get away. We could've charged right in if it had been Roderich and his goons approaching her directly, but since these ones appeared to be hired hands, they could just claim to be unrelated to Roderich, even after getting caught. After all, those guys were citizens of the royal capital and not from this territory, so they belonged to the king, and Roderich had various connections because of his powerful merchant family. This meant we had to catch him red-handed, leaving him no room to weasel his way out. Ideally, we wanted the arrest to be performed by a third party with real authority, like the guards, instead of being done privately by us. I didn't expect Leia to be able to explain the situation succinctly, so we had to be on the scene as witnesses so we could give testimony later. Things could get complicated when I gave my testimony if I watched the events through binoculars, so I had to see things unfold in the flesh.

Though, the biggest reason I was watching from nearby was so I could stop Leia immediately if the culprits were in danger. I had warned Leia already, of course, but the situation was sort of like how children could accidentally crush butterflies in their hands when trying to catch them.

"I'm gonna get a little closer," I said. "I'll move in from the opposite side of Roderich's crew. Make sure they don't see you!"

"Roger that!"

And so, I moved closer and peeked from the shadows...

"Excuse me, miss, are you with Little Silver?" one of the three men surrounding Leia, presumably their leader, asked softly.

"Um... I guess? I don't work there, but they do give me money..."

It appeared Leia's reply was good enough for them.

"Could you come with us, then?" the man asked.

"Sure," Leia answered.

The man stared blankly, caught off-guard by the response. They briefly wondered if she was some sort of idiot, but quickly regained their composure.

"Then come this way... We have tasty snacks for you too."

"Oh, I can't wait..."

I had a feeling Leia was cooperating with them because she wanted to see what would happen, not just because of her mission. She was riding the line of her originator's orders so she could enjoy the delicious and fun things in this world. This job was a pretty sweet deal for her, since she could get more money out of us to use for recreation, and the mission itself was exciting. As an added bonus, I would even end up owing her a favor. It was true that I was grateful for her help; it was thanks to her that we could pull off a mission like this without putting an actual child in danger. Without her, we would have had to opt for a more direct, violent approach.

It's important for people to help each other out, after all... Of course, Leia isn't actually human. But who cares about such minor details, right?

"We brought her!" The men had led Leia to a small hovel on the outskirts of town. It seemed they weren't stupid enough to take her directly to their employer's branch store.

Roderich's crew, who had apparently returned here earlier after witnessing the successful abduction, had put on masks to cover their faces. It would have been fairly straightforward to identify four men with swollen faces otherwise, even though they would have probably worn the masks even if their faces weren't injured. Either way, the fact that they were hiding their faces meant they intended to let Leia leave without hurting her unless necessary... Of course, it wasn't as if they could even if they tried.

The three men who had brought Leia to the meeting spot weren't from around here, so being seen by some ten-year-old girl wouldn't be a problem for them. They would simply disappear and never see her again once the job was done. Besides, they wouldn't have been able to get a child to follow them in the first place if they had been wearing masks.

Reiko and I were concealed with Reiko's pseudo-magic, watching the events through a space in the distorted wooden window frame. There was no glass in the window, so we could hear their voices perfectly clearly.

"Well done!" Roderich exclaimed, then turned to Leia. "Welcome, young lady. You can

play here all you want until tomorrow evening. These three guys will keep you entertained, so you can tell them to be your horsey or play ‘master and servant!’”

The three men chuckled bemusedly, but this may have been part of their arrangement, since they weren’t protesting the idea. Actually, it was likely part of their plan, so that once Leia was released, she would testify that some strangers had just kept her entertained for a while. Meanwhile, they could hint that they knew her whereabouts and give thinly veiled threats like “I sure hope you find that girl unharmed...” to Little Silver, all while claiming they were uninvolved with her disappearance. And with that leverage, they would force us to sign a contract that would benefit them.

At the end of the day, the Relinas Trade Company was a normal business and not some criminal organization. It was unlikely that they were really planning on hurting a child or selling them into slavery. That didn’t mean they wouldn’t slap a kid in a flash of rage if they didn’t cooperate, though. That wouldn’t happen with Leia, though. She may complain, but she wasn’t the type to scream and throw a tantrum. Besides, if she truly became upset... well, it would be over then and there. Their lives, that is.

“Where are the tasty snacks?” Leia demanded.

Snacks were a third of the reasons why she was doing this in the first place. My request for her help was another third, and the last third was just for the fun of it. She had never been involved in something like this before, so it was like a game to her.

“Yes, yes, of course,” one of the trio that had brought her here answered, then carried over a wooden bowl with candy in it.

“That’s not what you promised... Those are cheap and don’t taste good. You said there would be ‘really tasty snacks,’ which refers at the very least to something as sweet as baked goods from Marku, sweets from Nevor, fruit pastries from Elto, or treats from Burg Snacks... This is nothing but bird feed.”

Uh oh...

Her expression was unchanged, but I could tell Leia was angry.

This is bad.

“You ungrateful little...” the man uttered. “This may not be much to you, but it’s still valuable to most kids, all right?! Everything you just mentioned is a top-of-the-line

snack in terms of flavor and price! Besides, it's boring if you just eat fancy stuff all the time. You need to expand your horizons by enjoying the cheap stuff too! It's good in its own way, you know? I'll bet you only eat the most expensive treats, so you should try out the food of commoners and learn the ways of the world for once!"

I had expected him to just shout nonsense, but he kind of had a point...

Leia was silent after the man in charge of preparing the snacks went off on his rant. I wondered if things were about to go south and considered abandoning the plan to intervene, but then..."You have a point..." Leia said. "I understand and agree with your argument, so I'll put up with the cheap stuff for today. However, I demand you provide a sufficient quantity."

"R-Right..." the man said, slightly taken aback. "Good..."

No way!

That goon had actually managed to convince Leia, who never compromised when it came to food. I was absolutely shocked...

"Looks like things will be fine here. I'll leave the rest to you," I said to Reiko.

"Roger that!" she responded.

Reiko could handle things by herself, so it was time for me to head out. She could monitor them from hiding and her magic would be more useful than my potions in this situation. Plus, I had to work on preparations for tomorrow.

All right, I'm outta here!

"Lady Kaoru, you have a guest," Ellie told me just before noon. "They're four men with swollen faces..."

Ellie hadn't been targeted by the four attackers, but it was painfully obvious who they were, given the simple ease of identifying them. It wasn't as if they could come visiting with masks covering their faces either. The men must have known the kids had already reported that they had beaten their attackers' faces to a pulp. Since they were here with their conspicuously swollen faces, they had no intention of hiding that fact. There

was only one reason for them to be here now...

I ordered Ellie to escort the group to the dining hall after a short pause, then quickly made my way there with the guards I was having tea with. We didn't have a reception room here, so we used the dining hall for receiving guests, since it was well kept up and the kids didn't go in there except during meal times. Depending on the guest and situation, we usually let the guest into the room first, and I would enter after, but I decided we should wait in the room for the visitors this time.

As soon as we took our places in the dining hall, Ellie brought in the visitors. I was seated on our side, with one man standing behind me as a bodyguard. Last night, I had arranged for him to be here for the meeting, since it would have been disconcerting for a mere frail woman to meet with four adult men on not-so-friendly terms by herself... usually, anyway.

Reiko was pulling an all-nighter watching over Leia. Leia probably didn't need to sleep, so she was almost definitely bombarding her three captors with questions. There were three of them, so maybe they would take turns dealing with her so they could take naps as needed.

After the children served tea and snacks at the beginning of the meeting, I had them leave out of concern for their safety and emotional education. That left six people total: me, my bodyguard, and the four men on their side.

These four are always together, aren't they... I guess it never occurred to them that they could split up and handle business concurrently.

Well, their branch store was preparing to shut down, so maybe there was nowhere for them to be; I doubted they wanted to help out with the process. I gestured for the visitors to take a seat. They didn't say anything, so I decided to break the ice.

"So, how can I help you, now that you've suddenly shown up without an appointment?" I asked, putting on my best fake smile...

Why are they backing away and looking scared?!

"Ah, y-yes... We were hoping to sign a business deal with you today..." Roderich replied.

"What? I heard that the Relinas Trade Company is closing up shop here. What sort of deal are we talking?" I countered. This was going as expected so far.

"We were thinking of something like this..." he said, showing me a contract. I read through its contents, then...

"Wha!"

Ah, I didn't mean to shout like that. But this contract... You've. Gotta. Be. Kidding me!

It was downright ludicrous. All that I could muster was a dry laugh. They must've thought I was some sort of fool. It was a contract with their main branch in the royal capital, but it stated we would bear the cost of any damage incurred during transportation or as a result of a bandit attack. Moreover, they could freely decide and specify the type and quantity of goods to be bought or sold, and if we couldn't provide the goods, we would pay a penalty. Not to mention, only they would have the right to break the contract. They had to think I was a complete idiot. I mean, it would definitely be a huge achievement if they could somehow get us to sign this piece of junk.

"Denied!" I said.

It was the only possible outcome here. I wouldn't have accepted the terms even if they had been decent, of course... But, man, this contract was far worse than I had imagined.

"What would be the benefit in switching from our current business partner to Relinas?" I asked. "According to this contract, our profits would be cut down to a mere fraction, or we'd end up in the red. Besides, our current business partner is funded by the local lord. It may not matter to you, since you're closing your branch and leaving, but why would we want to be on bad terms with the lord when we're doing business here? Did you really think we would agree to this? Are you insane?"

The terms in the contract Roderich had given us were so bad that it made me question his mental state. No proper merchant would ever suggest something so ridiculous.

"By the way..." Roderich started. "I hear your relative's daughter was staying at an inn. Do you know where she is now?"

Here we go! Just as planned...

"Hm? Do you mean Leia?" I replied. "I'm sure she's at the inn, wandering around town, or out and about somewhere. Why do you ask?"

"Huh? Roderich said.

There was a long silence.

The silence stretched on, and the visitors were starting to look troubled. Their plan had been to offhandedly mention the missing Leia, act concerned, then reveal that they had her in custody in order to make us sign the contract. If we weren't even aware that Leia was missing, there was no way for them to subtly imply that they had taken her. They couldn't be the one to bring it up first, since it would be unnatural for them to know she was missing. They wanted to imply they were responsible for her disappearance, and make us worry because of it, without directly admitting their role in things. But their plan would only work if there was a commotion about her going missing, and Roderich's group had just happened to hear about it.

The silence hung thick in the air.

They didn't know what to do, but to be honest, neither did I. The conversation had come to a complete standstill. Even if they had decided to throw the plan out the window and make me sign the contract by force, I had a bodyguard with me. It might have been four against one, but the four pot-bellied merchants stood no chance against an experienced and armed combat professional. If he was forced to draw his sword, my guard would make quick work of them and leave four dead bodies on the ground. Even if they survived with heavy injuries, they would get the death sentence for assaulting me.

Besides, this was our shop and they were the away team. There was only one guard in the room, but I could easily summon several others as backup at any time. Kids like the two that had beaten them up could swarm up over them, armed with sharp knives. No, they didn't have the guts to make me sign the contract by force. The imagery of what would happen was... pretty frightening.

"H-How long is that girl usually away...?" Roderich asked with uncertainty.

"Hmm, it could be two or three days, a week, ten days, or even a month or more. She's capable of handling herself, so I'm not really worried," I replied.

"Huh..."

More silence.

What is this, a funeral?

As it stood, there was no chance that I would ever experience genuine fear for Leia's safety and thereby fall for their intimidation tactics, and if they did nothing but wait for me to start worrying about her whereabouts, they would eventually be forced to withdraw to the royal capital. But if they insinuated or raised concerns about Leia being missing, it would practically be a confession that they were holding her captive. We could then report them to the guards, which was something they would want to avoid.

It was a stalemate... But we would only waste time by just sitting here, so I decided to make a move. "Anyway, I'm offended that you think I'm stupid enough to accept such ridiculous terms. I'll be sure to tell my business partners that Relinas is a company that uses such absurd practices. I'll only be telling them the truth, so I presume you'll have no issues with that. It isn't as if you demanded we sign a contract with shameless terms that you wouldn't want others to know about..."

"Urgh..."

Since I hadn't signed the contract, I wasn't bound by the stipulation that stated I couldn't disclose the contents of the agreement with others. Not disclosing the details of a contract was kind of an unspoken agreement, but since they were treating us like idiots without any business sense, we'd just act like the idiots that they assumed we were. We only abided by common practices and rules with respect for the other party when they did the same for us. There was no reason to be polite and considerate with lawless goons.

Roderich said nothing, probably because he didn't think a few negative rumors circulating in some regional city where they had no company presence would be an issue. Their branch store was closing, so he assumed this wouldn't affect the Relinas Trade Company all the way in the royal capital. The thing is, he didn't realize that Muno's branch store was also located in the capital.

"Thanks for your time..." he finally said.

Looks like he's given up.

There was nothing he could do here anyway. It seemed they were going to regroup and come up with another plan. Too bad for him, he was running out of time.

Kaoru had trailed Roderich's group as they left Little Silver until they arrived at a small hovel on the outskirts of town that they were using as a temporary base of operations. Since they weren't going in the direction of the branch store, it was obvious they were headed here. Trailing someone was simple when you knew their destination, particularly when the target was frustrated and unable to concentrate.

"How did it go?" one of the hired kidnappers asked, but Roderich ignored him, looking upset.

The trio realized that the plan had failed, mostly by the look on their employer's face. However, this part of the plan was outside of their responsibility. They had succeeded in kidnapping the girl without trouble and had then babysat her overnight, thus perfectly pulling off their assignment so far. All they needed to do now was wait for their employer's order to release the girl. There was no foul play here; just some kind men who liked children giving sweets to a girl who had followed them of her own free will. The excuse wouldn't hold under normal conditions, but since the girl in question was staying at an inn long-term by herself without a guardian, she was free to do as she wished. If she wanted to spend the night there, it wasn't a problem for them to oblige.

It was a rather forced excuse, but it was good enough for them because they would be leaving town as soon as they let the girl go. They would only have the testimony of a girl who wasn't even ten years old, and there were no photos, TVs, or newspapers in this world. No one would bother putting up a bounty or go searching in another city for a few guys who gave snacks to a child when there were so many violent criminals out there.

Although Leia had complained about the taste and quantity of the snacks provided, she spent all night talking to the men without getting too upset. This was the first opportunity she'd had to grill someone with questions without being concerned about troubling them or taking up too much of their time. Since Leia didn't require sleep, she had asked questions throughout the night without pause and ended up being quite satisfied.



The three men looked exhausted, but not discontent, as this was what they had signed up for. In fact, watching over a young girl was like a vacation away from their usual savage work, and they ended up enjoying themselves.

"Nothing new here. Leia just grilled them with questions all night. The kidnappers were doing their best to answer her earnestly the whole time. Maybe they're not such bad people..." Reiko reported.

"Hello? They kidnapped a little girl!" I shot back.

As soon as I arrived, Reiko walked up to me and included me in her stealth field. Thanks to her, we could look inside without trying to be sneaky and speak at a normal volume without fear of getting caught. They were in an abandoned shack with no shortage of gaps to peek through, and we could clearly hear any conversation from the building.

Inside, Roderich and his crew were ignoring the kidnappers they had hired and interrogating Leia.

"Why do you act on your selfish whims when you come from a rich family?"

"Why don't you have any guards with you?"

"What's your family name?"

"What's your relation with Little Silver?"

To which Leia answered, "I don't know; don't ask me..."

She didn't have a family name, and it was difficult to explain the relationship between us. It was equally difficult to explain why she didn't have any guards or why she was roaming around freely by herself. Besides, she wasn't obligated to explain in the first place.

"Oh, I guess you could say they're my... income source?" Leia said.

Well, she's not wrong... Damn it!



Her explanation wasn't enough for Roderich. "You little brat!" he shouted.

"There!" I said.

Bam!

"Stop, kidnapper! Take one step and you're dead!"

"Whaaaaaat!!!" the kidnappers all yelled in unison.

Roderich was raising his fist in response to Leia's cheeky attitude, and one of the hired abductors had jumped in front of Leia to protect her. At that moment, the guards slammed the door open and barged into the room.

I had preemptively spoken to the guards last night and told them my relative, a noble girl, had been kidnapped. That got them pretty worked up, and it took a lot of effort to convince them to wait until the next day, so we could capture the culprits along with the mastermind. Normally, they would have mobilized immediately without waiting, despite what I asked... After all, a noble girl had been kidnapped. The matter didn't just put the city's reputation at risk, but that of the lord and those in charge of maintaining public order. They could all be held responsible.

Fortunately, I had built up trust through my daily conduct here. I assured the guards Leia would be safe as a hostage, and I promised to give them full credit for Leia's rescue and send them expensive drinks from my home country as thanks, at which point they reluctantly agreed. Of course, I had held off on giving them this location until just recently, so they wouldn't ruin the operation at an inopportune time. Plus, it would've been strange if I had already known about this place yesterday.

When Roderich's crew had left Little Silver, I flipped over a ten-minute hourglass before I went after him, telling the kids to hand my letter to the guards when it emptied, just as I had instructed them last night. I knew they wouldn't be able to delay their arrival time or walk slowly even if I told them to, so the timer was a foolproof way to calibrate the timing. The plan was for the guards to receive my letter, with a map enclosed, then rush over with their swords at the ready. They had probably been ready and raring to go since last night, when I had given them a heads up.

In any case, the culprits and masterminds had been caught red-handed.

"Excuse me, miss, are you Leia?" the commander of the guards asked gently.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Why are you here?" the man asked.

"These guys said they'd give me tasty snacks, so I followed them here... but it wasn't true. I've been here since yesterday."

"Capture them!" the commander ordered. "Round them up and drag them away!!!"

Well, that was to be expected...

By "it wasn't true," Leia probably meant the snacks provided weren't up to her standards, but the guards seemed to take it a different way.

Well, time for me to step in... Leia won't be able to explain everything by herself.

"Reiko, deactivate the stealth magic!" I ordered.

"Roger that!"

I barged into the room through the door.

"Ahh, Leia, I'm so glad you're safe! I heard you were missing last night and asked the guards to search for you!" I said, then turned to the guards. "Thank you all for saving Leia from the kidnappers! If it wasn't for you, they would have extorted money from us and sold her off somewhere. I can't even begin to thank you for saving her from such evil child traffickers!"

"Whaaaaaat?!" Roderich's team and his hired kidnappers screamed in shock as their crimes grew more and more heinous.

"You said you weren't worried about her being gone!" Roderich complained.

"You were the primary suspect behind the kidnapping. Why would I tell you the truth?" I shot back. "And you went straight to your hideout without even thinking of the possibility of being tailed. Are you dumb?"

"Urgh..."

He had no words. To be honest, I already knew about this place last night before I

followed him.

"Those are the real bad guys," Leia said, pointing at Roderich and his team. She then gestured toward the kidnapper trio. "These three were tricked by those guys, and thought they were just hired to take care of a kid for a day. They tried to protect me earlier, too..."

The trio looked at her wide-eyed. They must have been incredibly grateful. After all, they were at risk of being put to death here, but thanks to Leia, they might end up getting off with just a hundred lashes or so. They should be scraping their foreheads against the ground in appreciation. Humans were pretty much like ants to Leia, so the trio must have grown on her after talking to her all night. Maybe they had been promoted from ants to hamsters or something... Or maybe *all* humans had been promoted to hamsters after her interactions with them. It did seem like she was particularly interested in Mine...

Maybe this is a good sign.

If it meant there was less of a chance of her getting upset and massacring humanity... not out of malice, but in the same vein as humans spraying pesticide... it was definitely a good thing.

"True, this man was trying to protect Leia when we stepped in," the commander confirmed. "All right, we've heard your testimony. Don't worry, we'll be sure to include it in the report."

The three kidnappers bowed their heads, tears streaming down their faces. It was a pretty touching moment, truthfully. The guards, for their part, were nodding contentedly.

As for Roderich...

"I don't know what you're talking about!" he shouted. "We heard a child's voice from this seemingly abandoned shack, so we got worried and looked inside! I was just attacking those suspicious men to save the little girl!"

"Uh..."

"You don't really think we'll believe that, do you?"

“Just give it up already...”

“So shameless...”

“Then why did you say, ‘You said you weren’t worried about her being gone!’ earlier...?”

The guards clearly weren’t buying it. The commander then said, “It’s pointless to try to talk your way out of it with us. Our job is to capture criminals; the higher-ups will do the judging and sentencing. All we’re going to do is report what we saw and heard, along with the testimonies of everyone present, to the higher-ups, not judge whether they’re true or false. You might as well save your excuses for the interrogator.”

He was right. It seemed Roderich understood this as well, and he stopped his desperate wailing.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, then,” I said to the guards. “Please reach out to me any time if you need my testimony and I’ll rush right over. I’ll have to report how they tried to demand we sign an unreasonable contract using Leia as collateral... Oh, I should spread the news through the city, the royal capital, and the Commerce Guild too. These men are from the royal capital, and they work at their company’s main branch there, after all. Maybe their company ordered the kidnapping in the first place...”

“What!” Roderich and his crew stared in wide-eyed astonishment at my comment.

Such a report would not only take Roderich out of the running for being the next president of the company, but could very well bring down the company itself. The king wouldn’t overlook a business that was willing to kidnap a noble girl from another country to threaten others into signing a contract with ridiculous terms. The company would be doomed as soon as the word got out. The president of the company would be under constant threat of getting arrested or having his stores shut down, so no one would want to do business with them, since there would be a huge risk of not being able to collect payment. Besides, their associates could be put under scrutiny for wrongdoing too... That said, some people might be happy to do business with them if they were allowed to do deferred payments, so they could avoid paying altogether once Relinas shut down. Merchants were all like that.

Huh, Roderich’s crew has been awfully quiet...

Their sentences might be lightened if they claimed they were working under the orders of their main branch, but that would mean the company would go down,

putting their families out on the street. It would be better to just admit their wrongdoing and accept their punishment. I mean, they had brought it on themselves.

Dragging their families into it wouldn't change the outcome by much anyway. They hadn't hurt any children, so they'd probably avoid capital punishment. If they could smooth-talk their way out of this situation, they might even end up taking a much lighter penalty. And if Roderich contacted his father, he might be able to take care of the entire situation through bribes and political maneuvering... That was probably what was going on in their heads. They were hoping that they'd get help, even if they ended up as slaves, as long as the family business was intact. Roderich's father could buy the right to hire them for the duration of their labor, and he could support them after they completed their punishment period.

I guess they didn't even consider the possibility of Roderich being disowned and completely cut off from the family.

That was a family matter that didn't affect me, so I decided to ignore it.

I left the guards to handle the situation and headed home to Little Silver with Leia. I had to take her to the underground headquarters to give her a delicious treat as a reward, like a potion that looked and tasted like luxury Japanese sweets but was also somewhat healthy. One might ask, "Isn't a potion supposed to be liquid?" but sweets have liquid in them, so it wasn't a problem. It wasn't like they were completely dehydrated dried goods or anything. Besides, "potion" kind of sounded like "portion," and you used portions in cooking, so it was all good... At least, I liked to think that if I believed that hard enough, it'd pass the Goddess' scrutiny. Besides, I'd already had meetings with Reiko and Kyoko about that to test the theory, so we were fine on that end. I'd made plenty of food in the past with my ability too.

Anyway, with the Roderich issue resolved, Kyoko could finally come home. From now on, Roderich would be under guard, in jail, wherever he was getting sent to work to serve his sentence, or maybe they'd take him back to the royal capital. Whatever the case, he wouldn't be running into Kyoko again. Even if he did, he wouldn't be in any state to recognize the similarities between her and the merchant Salette, so there should be no problem.

All right, I'm gonna let her know as soon as I give Leia her payment.

"Great work! You were a huge help. Here, eat to your heart's content!" I said.

As soon as we got home, I gave the kids the good news that the case had been solved, then went underground through my room and handed Leia some cooking and sweets in the headquarters.

She then looked at me and said, "Good. But first, I'll take my payment in gold coins with a premium rate, plus the settlement fee."

Damn, she remembered...

Celes and Leia could create anything, but they didn't create currency. Supposedly, money was the embodiment of a country's creditworthiness, so unlike food or jewelry, a third party creating it made it counterfeit and therefore no good. I didn't actually think it really had to do with creditworthiness, since the value was determined by the gold content in the coins, but I had also decided not to create currency regardless, so I was paying her with my own hard-earned money. I could technically make jewelry or gold nuggets instead, but as soon as a girl like me tried to turn them in, I'd get the guards called on me if I was lucky... or worse, I'd get confined and tortured by some criminals.

"If you want more, just ask. And let me know if you want anything else," I said.

"Mhm," Leia replied. It wasn't as if she would hesitate to demand things from lower lifeforms like us, though...

CHAPTER 72

TRADER SHOP

“Got it! Oh yeah, and I hired a store manager!” Kyoko said.

“Huh?”

After Leia left, we called Kyoko on the transmission device to tell her the matter had been resolved, and then she gave us the unexpected news.

“I mean, it kinda sucks that I have to stay down here all by myself, don’t you think?” she asked.

Reiko and I were struck dumb. We had actually been concerned about that too.

“That’s why I hired a manager,” Kyoko continued. “Now I can take it easy over there and only come down to the shop to restock the inventory once in a while!”

Another long silence from Reiko and me. Well, I guess that was a good thing. Now we could all take it easy here, other than when we need to go out on occasional business trips.

That reminds me, Reiko and I haven’t gone on business trips in a while because we’ve been dealing with Roderich. We’ll need to go sometime soon...

“I’ll be back soon!” I said and hung up.

All right, now that I’ve told Kaoru and Reiko the news, maybe I’ll head back to Little Silver in two days or so.

The manager I hired used to be a sales clerk at some merchant house and had been recommended to me by the guildmaster and vice guildmaster of the Industry Guild.

I guess a sales clerk would be like a section chief in Japan? A shop boy is like an ordinary

employee to a chief, a sales clerk is like a section chief, a head clerk is like a department head, and a chief clerk is like a managing director...

Thinking of it that way, a sales clerk working as a store manager might be a bit much, but it was pretty much like a section chief from a major company working as a store manager for a small shop, so they were more than qualified. The guildmasters must have taken that into consideration, so I decided to trust their judgment.

I had been turning down employees from other merchant houses because I couldn't trust them, but then I realized the same could be said of anyone, so I turned to the guildmaster for referrals. My choice was between a stranger who might or might not be trustworthy and a referral from the Industry Guild with business experience who might or might not be trustworthy. The choice was clear, though the decision wasn't without its risks.

I made sure to tell the new store manager that the second floor was off-limits and that anything they saw or heard here was confidential. The two employees I had hired from the orphanage had been onboarded directly by me, and although there was a hierarchical relationship between a store manager and a normal employee, they were all considered colleagues hired by me. Regular harassment, sexual harassment, other crimes, and miscellaneous forms of betrayal were prohibited. I secretly told the two employees that if the new manager ever harassed them, they were to report it to the Industry Guild and return to the orphanage until I got back. I didn't want them to keep quiet about it for fear of getting fired, so I assured them my orders overrode the store manager's and that I would fire them anyway if they disobeyed my instructions.

I wanted the store manager to be a woman too, but the guildmaster told me there were no female sales clerks. I wasn't sure if that was true, but come to think of it, there were female-owned flower shops and eateries and small stores with salesgirls and female cashiers, but the women at major retailers were basically servants in charge of cleaning, cooking, and serving tea. That was why I opted to hire the man referred by the guildmaster, but I made sure to put some safety measures in place to protect my two female employees, the shop... and our secrets.

“Ah... It went by so quickly...”

After a long acclimation period, I stayed at Little Silver for about five days or so.

When I had returned to my shop, I checked the traps I had set on the forbidden second floor, like the piece of hair that was set to break when the door was opened, and confirmed that there had been an intruder. Then I checked my convenient surveillance camera that recorded the time when something moved within its field of view. Afterward, I spoke to the manager and asked if anything happened during my absence. He reported that nothing was out of the ordinary...

After we closed up for the day and the three workers went home, I headed toward the orphanage to speak to two of my employees there.

I had gone straight from the orphanage to the Industry Guild, requested a meeting with the guildmaster, then got escorted to his room. As soon as had I entered the room, I smiled at the guildmaster and vice guildmaster and said, "Please take back the man you introduced to me." I hadn't even taken a seat yet.

"Huh?" the guildmaster said, dumbfounded.

"I'm terminating his employment for breaking into my private quarters after I told him they were absolutely off limits, snooping around my personal space, stealing my merchandise, and verbally abusing and threatening my female employees in my absence. I'm afraid he'll get upset and lash out, so I'd like you to take responsibility for introducing him to me in the first place."

The guildmaster and vice guildmaster stared wordlessly, their mouths hanging open and their faces scrunched up in astonishment.

I continued, "When I was hesitant to hire anyone because I didn't know any trustworthy managerial personnel, you two were the ones who assured me he would be a good candidate. You *will* take responsibility for this, won't you? Please inform him of his termination and demand the stolen goods back. I don't want him to attack us in retaliation, so I think you should take him. I would hand him over to the guards, but I would need to reveal some confidential technology and security methods if I was to provide proof. There hasn't been much monetary damage, so he's likely to get off with a light punishment. If you dismiss him for disciplinary reasons and tell me everything, including who sent him, I may be willing to settle this with you taking him in on your end. If you refuse to cooperate, I'll be looking into this and taking care of it in my own way. Of course, in that case, I'll spread the word through the city, the neighboring cities,

and the Commerce Guild in the royal capital that a merchant sent to me by your guild committed a crime... It's important to share this information to avoid more victims, so I have an obligation to do so as an upstanding merchant and guild member, wouldn't you agree?"

I wore a smile and kept my tone businesslike throughout my speech to make it clear that I no longer trusted them, and that this was merely a professional conversation. The guildmaster, vice guildmaster, and receptionist lady who had escorted me here all looked rather pale. They had brought this on themselves, so I wasn't going to let them off easy.

I'm not overlooking the possibility that you were the ones who ordered him to spy on us either.

"W-Wait, we didn't order him to do anything, I swear! Explain what happened in detail! I-I mean... please..." the guildmaster pleaded.

"So, while I was away from my shop for an extended period for the first time... though it was only about five days or so, he went through the places I specified as off limits, including my private room and every corner of the house. Not only that, but he pilfered some of my goods, insulted my female employees, and threatened them by saying he would claim they stole from me and get them fired if they said anything. He didn't steal enough to profit much, so I'm guessing his goal is to analyze the items and create copies. This makes it likely that he has someone backing him instead of working solo, like a merchant house... or an organization like the Industry Guild," I said.

"N-No, it's not true! We have nothing to do with this! We'll investigate this matter and prove it to you, so please don't make any rash decisions. One day... one day is all I ask, so please give us some time!" the guildmaster begged, then turned to the others. "Hey, summon the enforcers and apprehend him! You, go find Betel, the former torturer! Tell him to come immediately and that there's a special reward in it for him!"

Look at him panic...

The vice guildmaster and receptionist bolted out of the door to do as they were told. Maybe the guild really hadn't had anything to do with this?

The next day, I was summoned by the guild... Well, they sent me a rookie hunter with a message.

"You can tell them I said, 'Why should I go through the trouble to visit and listen to you because of your mismanagement? If you have something to tell me, please come here and say it. We can talk in my reception room, where spears might rain down from the ceiling, or poisoned needles could shoot out from the chairs.'"

The messenger turned pale and ran out the door. It was just a joke... It wouldn't be spears coming down from the ceiling, but an electric shock. Also, the needles weren't poisoned, they were tipped with numbing agent.

And so, the guildmaster and some other guy showed up two hours later. Maybe they left the second-in-command out of this meeting to avoid losing the top two members of the guild, just in case? For some reason, the two guests were wearing leather armor. At least they weren't armed...

Come on, you've gotta be kidding... It was supposed to be a joke... Besides, they would've needed metallic armor to protect themselves from poisoned needles. They looked like they could have withstood electric shocks, though.

"W-We're here to report the results of our investigation..." the guildmaster said, his voice trembling.

"What are you so afraid of? It was just a joke! Coming from a little girl, no less!"

They said nothing. This was a huge overreaction... Or maybe they knew I was kind and mild-mannered, but thought that my (non-existent) secret bodyguards or my parents back home were going to take action once they heard what was going on? It would make sense then...

"Anyway, please take a seat," I said as I gestured toward the seats.

They stayed silent, standing completely still.

"There aren't any poisoned needles hidden in the chairs," I assured them.

They still said nothing.

Regardless of what I had told the messenger earlier, we didn't even have a reception

room. We didn't have many rooms in the first place, so we couldn't afford to set one aside for that specific purpose when it would hardly get used.

After a full thirty seconds or so of deliberation, the two finally sat down.

"Close down the shop for now. And get some tea for our guests..." I said to my two employees. They flipped the sign on the door to "Closed" and went to the back room to prepare some tea and snacks. Of course, it was just the two from the orphanage working at the shop. The manager I had hired previously wasn't here... or, really, he couldn't be here.

"So, how did it go? Did he confess?" I asked.

"After looking into this issue, we've confirmed that he's exactly the type of man we assured you he was: a loyal and faithful servant who would never betray his master," the guildmaster explained.

Huh?

"But he did betray..." I started, but was cut off.

"No, he didn't."

What was he on about?

"All he did was follow his master's orders to get hired at your shop, look into your supply chain, find out your manufacturing methods, and take a few samples. Therefore, we were right in our claim that he was a faithful and loyal servant who would never betray his master!" the guildmaster said.

"Wh-What the hell?! There's no way an excuse like that is gonna work!" I shot back.

"Oh... Well, I didn't think it would," he said.

I had forced the guildmaster to spit it all out. Since the evidence couldn't be made public, we couldn't hand the culprit over to the guards so they could investigate the case. That was why the Industry Guild had secretly interrogated him in their own basement. They had even called in some old guy who used to work as a torturer in

another region... Supposedly, the old man was thrilled by the extra income and the fact that his abilities were being relied upon again.

All of this wasn't arranged just because I had requested it, but because I also had the testimonies from my two orphan employees and because I claimed that I had irrefutable proof. Besides, there was no reason for me to throw such an accusation at a freshly-hired manager if it hadn't been necessary. I could've just fired him if I wanted to get rid of him. It wasn't like there was such a thing as employee rights in this world. And for some reason, people had a whole lot of trust in me here. This case could have compromised people's faith in the Industry Guild, so they were desperate to resolve it.

Once left alone with the old man, the former manager had blabbed about all sorts of things... with silver accessories (metal needles) stuck under his nails. He was just a servant from a merchant house and not a professional agent trained to withstand torture, so I couldn't blame him for talking.

"So, when you said he's loyal to his master, you meant his original master who had ordered him to infiltrate the shop, and that the orphans weren't really his subordinates or co-workers. But he threatened my two employees by saying it would be his word against theirs, though it should've been obvious which side I would believe... There aren't a lot of people less trustworthy than a fool who believes their actions could decide the fate of young orphans who would willingly give up their lives to protect the store's money and products. Wouldn't you agree?" I asked.

I thought they would immediately agree, but the two stayed silent.

"I thought I would finally be able to take it easy and go back home more frequently, but I guess not," I mused. "Thanks to that traitor and our 'malicious adversary'...I'll have to make sure to punish them heavily to discourage anyone from trying something like this again..."

I spoke with a smile on my face and my two guests' faces scrunched up with discomfort for some reason.

I wonder why that is?

I had to teach them that if you swung at someone, you could end up hitting a pile of poison-tipped swords.

While we awaited the results of Roderich's interrogation, we got a message from Kyoko. It read, "The manager I hired was a spy. He betrayed me. I'm a bit annoyed, so I'm going to take care of it real quick."

"There's Kyoko's 'I'm a bit annoyed'..." I said.

"And her 'I'm going to take care of it real quick'..." Reiko followed.

"Aaahhhhhhhh!!!" we screamed.



"This world is done for..." I breathed.

"We have to go stop her... But the guards might call us in for Roderich's case, so we can't leave..."

Reiko was right.

"Maybe one of us should go and the other can stay?" she suggested.

"No, we can only stop her if both of us go... So let's have someone else testify for us. A bodyguard could give testimony for the events at Little Silver, and the guards who stepped in at the shack will be able to speak about what happened there. We'll be fine if we go over the details with Leia beforehand. There's no way for Roderich to turn this around from here anyway..." I said.

"Okay, let's let our bodyguard handle things here. For now, we should tell Kyoko to hold off on doing anything because we're on the way," Reiko agreed.

"All right, let's go!" we chorused.

I had to talk to Leia and the bodyguard myself. I was Celes's favorite, so Leia treated me relatively well for a lower life form... almost as if we were equals. Reiko and Kyoko had also been reincarnated by Celes, but I was the one the pseudo-god had apologized to and compensated for my death due to her screwup, whereas the other two had lived full lives, then asked for compensation on their end. So, although they had also been reincarnated by the good-natured Earth god, there was a sense of apology involved in my case, whereas he didn't care about them as much...

Come to think of it, reincarnating those two may not have been to compensate them, but to compensate me for taking away the fun times I could have had with my friends while I was still alive. It seemed unlikely that they were reincarnated with cheat powers just because I, a friend of theirs, had died. That would explain why my memories of when we used to hang out were still clear, and anything that happened after that was muddled. My mind and sensibilities were also reverted to when I was younger in order to match my body. Everything was a bit too convenient... but maybe it was best not to think about that. Reiko was Reiko, and Kyoko was Kyoko. My friends...

Well... that's enough of that.

Maybe Celes and Leia understood all of that, because they were more distant with Reiko and Kyoko than with me. In fact, it felt like Leia regarded the kids, especially Mine, more highly than Reiko and Kyoko. That was why it was my role to talk to Leia about important subjects. I was the one who had hired the bodyguard and arranged everything, so it would obviously be better for me to handle that too. I would have Reiko contact Kyoko and explain the situation to the kids instead.

"All right, we're trusting you guys to handle the rest. Mine will manage the order deliveries and Ellie will take care of food and snacks. The guys who attacked you have been arrested, but if you go into town, make sure you go out in pairs and bring your self-defense tools with you!" Reiko said.

"Understood!" the kids answered.

"There they go..."

"Yup..."

The kids went silent for a moment.

Kaoru and Reiko had left for the city where Kyoko's shop was located, leaving the kids alone at Little Silver. Mine, who had been left in command, began taking charge right away.

"The only instructions Lady Kaoru left us are to fulfill the regular deliveries to clients and make the products for those orders. Other than that, we are to purchase any necessary food and consumables on our end, cook, and study. We don't need to acquire any new customers or increase production to fill up our inventory. She said we can use this opportunity to take it easy and enjoy our free time, but..."

"Just because she said 'we don't need to,' it doesn't mean we 'we're not allowed to'!"

"And if we use our free time to do what we want, which is to work and serve Lady Kaoru, we would still be following her instructions..."

"Yeah!" they all yelled together.

"At least one of the three ladies are always home, and we never get to work outside of our work hours of nine in the morning to six in the evening. With lunch, our post-meal rest period, our snack break at three o'clock, and break time every hour, we're not able to continuously work without frequent stops in between."

"And we don't get to work on one of the days out of the week either..."

"This is torture!"

The children's lives were all about being useful and contributing to the orphanage, so being unable to work and be of service caused them intense stress. However, Kaoru and her friends couldn't bring themselves to overwork kids who weren't even ten years old. According to them, children that young should be spending their days playing and studying, but they were allowed to work as a compromise after considering the values of this world and the benefits it would create for their futures. Kaoru, Reiko, and Kyoko would never allow the kids to extend their work hours beyond their current schedules. Even now, they had been trying to increase the number of times they took the kids out for studies (playtime) under the guise of "training" or "field checks" against their will...

"We'll use their absence as an opportunity to work as hard as we can! Let's make them reconsider getting rid of the unnecessary, meaningless, and harmful practice of giving us rest days!"

"Yeeeah!!!"

"First, we'll expand the farm and do some major cleaning underground. Oh, but we'll only clean the first basement floor... For some reason, they act as if we don't know about the rest of the floors, so don't go any deeper than that!"

"Got it!"

There had been many times when the trio had disappeared without a trace and couldn't be found, even on the first floor of the basement. They had told the kids that there were secret stairs leading to the basement in each of their rooms before, so it stood to reason that there were also secret stairs going farther down. Either that, or there were stairs leading directly to a deeper floor without passing through the first basement floor.

The children had already hypothesized that, and there was no way the goddesses

would make a mistake that would allow them to find out what they were hiding so easily. Therefore, they believed there was a deeper meaning behind the trio's actions and took that to mean, "We're going to let you know because we trust you, but you are to pretend you don't know about it." They figured there was something in the lower levels as part of a contingency plan and that the goddesses would reveal it to them once the kids earned their approval.

And so, the children firmly believed Kaoru and her two friends were goddesses and therefore worked diligently, grateful to be of service... completely unaware of what the trio was thinking.

"We will now proceed with the questioning for the kidnapping case."

Roderich's questioning was about to begin in the guardhouse interrogation room. Roderich's group, seven men in all, bowed their heads at the interrogator's announcement. They consisted of Roderich, his three followers, and the three kidnappers they had hired.

Since this was a major case, the local lord was in attendance as an observer. The victim in question was a girl who seemed to be the daughter of a noble from another territory or country, whereas the culprit wasn't from this territory, but rather a citizen of the royal capital. The case could end up developing into a major crisis if things went wrong, so it was only natural for him to be there.

The objective facts of the incident were witnessed by many, including the soldiers of the guard squad, so there was no way for Roderich to talk his way out of this. The only thing Roderich could do now was to make up a believable story that didn't contradict eyewitness testimony. The girl from Little Silver would surely deny and refute his claims, but if he could somehow make the interrogator believe him...

Huh...?

Having calmed down a bit, Roderich noticed something was off and scanned the room.

Where are they? Those girls aren't here...

Other than the seven from his group, the only ones in the room were the interrogator, four soldiers from the guard squad that had arrested him, that girl Leia—who was the

victim in this case—and the local lord. As Roderich stared in confusion, the interrogator explained, “The members of Little Silver have something important to attend to and are out of town. The interrogation will proceed with the individuals present.”

“What...?”

They weren’t there. Those girls wouldn’t be attending the interrogation. There was no one other than the people on their side who knew about the exchange at Little Silver, and the only one who was directly involved in the incident and knew anything about the situation was that Leia girl, who was apparently an idiot. That girl had followed them to their hideout with the promise of snacks and had just eaten candy all night long. Moreover, she had grown attached to the kidnappers who had kept her company and had spoken in their defense.

Yes! Now there’s no one here who can deny my claims! Anything I say will be taken as truth!

Things went rather smoothly from there. No one interfered with Roderich’s passionate defense to the interrogator’s questioning. The men he had hired stayed quiet, as their sentences would also be reduced if Roderich got off lightly.

I win!

As soon as Roderich was certain victory was in reach...

“He’s lying,” Leia said.

Then...

“He’s lying,” the local lord confirmed.

“Wha...” Roderich froze at their sudden comments. “Wh-Why...?”

A statement from Leia was understandable. She was directly involved in this case, so he knew she could speak up if he said anything untrue. He was planning on arguing his way out of it, as she was just a foolish, naive seven or eight year old. However, he hadn’t expected the lord to also deny his claims. The lord had only heard reports from his subordinates and was supposed to be there as an observer. In other words, he should have stayed out of it unless the interrogator asked him to speak up, or if the

conversation had somehow gone off-track. He shouldn't have intervened by cutting him off as the suspect was speaking when the questioning was moving along with no arguments or problems.

"N-No, it's all true!" Roderich insisted.

"But I heard you visited Little Silver and spoke as if you knew that girl was missing," the lord shot back. "And you made ludicrous demands that were almost—no, they *were* an outright threat and attempt at intimidation."

There it was. Roderich knew the lord had received reports about the incident. Normally, that claim would have resulted in a heated debate with conflicting claims, with Roderich being put at a severe disadvantage due to circumstantial evidence. But it seemed the Goddess was watching over Roderich, as the only ones who were present during the incident were the four men on his own side. He could still get out of this.

"Excuse me, sir, but the girls lied about that to get us in trouble, since we're their business rivals. As legitimate merchants, we would never do such a foolish thing. The fact that those girls aren't here today is proof enough. I'm certain they fled, afraid that their lies would be uncovered and they would be punished instead. There's no one who can verify those claims are true..." Roderich tried to say, but was interrupted partway through.

"There is a witness," the lord said.

"Huh?"

"There is a witness right here," the lord repeated.

Roderich looked around the room, but couldn't see what he was talking about. It was just him, his three followers, the three kidnappers he had hired, that Leia girl, the interrogator, four guards, and the lord. He said nothing, not able to comprehend what the lord meant.

Finally, the lord spoke up again.

"You still don't get it?" he asked. "It's me! I'm the witness!"

"What...?"

Roderich stared at the lord's face intently...

"Ah!"

His face grew pale as realization hit him.

"N-No..."

Roderich's followers went pale as well.

"Y-You... It was you..."

It finally dawned on Roderich and his men... they remembered the face of the bodyguard who was standing behind Kaoru during the meeting. There was no way she would have hired some stranger and had him attend such an important event. In order to save time and effort explaining the situation, to prepare evidence, and save money on hiring a bodyguard, she had the lord dress like a guard and stand there during the meeting. Since they knew Roderich's group of four men would come barging in, she needed a bodyguard to intimidate them, lest they underestimate her as a little girl and resort to blatant threats and use of force. As such, Kaoru had killed two birds with one stone by using the local lord.

"That's perjury during the interrogation and false statements made to the local lord. All of the criminal acts you've been accused of are therefore confirmed to be true. I declare you guilty! Your punishment will be determined by the interrogator."

The lord left the room, leaving Roderich and his crew slumped over in defeat. The lord had claimed he would leave the rest to the interrogator, but the sentence had been decided prior to the interrogation. They would send the details of the incident and a request for punishment to the guards in the royal capital. Although Roderich and his men were registered as citizens in the royal capital, they had committed their crime in this territory, and so they could be legally punished here. However, it was true that they had intended to let Leia go free without harming her, and since they had treated her with courtesy, their crime wasn't a serious felony or violent in nature, despite trying to force other parties into an unfavorable contract through intimidation.

Therefore, their sentences wouldn't be exceptionally severe, and they certainly wouldn't end up being put to death or cast into indefinite slavery. The lord had determined that it was better to send them back to the royal capital so they could receive punishment there rather than eventually releasing them in this territory after

brewing up hatred toward Little Silver for a few years. That way, the damage inflicted to their main branch in the royal capital would be more severe and it would be less likely for them to return to his territory for revenge after they served their sentences.

As for the kidnappers they had hired, the kidnapped girl herself and members of Little Silver had made a plea for a reduced sentence, so although no one believed their excuse of "I didn't know it was a crime," it wasn't a significant issue. As such, they were to be forgiven with a hundred lashings and banished from the territory. They wouldn't be able to sleep on their backs for a while after getting the hundred lashes, but it was a rather mild punishment compared to being tattooed with the mark of a criminal, being made a slave, or having one of their hands cut off. And since they were from a neighboring territory in the first place, being exiled from this place would hardly affect them.

Even if they hadn't had malicious intent, they had kidnapped a young girl, so such a light punishment would have been impossible under normal circumstances. It was likely that the three kidnappers had fallen to their knees, weeping tears of gratitude after they had heard their sentences.

Kyoko had brought her airship to a nearby forest in the middle of the night to pick us up, and now we were flying toward the city where her shop was located. Sure, we could have run all the way there by increasing our stamina and recovering our vitality along the way with my potions or Reiko's magic. If we had run fifteen hundred meters in six minutes, which was an average speed for a fifteen- to sixteen-year-old girl... well, maybe someone doing track and field could temporarily reach that speed... then we could have traveled three hundred and sixty kilometers in twenty-four hours. Even if someone saw us on the way, they would have only seen us for a few minutes at a time, so it wouldn't have raised any red flags... though they might have found it strange that two girls in sportswear were running along the road so far from any city.

Yeah, no thanks. I think I'll pass on running all night soaking in sweat! Our muscles would be so sore the next day, it wouldn't even be funny!

"Why are you breathing so heavily, Kaoru?" Kyoko asked, confused.

"Don't worry about it..." I said.

"Anyway, you haven't done anything yet, right, Kyoko?" Reiko asked. "Don't tell me you retaliated against that manager you hired, the merchant house that sent him, or the guildmaster who roped you into this mess..."

"No, I haven't," Kyoko replied. "I can't do anything to the manager because he's holed up in the Industry Guild's basement, and you told me to wait till you got here... even though it turned out I went to pick you up instead of waiting for you to arrive."

"So, about what the guildmaster said... Are you sure it wasn't some poor attempt at a joke? The head of the Industry Guild couldn't possibly think an excuse like that would work. Maybe the situation was so bad that he had to make a joke out of it?" I asked.

"Hmm..." Kyoko pondered. "The guildmaster and vice guildmaster *are* nice people. They were kind to me when I came out of nowhere without any allies..."

I remembered her talking about it happily when she had first returned to Little Silver, and decided to give the guildmaster a little help.

"Well, he may have upset you by making an insensitive joke when you were frustrated about getting betrayed by the manager, but maybe you should give him some leeway and forgive him just this once?" I suggested.

"Hmm... If you say so," Kyoko said. "So, what about the manager and the guy who was pulling the strings?"

"Let's crush them!" Reiko and I answered.

"Thought so."

"So, who was the mastermind behind all this?"

"There's a store in this city that pretends to be an ordinary shop, but it's secretly a branch store for a major retailer with its main office in the royal capital," Kyoko explained. "This city is served by one of the major businesses headquartered in the royal capital, the Hawkes Trade Company. You see, the big-name stores have an unwritten agreement where only one of them occupies each city. It would be better for the residents if there were multiple big retailers competing with each other, but it's more efficient for businesses to cooperate with each other and divide up territories

to monopolize each one rather than cannibalize each other's sales."

"Ah..." we replied.

As a business owner, I understood how those retailers felt.

"So what's up with the 'secret branch store' stuff?" Reiko asked, then Kyoko nodded.

"It's a branch store for a major retailer that's pretending to be an ordinary, independent business. There's no proof, but they only handle the bare minimum of goods to buy and sell in this city while buying a ton of local specialty products to send to the royal capital. Pretty fishy. But the whole unspoken agreement thing isn't an official rule, and it's not a crime or anything, so Hawkes has been ignoring it..."

"But then they set their sights on your shop," I said.

"Yup," Kyoko confirmed. "My products fit their criteria of 'items that can be bought for cheap and sold for a high price in the royal capital.' Of course, we don't just sell to the small shops in this city, but to Hawkes branch store too, so our wares have been making their way to the capital through Hawkes for a while now. Because of that, some parts of the capital have already taken notice of our products and want more. But they can't just buy up a ton of our stock right under Hawkes' nose, which must be why they wanted to find our supply route or manufacturing methods."

"Makes sense..." we said, nodding along.

Wait a sec...

"So the reason Roderich and his men knew about your shop was..." I said.

"Yup, our store is already becoming known in some parts of the royal capital," Kyoko confirmed.

"I see..."

That explained why they had jumped on to Kyoko's Trader Shop so quickly.

And so, we had arrived at the city where Kyoko was staying as a base of operations

before we knew it. The trip took no time at all on an airship. Although it was nighttime and we had our optical camouflage and sound-baffling devices active, we obviously didn't want to land in the middle of the city. We descended in a deserted area on the outskirts of town and walked the rest of the way.

We sent the airship back into orbit using its autopilot feature. Kyoko kept the mothership on standby rather than putting it away so she could call for it quicker in case of an emergency. Like me and Reiko, Kyoko was the cautious type, or maybe even a bit of a worrier.

"Oh, wait!" I exclaimed.

Reiko and I weren't wearing disguises, and it was too early to reveal the relationship between me and Reiko from Little Silver, or between Can the hunter, Edith the saint, and the merchant Salette. And so...

"Here you go, a potion that changes your hair and eye color!"

I handed Reiko a potion bottle I had just created that resembled a nutrition drink, and then I made one for myself too. I downed it all at once, changing my coloration to something other than my usual self or Edith the saint. I used the bracelet on my left wrist to change my face through optical camouflage, then adjusted the dial on the voice changer, making myself look and sound different from Edith. It went without saying that the transformation bracelet wasn't only capable of changing my voice and appearance to Edith's. It was unlikely that anyone would see us tonight, but this kind of prudence could end up saving our lives.

Anyway, Kyoko changed into her usual Salette form, while me and Reiko put on plain faces that would blend in, then we all headed toward Kyoko's Trader Shop. There was a lot to talk about once we got there...

We arrived at the Trader Shop without anyone finding us, so we went to Kyoko's room on the second floor to have a meeting. We had all disabled our disguises, since it would've been distracting otherwise. There were rooms for me and Reiko on the second floor and Kyoko had told us we were free to visit any time without prior notice.

She must have been bored and lonely out here... We should make arrangements so we can live together once all of this is settled.

And so, we got our meeting started. I pulled some drinks and snacks out of my Item Box and placed them on the table.

"So, can we really trust that confession?" Reiko asked. "Maybe the manager planned this whole thing himself, but he's trying to blame his former boss for it. Or maybe it was someone else who gave the orders..."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Kyoko said. "This is just hearsay from the guildmaster, but the old man who tortu... *interrogated* the manager said, 'The young ones think you just need to hit them with all your might, but as you lose your vitality with old age, you need to learn to adapt. Torture isn't about inflicting pain on their body, but their mind. It's all about breaking their spirit, not their bones.' So, a veteran torturer knows whether someone has been truly broken and can easily tell if they're lying or not."

She corrected herself by saying "interrogated" instead of "tortured" at first, but ended up saying "torture" multiple times after that.

That's Kyoko for ya...

"So we can assume that business and its boss are behind everything?" Reiko asked.

"Yup. Oh, and this is already confirmed, of course." Kyoko said.

She must have secured some definitive proof with a wiretap or something... though she wouldn't be able to submit it to the guard or local lord as evidence. We couldn't make a move until we were completely certain who the culprit was, after all.

"So, what would be considered 'karma' here?" I asked.

"Hmm..." we mused. We all wracked our brains together. "Karma" was usually determined by destiny or the gods, but in this case, we were going to give a little helping hand to move it along.

"The obvious offenses are breaking into a woman's room, searching her house, and theft. Threatening the employees probably wouldn't count as a crime. It was between a manager and two orphan workers, so it wouldn't even be considered harassment in this world, just something normal... If that's all there is, the punishment won't amount to much. Maybe a hundred lashes at most, and the boss who ordered it won't be affected at all. That won't be enough for KKR, not by a long shot. Not to mention, this is a fight they picked with us directly, and not a job someone asked us to do. So..."

Kyoko trailed off.

““If it’s a fight they want, they’ve got it. And we’ll even up the ante!” Reiko and I said.

“Don’t mess with KKR! Yeeeeeeeaaaaah!!!” we all shouted together.

Cringe.

The three of us crouched down with our heads in our hands out of embarrassment. That sort of thing was only okay in middle school, or maybe up to freshman year in high school... but we were doing it while college-aged. However, we were also helping people, so it wasn’t all bad. In fact, we may have gone a bit overboard at times, but we were acting out of virtue, and the female students we helped were always thankful. Even so, looking back objectively at everything we said and did back then...

“Aaahhhhhh!!!” we cringed in unison.



“So, how should we do this...?” Reiko said suddenly.

“Give us a minute, will you?!” we shouted back at her.

“Is the guildmaster here?”

“One moment, please!”

Salette had come to visit the Industry Guild, and so one of the members there rushed off to the second floor in a hurry. After a brief wait...

“Right this way.”

As long as the guildmaster was there, turning Kyoko away without talking to her was not an option.

“W-Welcome...” the guildmaster said. He looked rather uncomfortable, but Kyoko paid him no heed.

“What happened to the former manager?” she asked.

“Y-Yes... He was introduced by the guild to a store full of young women to be hired as a manager, but he betrayed the guild and employer’s trust by committing a criminal act. Although it wasn’t too serious of an offense in terms of the law, his actions go against the morals of a merchant and are unforgivable in the eyes of the guild... Therefore, he will be expelled from the Industry Guild,” the guildmaster explained.

“What...?”

It was far too lenient a punishment, and there was no mention of a criminal penalty, like turning him in to the guards.

Kyoko pointed this out, then the guildmaster responded, “Well, you see, this is actually quite a severe punishment when you consider there was no violence or embezzlement of large sums of money involved... Since this city isn’t very big, the Commerce and Artisan Guilds are combined to make up the Industry Guild, so being expelled from our ranks also means being expelled from both the Commerce and Artisan Guilds in this country. If this was somewhere else where each guild was independent, he may

have gotten off with just an expulsion from the Commerce Guild... I should also add that anyone who has been expelled from the Commerce or Artisan Guilds can no longer work in those industries. Although, from the guild's perspective, it doesn't matter where they work, as we won't try to intervene, but the guild will not provide any assistance, support, or cooperation, monetary or otherwise, to any store or business that is involved with an expelled person in any way, however slight. In other words, even if they get involved in an accident or crime, the guild will not provide any sort of support to a business that has hired that person, even if that person is unrelated to that particular incident. Even if they were just the coachman driving a carriage or sweeping the floor at a store where a business transaction had occurred, any business that hires such undesirables will also be viewed in kind, and if they get betrayed, they will simply be suffering the consequences of their own actions. When you consider all of this, it should be obvious that no business would want to hire someone who has been expelled."

Kyoko stayed silent.

"The world of business is quite small. In this country, even if one changes their name, they will be exposed immediately. That leaves them no choice but to find someplace that has nothing to do with trades or crafts... perhaps something involving heavy lifting, or they could go to a distant country..." the guildmaster went on.

"Couldn't they work at a restaurant or get into agriculture? There are all sorts of options out there..." Kyoko said.

"Restaurants are also members of the Industry Guild. Agriculture isn't possible without land, and no farmer would hire a middle-aged amateur who isn't physically capable. A pot-bellied, middle-aged man who has only known the world of business will need to have a complete change of heart and work diligently if he hopes to survive in another line of work..."

It seemed to be quite a severe punishment for someone who had only had a career as a merchant.

"You aren't going to turn him in to the guards?" Kyoko asked, but the guildmaster shook his head.

"His only charges would be that he broke into a woman's room when he knew she wasn't home and ransacked it, and that he stole some merchandise. It wouldn't result

in much of a punishment, and yet we conducted somewhat of a... heavy-handed interrogation. So..."

Kyoko sensed what he was getting at. They had already handed out far heavier a punishment than what he would have received had he been turned in to the guards. The guild couldn't afford to lose face and had to handle misconduct within their ranks in their own way. The guards would likely understand this and tacitly approve, but the guild didn't see a need to go out of their way to report the events to the guards themselves.

"What will happen to the shop of the mastermind behind all of this?" Kyoko asked.

"There isn't much we can do with just the culprit's confession..." the guildmaster said. "If things go south, there could be intervention from the royal capital. We're hoping you will agree that punishing the perpetrator will be enough, as we're sending a message that anyone who lays hands on the Trader Shop will be dealt with."

They clearly didn't want to pick a fight with the major retailer in the capital. The Industry Guild was just a small organization that barely managed to survive by merging with the Artisan Guild, so Kyoko couldn't blame them. She nodded in agreement and the guildmaster was visibly relieved. Kyoko then asked the guildmaster about everything he knew about the former manager. She told him it was for the purpose of self-protection, in case something happened later, and the guildmaster couldn't refuse.

Kyoko hadn't lied. She did agree with the guild's decision not to pursue the mastermind behind this incident, and she really was going to use the information she had heard from the guildmaster for her own protection. However, she opted not to mention that she would be handling this in her own way from then on, nor the fact that her favorite motto was "The best defense is a good offense." And so, she left the guild behind with a big smile on her face.

"So, I'm done with the former manager. Now..." Kyoko said.

"It's time to go for the secret branch office (mid-boss) and the mastermind (final boss)... their main office," Reiko finished.

Kyoko nodded.

We weren't going to be satisfied just cutting off the lizard's tail. Besides, we looked like a bunch of young girls, so for us to be recognized and gain any power or influence, we had to strike down anyone who tried any funny business.

"Let's go crush that secret branch of theirs, shall we...?" I said.

"Freid failed me... Useless bastard..." Orald, the proprietor—or, rather, the local branch manager of Theitos Trade Company—grumbled to himself. The orders for the plan had come from their main branch in the royal capital. There had been a small quantity of products circulating in the royal capital lately, and they had supposedly been coming in from an independent store in this city. He had therefore been tasked with finding their supply route. During his investigation, he had discovered that the supply route from this city to the royal capital went through a Hawkes Trade Company branch store, and that they were getting their goods from a small, independent startup shop... That shop was owned by none other than the girl who the guild had notified him about: the one to whom the Industry Guild Special Measures had been applied.

"Section 2, Article 3-2 of the Industry Guild Special Measures... Special orders that mean when aristocrats, powerful people, or their family members appear while hiding their identity, we need to pretend we don't know who they are and treat them favorably. We're not allowed to meddle with them or do anything to give them a bad impression... But that doesn't matter if no one finds out what I'm doing. And even if someone *does* find out, I can claim Freid did it on his own and act none the wiser. He quit working here a long time ago, which is why they hired him in the first place. Besides, that guild recommended him, so Freid and the guild will take all the blame. I had nothing to do with the hiring process, and I have no connection to or responsibility for someone who doesn't even work here anymore." Orald was taking a rather optimistic view of the situation because he couldn't imagine that Freid would ever confess the truth. That was because he had promised Freid that he would take care of him as long as he kept his mouth shut about his connection to the Theitos Trade Company.

His plan of having Freid rummage through the owner's room during the few days she was away to visit her family, in order to find her purchase contracts and transportation documents, should never have been exposed in the first place. The two other employees there were orphan children commuting from the orphanage, which meant Freid should have been the only one in the store after they went home for the day. He

had the perfect excuse to be there, and nothing he did should have raised any suspicions. It should have been impossible for him to get caught. He did steal a few products, but they were only small amounts, to be used as samples. Sure, he could have bought them normally, but that would have been foolish. No one should have noticed a few missing products, and even if the inventory count hadn't matched, he could have claimed a customer or the employees had stolen them. It would've been the word of some orphan brats against Freid's.

Such were Orald's thoughts when he came up with the plan, but he had been taken completely by surprise when Freid was exposed. Not only that, but they knew with certainty that Freid was the culprit, and supposedly had proof to back it up. The Industry Guild's guildmaster, vice guildmaster, and a few others visited Theitos Trade Company to question him, but they retreated rather quickly after he claimed he had nothing to do with someone who no longer worked there. Since the guild had given up rather quickly and there hadn't been any guards accompanying them, Orald knew it was unlikely that Freid had spilled the beans about their connection. If Freid had confessed, the guards would have taken Orald away for more questioning, but since he was still here, it was clear that they were simply investigating, without any real suspicion in his direction. He was the culprit's former employer, so it had to have been part of a routine examination.

Furthermore, Orald believed Freid would never confess. If he decided to talk, no one would help him even after he was released. However, if he kept his mouth shut, a handsome reward and guaranteed employment awaited him. Freid was convinced his resignation was just a facade, and that he still retained his position at Theitos Trade Company, with a path to success as reward for taking on his dangerous role. As such, he would assume his punishment would be rather light, even if he was caught, since all he did was search through someone's house, without stealing their personal belongings or actually hurting anyone. At worst, he would be fined or detained for a few days. It might have been somewhat damaging to his reputation if word got around that he had gone rummaging through a young woman's room, but that had nothing to do with one's ability as a merchant, and was rather trivial compared to what other heads of trading companies were routinely up to. It wouldn't be considered problematic within the industry, and could even be considered an amusing episode.

Initially, Orald had planned to give Freid preferential treatment for his loyalty, but that was before Freid's snooping and pilfering had been exposed, the business owner decided to believe the orphans rather than Freid, and the guild took their side. Now that things had gone so terribly wrong, Orald couldn't afford to rehire Freid and

provide a career path for him, as doing so would be equivalent to admitting he had been in on the plot. However, this wouldn't be an issue. He could simply tell Freid he would need to move to the royal capital to work in the main branch to be promoted there... It wasn't uncommon for travelers to be attacked by bandits out on the road.

"What?!" Orald shouted, slamming the table in outrage in response to his sales clerk's report: "Word of Freid's crimes has spread throughout the city... There are rumors that we were the ones behind them, that his resignation was just a facade, and that we're cutting him off and pinning the crimes on him now that he failed... There are even rumors that we're no ordinary store, but secretly a branch of Kurth Trade Company..."

They weren't just rumors; it was all true. In fact, most of the Industry Guild and much of the general public already knew they were a secret branch store. It was quite obvious, but there hadn't been any definitive proof, and since the situation hadn't been particularly harmful to anyone, it had been tolerated. The only ones who could have been directly inconvenienced were Hawkes Trade Company, since they had an official branch in the city. Although they clearly weren't happy about it, they had tacitly approved rather than upset anyone. The situation had been a sort of open secret, but something had now caused it to come to light, seemingly out of nowhere.

Despite his frustration, Orald knew shooting the messenger wouldn't help.

"Damn it, Freid is the only one who could have known all this! That little rat!" he complained, even though he fully intended on betraying Freid himself.

Freid hadn't shown himself since the incident was revealed. It would have made sense if Orald had gotten into an argument with him before spilling the truth, but there was no way Freid would spread such rumors without talking to him first. Which meant...

"It must have been the guild..."

If Freid had confessed after being arrested, the guards would have been there to arrest Orald too. That meant Freid only confessed to the guild, and the guild hadn't handed Freid over to the guards.

"Which means the guild must have Freid, and they don't intend to make any more waves about this... They want to bring my reputation down with unconfirmed rumors

to punish me. Honestly, I didn't expect the guild to look into this independently without involving the guards. I guess Freid was forced to talk and didn't intend to backstab me after all. This is a message from the guild saying they don't want to stir up trouble with Kurth Trade Company, but they're not going to let me do as I please anymore. I have no choice... Both sides got burned already, so I won't confront the guild about this. The rumors will pass eventually if I just ignore them. Besides, it won't matter now if people start yapping about my connection with Kurth Trade Company."

Orald figured the guild wouldn't be making any further moves. He had been agitated earlier, but now he had calmed down, and decided to send Freid to the royal capital as soon as he was released by the guild.

"I'll have to arrange a meeting with his would-be attackers..."

The Industry Guild were his adversaries and had spread the rumors, but they would be staying out of his hair from now on. Orald was completely confident in his judgment, and he wasn't wrong about the guild. However, the Industry Guild wasn't the only adversary up against Theitos Trade Company. Orald did not yet realize that he had made an enemy of an opponent far worse than the Industry Guild.

"I'm looking forward to working with you!"

"No, no, the pleasure is all mine!"

Kyoko (Salette) was smiling and shaking hands with the manager of Hawkes Trade Company, a major business with its main office in the royal capital and a branch store in this city.

One might wonder, what was she doing there? It was as they say: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"All right, now we have Hawkes Trade Company, Tavolas Trade Company, the Trader Shop, and Little Silver up against Kurth Trade Company. Then there's Relinas Trade Company, which we can use to our advantage without feeling guilty about it!" Kyoko, who had just returned from the Hawkes Trade Company branch store, raised her right fist as she spoke.

"Yeah... well, we're done dealing with Roderich's crew, and Relinas took a big hit from that whole ordeal, so I didn't really intend on getting involved with them anymore..." Reiko said. "But if we need a third party to take a hit for us for whatever reason, they may end up being useful. Of course, we'd manipulate them into helping us without letting them on. It's nice to know a merchant house that's completely unrelated to us that we wouldn't mind causing trouble for."

"We can't help Relinas make any money!" I reminded them. "Also, let's avoid anything that will hurt them *too* badly. Their president's oldest son will be taking over the company, and it's not like he or the employees there or their families caused us any trouble."

They nodded.

Their head office had inconvenienced us with their internal circumstances and their business policies, but that was just part of running a business and pursuing profits, so I wasn't angry. All we had to do was get back at them through commercial means, fair and square. We wouldn't stoop to what Roderich and his men had done; those sorts of tactics were completely out of line. Still, I would feel bad if they ended up profiting because of something we did. Unless they meaningfully contributed in some manner, we had no reason to help them make money. Ideally, they would make their contribution to Tavolas Trade Company, which was basically one of our own and had its main office in my city, or Hawkes Trade Company, which was Kyoko's business partner and had an official branch store in this city.

We didn't intend on moving the Trader Shop or Little Silver to the royal capital... at least for now. Small, independent shops that were run by young girls and handled expensive items would attract bad guys like flies to... you know. If we drew attention in the royal capital, it wouldn't just be merchants and bad guys gathering to us, but all sorts of minor aristocrats, money-grubbing nobles, and third sons and below that weren't even close to being in the running for being the heir of their house.

The good thing about provincial cities like mine and this one was that you didn't have to worry about nobles or guards messing with you if you were on good terms with the local lord. If this had been the capital, the nobles staying in the royal residence, their families, the vassals and soldiers they brought with them, and various other people would be up to all sorts of mischief to earn pocket money, and if other noble families got involved, the lord wouldn't be able to come on too strong. There were far too many obstacles in the royal capital to keep ourselves safe. That was why we wanted to leave

business in the capital up to Tavolas Trade Company's branch store in the capital and Hawkes Trade Company's main store. Fortunately, Kyoko wasn't just gentle- and gullible-looking, but cute too, so whenever she had a lot of opportunities to talk with guys, a bunch of them got the wrong idea. There was some sort of aura about her, or maybe she emitted some sort of substance that lured people in, but a simple disguise wouldn't be enough to suppress her nature.

If there had been some sort of substance in a bottle that attracted kids and fluffy animals, I'd buy it...

Oh! Maybe I could make a potion... No, no, I can't do that! It would be meaningless if they were only drawn to me because of a potion!

Anyway... there was no reason for a star merchant to show up in the royal capital in person. All we had to do was distribute goods and money and use an agent or intermediary to meet with the other party, like Tavolas or Hawkes, for example. A hunter or saint wouldn't be in danger of getting targeted for supply routes, manufacturing methods, or savings, but a trader had it pretty rough...

There would be a day when we would need to visit the royal capital as Can, Edith, or Salette. Eventually, our individual achievements wouldn't be enough to increase our influence further, and we would need to get to know some aristocrats and big-name merchants. I didn't intend on initiating any major transactions or activities, but we could still single out a powerful figure and do them a favor so they would owe us, or otherwise make them take notice of us. It would be a simple task for us, but we would need to accomplish it as Can, Edith, and Salette, or using other alter egos. We wouldn't be going to the royal capital as Reiko, Kaoru, and Kyoko from Little Silver. If Little Silver made good money, we might eventually draw some unwanted attention. Making money wasn't problematic in itself, but getting attention was inevitable, because everyone from the head of the company to normal employees looked like children. Even if we hired adults, they would try to take advantage of us, as with the most recent incident.

I guess we'll have to cover our backs sooner rather than later...

It would defeat the whole purpose of our plan if the hunter (Can), saint (Edith), and trader (Salette) got in trouble with crazies, so we had to be extra careful.

Oh, and the perpetrator, Freid, was secured in the guild's basement at his own request.

The guild members had told him that if he went outside, the public would throw stones at him, or Orald would send someone to kill him. He realized they were telling the truth and begged them to give him shelter.

Well, if Orald's branch got shut down and he left the city, it should buy Freid some time to get out of town. The guards were already aware of Orald's and Freid's crimes, but it seemed they were going to let the guild handle him as expected. The guards worked for the highest authority in this territory: the lord. That was why they trusted and prioritized the wishes of the Industry Guild, which was composed of local merchants and artisans, rather than Theitos Trade Company, which was secretly a branch store made up of strangers obeying orders from their head office. The choice was obvious. The guards had offered to help if the guild wished it, but the Industry Guild didn't intend to prosecute Freid any further.

There was a reason Theitos Trade Company was getting a bad rap around town. Of course, the number-one reason was that we had hired people to spread the rumors about them, but there were other reasons too. First, Theitos Trade Company was a branch store of Kurth Trade Company, a major retailer with its main office in the royal capital. It had been an open secret of sorts, but that gave the impression that this city was looked down on and taken advantage of by those from the royal capital, and residents didn't think favorably about the situation. Theitos's main business model was to buy and send certain local products to the capital while doing a bit of retailing to the people of this city, and there hadn't been any major issues so far with that.

The problem was, Orald hadn't just abandoned a loyal employee who had committed illegal acts under his orders, but he had also pushed all the blame onto him and tried to silence Freid in the process. While wrongdoing shouldn't be tolerated, not everyone was a saint. Things would have been different if Freid had been a heinous, violent criminal, but many believed there was room for extenuating circumstances, given that all he did was search a girl's room in her absence—under his boss' orders—and had no intention of hurting anyone. In a sense, Freid was a victim who hadn't been able to disobey his boss. In that light, he could be seen as a loyal subject who had followed his master's orders despite potential danger and dishonor. Such a fate could befall anyone who worked under someone else. That was why, despite being the guilty party in this incident, Freid wasn't as hated by the public... though it was a different story for the Industry Guild, which had their reputation tarnished because of him.

As for Orald, he was loathed by the people for betraying an employee who had followed his unreasonable orders. Freid had just been doing what he was told, but

then ended up being betrayed and having his life threatened for his trouble. If such a thing was to be permitted, anyone who worked under someone else could end up in his shoes. In order to deter business owners from having any funny ideas... punishment and ruin were in order.

Yes, we had to stir up the people's hatred and weaponize it. Theitos was in big trouble now.

Anyway, we didn't want to deal with getting attacked again, so we were going to nip this in the bud. In order to take down Kurth, the mastermind behind all of this, we were going to send an attack squad directly to the heart of the capital... But that would come after we crushed their pseudo-branch store, Theitos.

Normally, bringing down a store wouldn't just affect the jerk store owner, but the innocent workers, their families, business partners, transporters, warehouses, and more, so I preferred to single out the bad guys and let the shop continue on as an organization.

But I'll make an exception for you, pseudo-branch store!

CHAPTER 73

KURTH TRADE COMPANY

"What's the situation?" Reiko asked.

"Not counting consumption from people within the territory and clients from the neighborhood, the local specialty goods Theitos bought in the past were pretty much bought up by our forces... Hawkes Trade Company, Trader Shop, and other merchants who came to stock up from distant cities. Since there are zero transportation costs, there's no way they can compete with the purchase price," Kyoko answered.

She was right; they stood no chance. We had a number of transportation methods at our disposal, like the Item Box, magic, potions, and mini vessels. They didn't need horse-drawn carriages or escorts to protect them, and we could use them to get products to the royal capital overnight. We could use the transportation savings we achieved to buy even more products and bring down our overall costs, making it impossible for Theitos to compete. There was a concern that the seller might not agree to a price increase when the transportation method was changed to more conventional means later, but for everyone other than Hawkes Trade Company, we could just say they were still new to the business and had lost a lot of money due to setting the wrong price. It wasn't like the sellers didn't know the market price to begin with, so they could assume they made a big one-time profit thanks to our stupidity.

As for Hawkes, they could say they couldn't afford to disrupt the supply of goods to their clients, so they were forced to stock up at a high price while knowing they were going to take a big loss thanks to that stupidity. In reality, we took on the transportation for dirt cheap, so Hawkes wasn't losing any money at all. Selling prices in the royal capital would remain the same, since we couldn't mess up the market there regardless of what our purchase prices were here. Our prices were the same as Theitos Trade Company's bosses, Kurth Trade Company, but they couldn't get their hands on the products to sell them in the first place.

The transporters and hunters that did escort missions would get the short end of the stick in all this, so maybe I'd give them some work transporting something else to the capital, like deliveries from Tavolas Trade Company. Those would be products that

would barely make any profit once you subtracted the transportation fees, and normal merchants wouldn't normally consider delivering them all the way to the royal capital, but I would at least be breaking even, so I didn't mind. I wanted to try and make sure no one lost money as collateral damage because of us.

And so...

"Theitos Trade Company's operations have pretty much come to a stop. They weren't doing much other than buying local specialty products here and sending them to the main Kurth store, and now that they can't do that, they've lost about ninety percent of their income. Plus, they're hated by everyone in town for betraying Freid, so that last ten percent went out the window too. They have zero sales, but still need to account for store maintenance, utilities, labor, and other expenses. They're not just on a slight deficit, but are rather hemorrhaging money at an alarming rate. They won't last for much longer without a huge amount of funding from their head office. And even if they do, there's no way their situation's gonna improve. Their head office must know what's happening, so unless their president is incredibly stupid, he's going to cut his losses soon. And..."

I trailed off, and Kyoko and Reiko finished my sentence: "An idiot couldn't become the owner of a major retailer!"

They were right.

"I've already talked to Muno and their royal capital branch," I explained. "Hawkes Trade Company's branch store already reached out to their head office, of course. We made sure to deliver their letter for them. Tonight, we'll be delivering products for Tavolas and Hawkes. This time..."

"I can deliver them," Kyoko said. "It won't just be local specialty products; some of them are unique to this store. Besides, I need to make a name for myself in the commercial world of the royal capital as Salette."

She had a point, so I said, "Okay, I'll let you handle this one, then."

Kyoko was dealing with the delivery this time, but it wasn't as if our transportation methods relied on her dinghy or miniature ships. We stored all of our cargo in my Item Box for delivery, so Reiko or I could carry them and ride on Hang or Scary, use magic,

or buff ourselves with potions. Hang and Scary had been complaining about not being able to contribute, so it didn't seem likely that they would be okay with us making regular long-distance trips without them...

I know I wouldn't be cool with that if I were them... I should tell Reiko to travel on Hang and Scary too.

It wasn't like we couldn't use buffing potions or magic, gravity-reducing magic, or tailwind magic on horses, after all.

"What in the world is going on?!" In the main branch of the Kurth Trade Company in the royal capital, the head of the company was shouting at his head clerk. "How did profits plummet so sharply in such a short amount of time?!"

The answer was obvious: because their sales had dropped. The president knew this, of course. He wasn't stupid and even did the bookkeeping himself.

"I understand Theitos Trade Company messed up. There can be unexpected pitfalls and failures in anything... but their role in that city is to purchase goods. It goes without saying that a retailer that loses credibility and reputation will see a massive loss of sales. But they purchase with cash instead of credit, so their business partners should have no reason to deny them sales! Why aren't they able to purchase anything? And why are purchase quantities going down and prices rising in other cities that are completely unrelated to Theitos Trade Company?!"

Indeed, if a business was profiting by breaking the rules, it was unlikely that they were only doing so in one location. With that in mind, Kaoru had expanded her investigation to other cities to find employees at the business' royal capital branch who were struggling with money, then bribed them. Using their information, she found other locations where Kurth Trade Company had pseudo-branch stores like Theitos Trade Company, and proceeded to buy up the products that they were purchasing like she had with Theitos. Of course, she had accomplished this through the cooperation of the businesses that had official branch stores in each respective city. They were all happy to help when they learned that they could finally remove the thorn in their side. Although they had chosen to ignore the problem instead of getting riled up about it initially, most of them were happy to jump on board when the opportunity presented itself.

Normally, it wouldn't have been possible to organize everything in all the regions so quickly, but Kaoru, Reiko, and Kyoko were each able to go out to distant cities at night, spend the entire day making arrangements, then return by dawn the next morning.

"Even our main products are losing sales!" the head of Kurth shouted.

Indeed, the sales of products purchased through their pseudo-branch stores weren't the only ones declining; their original mainstay products were suffering the same fate. Major retailers purchased a wide variety of products, but not all of them purchased the same items. Each business had its own specialty of sorts in specific types of products. Even if those items only accounted for a small percentage of total sales, they were a distinctive feature of a store and a powerful weapon for attracting customers. If a shop's specialty was ruined by another business and customers began to say, "That other shop has a better selection for cheaper"...

"Who would've thought their specialty products were seafood..." I mused.

"Aha ha..."

Kurth Trade Company offered not just long-lasting dried and salted fish (the completely dehydrated kind), but also the type that didn't keep for very long, just like the kind we sold wholesale. That included half-dried fish, seaweed, and shellfish, which were also carried by Tavolas's royal capital branch and Hawkes' main branch, and they offered superior quality and variety. The prices weren't particularly low, for the sake of long-term success, but the completely-dried goods were cheaper than Kurth's prices. It wasn't that we were undercutting them on purpose, but Kurth had set their prices so their profit ratio was higher. As such, we had no problem keeping our current pricing. Little Silver didn't just profit from sales; we also made a killing on transportation.

Not to mention, it was impossible for Kurth Trade Company to sell half-dried goods in the royal capital, as they took too long to transport. It wasn't as if raw fish could be sold there either. I mean, who would trust raw fish being sold in the inland capital?

"Did you find their supplier?!" the head of Kurth Trade Company demanded.

"Well, sir, the thing is..."

The reason for their plummet in sales quickly became apparent. It was because the other merchant houses like Hawkes and branches of newly established minor merchant houses in the provincial cities had begun to deal extensively in marine products, which was Kurth's specialty. Sales of marine products weren't particularly high, but customers who stopped by for those items also purchased other things while they were there, since there was no reason to go to another store if the quality and prices were similar.

What would happen if their seafood, which was a major draw for customers, lost its appeal? What if other stores had an abundance of cheaper and tastier seafood in stock? Not only would they lose sales on that seafood, but sales of all their other products would also plummet. That was the exact situation happening now. Their business was teetering on the thin line between life and death.

The head of Kurth had immediately sent his clerks out to investigate, and it didn't take long to find out exactly what was going on: two other stores had begun selling marine products. However, their supplier was unknown. Fortunately, as long as they could find out where those businesses were getting their products, they would have many ways to strike, like sabotaging, disrupting, or hijacking their purchasing routes, but as of now, those options weren't available to them. Hawkes Trade Company and the newly established merchant houses seemed completely unrelated, and the city where Hawkes's branch was located was incredibly far from the new merchant house's main store. Not to mention, the city where Hawkes Trade Company had its branch wasn't near the sea. It was unlikely that these local cities were connected, and if they were, the connection would likely be between Hawkes's head office and the royal capital branch of an emerging merchant family with its headquarters in a regional city... under the orders of their main branch in the provincial city, of course.

Obviously, using illegal means against other stores in the royal capital would not be an option. The Industry Guild wouldn't allow it, and Hawkes Trade Company would put pressure on nobles and guard officers. Kurth Trade Company had their own contacts, but they wanted to avoid intervention from government authorities because they were involved in various back-alley dealings, and there were hostile forces arrayed against Kurth and the nobles they were close with. That was why they wanted to avoid trouble, and getting their contact involved would incur expenses.

So if Kurth was to make a move against their competition's suppliers, it would be in whichever distant fishing village they got their stock from, or during transportation. But even after looking into the Industry Guild, carriage shops that undertook transportation, and the Mercenary Guilds and Hunter Guilds that would take on escort duty, the supply route was still a complete mystery. The Industry Guild and carriage shops cared about client privacy, but it shouldn't have been too difficult to loosen a mercenary or hunter's lips with a few drinks. Not many of them would go as far as to leak personal information that could compromise a client's safety, but if their job was already complete, there would be no risk of information leaking to bandits. With a little bit of monetary incentive, most of them wouldn't be opposed to making small talk about how they escorted cargo from a fishing village. But even after buying them drinks and giving them a few coins, all they would speak of was work they did for Kurth Trade Company or about escorting a small amount of normal, completely-dried goods.

At times like these, the standard method was to find someone who worked for the competition and make them talk. Although that would work with a company like Kurth, it was ineffective against a proper one that cared for its employees. If an employee betrayed their employer for a reason other than to expose injustice, the news would quickly spread through the Industry Guild. With their reputation tarnished, that person and their relatives would have a hard time finding jobs with merchant houses and in many other industries. They might not have issues getting hired doing day labor, but the chances of getting hired somewhere that required trust and dealing with money or sensitive information were slim to none. On top of that, their siblings, children, nephews, and nieces would have trouble getting married. No one would take such a big risk for such a small amount of money when they worked for a solid merchant house.

Many assumed orphans would be easier targets to bribe because they had no family or relatives, and that assumption was one of the main reasons they had such a hard time finding employment, but that was a misconception. Orphans were united by a powerful bond. Even orphans who had constantly fought with one another still helped each other and exhibited teamwork as if they had been best friends since birth when a common enemy against orphans appeared. There was no way an orphan would do something that would discredit and inconvenience other orphans. Many orphans would rather choose death than do something that would reduce work opportunities not just for other kids at their orphanage, but for orphans throughout the country, or even the continent. Put simply, orphans would never betray their employers. That left Kurth Trade Company without many options...

“Kidnap one of their employees.”

“Yes, sir!”

The head of Kurth Trade Company didn’t hesitate as he gave the order, and his subordinate was completely unsurprised to receive it as he answered. It clearly wasn’t the first time this had happened.

“Which one shall we target?” the subordinate asked.

“The newer one. The local lord may be close with them, but he’s nothing more than a small-time aristocrat in a rural territory. He won’t have many connections or any backing of note here in the royal capital. The newer shop’s employees won’t be well trained, and they’ll be much easier to deal with than Hawkes. We’re not kidnapping children here, so if we’re lucky, the officials won’t get involved. Still, it could be trouble if the store hires someone to investigate their missing employee. The smaller shop shouldn’t have the means for that, so they’ll be an easier target.”

“Yes, sir!”

They might end up slapping the kidnapped employee around a bit, but they wouldn’t kill or severely injure them. If they could interrogate their captive while keeping their identities concealed, they would be able to send the victim back in one piece. However, their hands might be forced if something went wrong...

Such were the thoughts going through the president of Kurth’s head. If things did go south, the officials wouldn’t be a problem. There were plenty of people out there who would kill for a few silver coins without batting an eye. They could just toss the corpse in some alley somewhere and the incident would be dismissed as an unfortunate soul who fell victim to some hooligan. There were no surveillance cameras, they couldn’t take fingerprints or run a blood analysis, people would rather stay out of trouble than give eyewitness accounts, and the hooligan’s friends could give false testimony to back up his story. Besides, it was impossible to narrow down a list of suspects, since the crime would be a seemingly random act with no motive other than money, so the officials wouldn’t bother looking for a culprit. Therefore, the only way to stop the perpetrator was for the victim to fight back and arrest him or to kill him on the spot.

A trading company couldn’t pressure or harass other merchants... but if an employee just happened to fall victim to some thugs, it would have nothing to do with the

company and would be no problem at all.

“An employee was attacked!”

“What?!”

A servant had burst into the shop with the dreadful news, and the branch manager replied by shouting in surprise. It was my turn to deliver the goods this time, and I was at the royal capital branch of Tavolas Trade Company, dropping some items off. I had come to say hi to Muno’s friends, the branch manager and assistant manager here, and they were serving me tea and snacks as the interruption occurred. I had a feeling these two would never betray Muno... but they obviously weren’t in on our secret. I was disguised as a random mob character and was here as the head of the transportation team hired by Little Silver. Muno and I (as Kaoru) went way back, but I had only met these two a couple times, so they wouldn’t be able to tell who I was based on speech patterns, mannerisms, or habits.

I had delivered the cargo by walking into their storage room and dropping it off. That was the deal we had with them, and I was allowed to do as I pleased because Muno had vouched for me... at my request as Kaoru.

Wait, no, none of that matters right now!

“Someone was attacked? Are they okay?! Don’t tell me...” the branch manager said.

“It was Corey, and he’s fine. He’s injured, but it’s nothing fatal. He’s at the clinic now. And... while Corey isn’t too badly injured, an off-duty guard happened to be walking by and stepped in to help...”

Oh no...

It went without saying that I didn’t want bad things to happen to people close to me, but the same went for people who were nice to those close to me. And when something bad happened to such people...

Yup, it’s time for war!

“Excuse us! You, take care of her!” the branch manager and assistant manager said to

a nearby employee, then rushed out of the store.

They were likely heading toward the clinic that had been mentioned earlier. Luckily for the victim, he was taken to the clinic, where a doctor or apothecary could treat them, rather than to the priest, who could only offer a prayer. Maybe it helped that a guard was with him, since guards were more prone to getting hurt, and it wasn't likely that they would be taken to a priest for prayer every time they were injured. They would need proper medical care and not just a placebo, and injury-prone guards would know which one was more effective from experience.

I waved my hand lightly toward the clerk who was left to tend to me in the managers' stead.

"Oh, don't mind me. My work here is done, so I'll be going back to the inn where my team is waiting. I'll be back to pay my respects before we leave the capital."

I would only get in the way if I stayed here during all the commotion. And besides, I had places to be. I'd be acting on my own judgment without consulting Reiko and Kyoko, but I had no choice. I couldn't allow someone's life to be ruined because of our circumstances. It was the first of KKR's Three Principles: "We cannot allow a good person to be harmed. Nor can we allow good people to be harmed by ignoring potential danger."

I stepped out of the store, then entered a narrow alley, checked that the coast was clear; then transformed.

"Chaaange! Edith One, Switch On!"



I recited the cliché transformation line quietly, then altered the setting on my optical disguise bracelet. I also chugged a potion to change my hair, eye, and skin color, then removed my top and shoved it into the Item Box. I pulled Edith's outfit out of the box, threw it on, then stuck my hand under my clothes and removed my skirt... Yeah, I wasn't gonna strip naked outside, where someone could walk by at any minute. I was wearing Japanese-style underwear, so I'd probably be treated like some sort of pervert if someone saw me. Though, even if I was wearing underwear from this world, anyone stripping down to their underwear in an alley would be considered a pervert regardless. Anyway, Japanese girls have mastered the art of putting on swimsuits with their clothes on and changing without exposing their underwear!

“Excuse me, I heard two injured people were brought in earlier...”

The woman at the counter saw a girl dressed like some sort of shrine maiden or priestess and looked rather puzzled. I couldn't blame her. Those from the Temple who (allegedly) healed injuries and illnesses with prayer didn't visit clinics because they were on bad terms with doctors who stitched people up with blades, needles, and strings, and also with apothecaries who cured people with suspicious plants. But the woman couldn't bring herself to disregard a girl who looked no older than twelve or thirteen, and maybe she was wearing that outfit because she was just a fan of priestesses.

“Oh, the guard and merchant? They're in the treatment room in the back. Is one of them your father?” the woman asked.

“No, this is a work-related visit...” the girl replied.

She wasn't sure if the woman was trying to find out who she was or just filling the silence, but the girl gave a rather vague response. She could have said “Yes,” but it seemed she couldn't bring herself to lie, or was earnest to a fault. The woman was slightly skeptical of the girl at first, but that skepticism evaporated along with this realization.

No one would try to profit off of tricking people at a clinic in a poor region, and the clinic was a lifeline for the poor who the priests wouldn't deal with, so crooks didn't mess with this place. If they did, they would only be hurting themselves when they or their family needed help. They would also have to deal with not just government

officials, but also ordinary citizens in the capital, other crooks, and many others. In short, the only ones in opposition to the clinic were the priests, and the people here weren't very wary of visitors.

"This way..."

And so, the woman led the girl toward the room in the back...

"Who is it?"

The room I was taken to had more people in it than I had initially expected. It was a modestly-sized room used for both examination and treatment and it was completely packed. A person who looked like a doctor, maybe some sort of assistant or apothecary, and two injured people were all seated there. Meanwhile, a young woman, a man in his thirties dressed in a guard uniform, and the Tavolas Trade Company branch manager and assistant manager who had rushed over here were standing around. Including myself and the woman who had brought me there, there were ten people in all. With the examination bed, medicine cabinets, and equipment for dispensing drugs also competing for space, it was pretty cramped. However, the woman who had shown me in left right away, so there were now nine people total, but ultimately it didn't make too much of a difference.

The doctor-looking person asked me who I was, so I answered, "Oh, I'm related to the company one of the injured people belongs to." This was technically true, though I didn't know the injured person directly. But since I hadn't met the branch manager as Edith, he stared at me blankly. "I should add, I don't work for the Temple," I continued. "I'm just a stray priestess who's not affiliated with any organization..."

"A stray priestess?" everyone asked.

I couldn't blame them for their surprise... I had never heard of such a thing either. Not that there weren't unaffiliated priestesses out there, but they were usually referred to as "independent," and no one used a self-deprecating term like "stray" to describe themselves.

"You're... a stray?" the doctor asked again.

"Yes, a stray..." I nodded. I then turned to the branch managers and said in a hushed tone, "I'm from an orphanage in a certain provincial city."

A look of realization came over the branch manager and assistant manager. They had both worked for Tavolas for many years, so they had to know of the orphanage that was Little Silver's predecessor, but it wasn't as if they personally knew every child there. It would be no surprise, then, if the stray priestess from there was still connected to the former orphanage that became Little Silver.

"So, how are their injuries?" I asked.

They probably assumed it would be pointless to explain to a priestess who worked with prayer, but it seemed the treatment had already been completed. The two injured people were wrapped in bandages, and the off-duty guard had his arm in a sling. They all appeared to be in stable condition. Since they weren't in any particular hurry, and the doctor was going to explain to the others anyway, he proceeded to speak to everyone present.

"The merchant is only suffering from swelling and lacerations in the area where he was hit, along with pain in his twisted left arm, but there shouldn't be any permanent damage. He also has cuts in his mouth, so he should avoid eating today, and only eat things that don't require much chewing tomorrow. As for the guard..." the doctor averted his eyes from the patient, looking reluctant to speak. "He has torn tendons in his left arm. He can move his arm and fingers, but it's unlikely that he'll recover fully... It shouldn't greatly interfere with daily activities or office work, but..."

"I won't be able to continue working as a guard?" the guardsman asked, in a normal tone of voice, not looking too upset.

The doctor nodded. The man who looked to be the guard's superior stared at the ground with a pained expression on his face.

I had a feeling something like this might have happened from the moment the servant reported to the branch manager. That was why I hadn't shown up here in convoy commander mode, but in Edith mode. I hadn't planned on debuting as Edith in the royal capital for some time, but this shouldn't have happened if we were to follow along our plans as Reiko, Kyoko, and I had discussed.

Corey, the employee at the branch store, wasn't too badly injured. He would likely get better after rubbing some ground-up medicinal herbs into his wound. It wasn't my place... But then there was this fool of a guard who ruined his life trying to help a stranger, despite being off duty, and the woman next to him who seemed to be his

girlfriend. If I abandoned them without helping, I could never face Emile and the members of the Eyes of the Goddess who believed in me as a goddess... not that I planned on seeing them again.

Oh well, it'll be fine if no one finds out I healed him! No problem!



"I'm sorry..." the guard's superior said. "This won't be considered an injury in the performance of official duties because it resulted from personal conduct outside of work hours. You won't be eligible for public service injury relief, benefits, compensation, or preferential reemployment assistance for injured retirees..."

The guard quickly waved his hand and said, "No, no, of course not. I've read the terms of service. I did this on my own, knowing I was off duty. I'm just glad the merchant was safe... Oh, I'm sorry, Gina. We won't be able to get married anymore... Your father approved our marriage because I was able to join the guards. He's not going to approve anymore... but I guess that would be better, for your sake."

The woman slapped the young soldier with an open hand.

Whoa, did she really just slap an injured guy? She seems like the prim and proper type too... Everyone looks super uncomfortable now.

"You idiot!" she shouted.

"I'm sorry for doing something so stupid..." the soldier replied.

"Not that, you moron!"

He really is a stupid moron who doesn't understand women at all... So stupid... that he deserves what's coming to him.

"Miss Gina," I said to the woman. "Are you willing to give up your future for this idiot?"

"Of course!" she replied.

Good answer.

She seemed reserved, but she clearly also had some guts.

"G-Gina..." the injured man said with tears in his eyes, but I ignored him.

"Then I, a stray priestess completely unrelated to the Temple, will now offer a prayer."

I didn't want the Temple to get credit for this, so I had to emphasize that the Goddess's miracles had nothing to do with them.

"Stray cat?" she asked, puzzled.

"Stray priestess!" I reiterated, then went on to explain what the prayer entailed. "I am just an ordinary priestess doing charity work in various villages. I just so happen to be connected with the Goddess..."

"You aren't an 'ordinary priestess' if you're connected with the Goddess!" they yelled out in response.

That sounds familiar... The nostalgia is almost making me teary-eyed...

"In any case, when we pray, very occasionally the Goddess may hear our prayers. However, the probability is very low that the wish will be granted. The wish must be worthy of being granted and the person who is being prayed for, as well as everyone else around them, must truly desire it from the bottom of their hearts. The person must also be pure of heart and the Goddess must be in the mood to answer our prayers... Also, I have no powers whatsoever. I don't possess any healing abilities myself; I can only send the Goddess a message requesting help. I am but an ordinary human being..."

"An ordinary human can't send the Goddess messages!" they cried out in unison.

Huh...? I'm just a stray priestess and not the Angel or a great saint, so this should be normal, right?

But it wasn't as if the self-proclaimed saints from the Temple had received oracular messages from the Goddess either... Celes had once told me she was upset about them making up fake visions. I thought they would have assumed I was just making this up too and would accept it as a placebo type of thing, but they seemed to be taking it awfully seriously.

I guess everyone relies on a higher power in times of trouble... It's the only thing they've got left.

Anyway, it was time to focus on Gina. I turned to her and said, "Now, please pray hard for the Goddess to save this man, and think about how good and sincere he is. Again, I don't have any powers myself. You will be the one wishing for a miracle, and it may be that the Goddess chooses to listen and make it a reality. Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes!" she said. She probably didn't truly believe a miracle would happen, but a

drowning person would clutch at a straw. It would cost her nothing to pray, so she might as well give it a try. Besides, the Goddess actually existed in this world, so nobody dared commit fraud using her name. Finally, I was dressed like a member of the clergy, so effectiveness aside, everyone understood I meant no harm.

Gina put her hands together, closed her eyes, then began to pray.

I closed my eyes too, then said, “O Goddess, please hear the words of this pious servant...”

I didn’t mention Celestine’s name in my words of prayer, because if she happened to be paying attention, there was a greater-than-zero chance that she would show up thinking I was calling for her, which would cause total chaos. By deliberately avoiding her name, I was sending the message, “I’m just putting on an act and not actually asking for you to show up!”

When I really wanted to call for her or talk to her directly, I called her Celes, as a friend. She liked it better that way.

I had created a potion inside the soldier’s stomach. I made sure it wasn’t too powerful, since I didn’t want to make it too obvious, but I had to make it clear that he would recover or he would get fired. So, I made it so his tendons would reconnect and heal and the bleeding would stop, even though his skin would remain torn. Cuts on the skin are common injuries for soldiers in the guard and those shouldn’t leave any serious aftereffects. Even if it left a scar, those were seen as a badge of honor for men in their line of work. And if it looked like an ordinary scar, nobody besides those present here would know that a miracle had taken place. They would assume the doctor had made a false diagnosis and that the tendons hadn’t been severed in the first place. Even if they did believe a miracle had occurred, they would assume it was due to the love of a devout couple, and the part about the stray priestess would be forgotten as the rumors were passed down over time. I didn’t want the existence of miracles to become widely known, so that outcome would be more convenient for me.

“Hm...” the soldier murmured, making a strange face as his left arm began to feel itchy. His tendons must have been wriggling around to reconnect where they had been cut.

Ew, gross! I’m glad we can’t see that!

Seeing the soldier's reaction, the doctor examined his left arm again, then his face tightened in astonishment. He checked the arm over and over again, rubbing it and tracing his fingers over it repeatedly.

Oh, I should say something!

"Ah, it appears the Goddess decided to grant your wish. How fortunate for you... Of course, this is thanks to Miss Gina and the soldier's power of prayer and good deeds. I am merely an intermediary, an intercessor, with no power of my own. Please remember, I am nothing but a drifting stray priestess..."

There, I think I made my point clear.

The Goddess had decided to extend a helping hand this time because of the soldier's virtuous nature and the power of love from his partner. That made for a much more interesting story anyway. Rumors tend to spread well when they're interesting and sensational, not because they're realistic.

"No no no no... Hold on just a minute!" the others shouted.

Huh?

Everyone was staring at me instead of the miracle couple.

What's going on...? Why is the doctor clutching my sleeve? And why did the soldier's superior move to the door and block the exit? Why...?

"U-Um..."

The superior officer heard my puzzled voice, then moved away from the door with a surprised look on his face.

"My apologies," he said. "I just..."

It seemed he didn't mean any harm and he had just subconsciously blocked the escape route out of habit to prevent suspicious people from fleeing... And the doctor still wouldn't let go of my sleeve.

Okay, time to go!

I shook the doctor's hand off, then made a run for it toward the now-open doorway... Then I tripped and fell over with a *wham!* That jerk of a superior officer had stuck his foot out, making me fall flat on my face.

Oh, my nose is bleeding.

"You wanna fight, asshole?!" I screamed.

"Huh...?" he asked blankly.

"What's that look for? You're the one picking a fight with me!" I shouted.

"Ah... I'm sorry! I've been trained to never let suspicious people get away, so it was a reflex..."

"Shut the hell up!"

The hell kind of excuse is that?!

"Excuse me..." Gina was looking at me as if she wanted to ask me something... then went right ahead and asked, "Can you even serve as a stray priestess with such a foul mouth?"

Shut the hell up!



Afterward, I pretended to be angry and left the scene without answering any questions.

Okay, so maybe I wasn't pretending. I was mad. Furious. Pissed off, even! That asshole officer...

But he had given me an excuse to leave without dealing with a bunch of questions, so it worked out all right. My identity was still unknown, and all they knew about me was that I was “a freelance stray priestess who was unaffiliated with the Temple and who may have been from the orphanage that was the prior owner of the building used by the business partner of the injured merchant’s employer.”

Even if they happened to look into Little Silver, we could always play dumb and say, “We only bought this place recently, so we don’t know anything about an orphan from so many years ago.” They could go asking people around the city, but nobody would have heard of Edith. I may have messed up by telling the branch manager that I was from the orphanage, but I couldn’t have just shown up as a mysterious priestess, suddenly appearing without any sort of connection to anyone there. They probably would have turned me away on the spot. It was the minimum required risk I had to take and couldn’t have been avoided.

This incident wasn’t as big of a deal as it seemed. A man had been diagnosed with a severed tendon in his left hand, but it actually wasn’t severed, and the external wound remained. Looking at it from an objective point of view, it was just a simple case of misdiagnosis. There were absolutely no signs of miracles or angels intervening. Well, it had been a few decades since the Goddess or Angel had shown themselves...

After the incident where the upper echelon of the Holy Land of Rueda had been destroyed and the Kingdom of Brancott took over, the religious officials all over the continent appeared to have turned over a new leaf... supposedly. But several decades had passed since the Goddess Celestine last showed herself or bestowed a message upon the land, so anyone who had known of the events at the time was no longer around. In this world, where people aged quickly due to an unbalanced diet, even the current village elders had been newborn babies when the incidents occurred. Not to mention, this place was on the other side of the continent from where those events had taken place. Even back then, there were all sorts of twisted, embellished, contradictory stories going around, so not a lot of people took them seriously.

Ten years had passed, and there were hardly any religious people in this country who truly had a sense of awe and faith for the Goddess these days. Indeed, many members

of the clergy were preoccupied with money, advancement, luxury, and women... Although, some of them who had been taught over and over again by those of the generation who knew firsthand what was going on back then seemed to still have faith and proper knowledge of the events. So the older, higher ranks were devout believers, while many of the younger middle-to-low-ranked priests often broke their religious commandments, when the opposite tended to be true otherwise.

In other words, there was no one who accurately knew about the events of the so-called Angel saga from "Season 1" and took it at face value that they were the only ones who were in direct contact with the common people. The few knowledgeable ones were deep in the temples, feeling high and mighty, and wouldn't walk around town by themselves. The ones who lived long lives as commoners were barely hanging on and weren't healthy enough to freely walk the city... Which meant there was no one out there who could connect the dots between information about my past and my current self or the recent events.

Wheew! I'm safe!

"So... that's what happened," I concluded.

Silence. After returning to the room I had rented at a local inn, I made my report to Reiko and Kyoko through the transmitter from my Item Box.

"It shouldn't be a big deal, but I thought I should mention it anyway..." I said.

More silence followed. After waiting an uncomfortably long time, I spoke again.
"Um...?"

"You know it doesn't work like that!!!" they shouted.

"Ah, didn't think so."

I had been trying not to worry by telling myself it would be fine, but it had all just been wishful thinking.



"NOOO!!"

“Besides, causing trouble is Kyoko’s job!” Reiko pointed out. “What are you doing, Kaoru?!”

“Yeah, it’s my... Wait, what? You make it sound like I’m some sort of chronic problem!” Kyoko said.

Huh? She really didn’t know...?

“Anyway, no more Edith in the royal capital for a while! You’re not still disguised as her, are you?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I said reassuringly. “I’m at an inn disguised as the female commander of the convoy right now. I’m not *that* stupid.”

“And you already made sure everyone who was there won’t talk, right?”

“Oh...”

There was another painfully long silence.

“The branch managers should be fine... I doubt merchants would voluntarily give out someone else’s personal information without understanding the situation first. But if someone powerful makes them talk, we’ll be out of luck. They wouldn’t put their own lives and companies on the line for this. The officer from the guards would have reported this to his superiors already if you hadn’t gotten him to swear secrecy... As for the doctor, I don’t know. He’d be at odds with faith healers from the Temple, so he might not want to spread information that could benefit them. Announcing something like this when his colleagues are fighting against superstitions impeding the progress of medical science would be like spitting in their faces, and he could be shunned as a traitor... Though, I guess it’s a different story when it comes to having faith in the Goddess, especially when he witnessed a miracle with his own eyes. Kaoru, do you realize you’ve pushed someone into a mire of suffering?” Reiko said.

“I-I’m so sorry!!!”

“Apologizing to me won’t do anything! Figure out how you’re going to make this right with that doctor!”

“Yes, ma’am...”

Reiko was merciless with me and Kyoko at times like these. She was completely right, of course...

"We won't need to follow up with that couple," Reiko went on. "They'll probably just go around saying it's a miracle of love, and everyone will just ignore them for being annoying."

Yeah, I think so too...

"Wh-Who's there?!"

"They call me the Masked Stray Priestess! I mean, never mind!"

I had snuck into the medical clinic late at night to find the doctor alone there, writing something. It seemed he lived there and his assistant commuted during the day. There was no security around; the doctor was truly the only one there. It looked like he didn't have a wife or kids either. So, I snuck up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. I guess I couldn't blame him for being surprised.

"It's... It's you! Oh, thank goodness, I've been hoping to see you again! That ability you displayed earlier today! Those mystical powers!"

The doctor had turned around and knocked a chair over as he stood up, then grabbed my shoulders hard with both hands.

Ow, watch it! That's sexual harassment! Well... I guess it's my fault for sneaking in in the middle of the night and scaring him.

"That was a scientific healing method," I explained. "It was just one of the advanced medical sciences that can be used to repair a fracture, stop bleeding by applying pressure, or suture a wound shut. Make no mistake, the wound wasn't healed by praying for the Goddess for her help. That was nothing more than a convenient cover to avoid having to explain something to people who didn't understand medical science and to avoid raising suspicion. Besides, the Goddess wouldn't go around healing wounds for individual humans. How many other faithful and pious servants of the Goddess are out there in the world suffering from injury or illness? Has the Goddess healed all of them? No, she hasn't. The Goddess has nothing to do with healing injuries or illness. This is something we humans must do with our own powers... The power

of doctors, medicine, effort, research, and knowledge."

"Ah! Ahhh! I'm so happy to hear that..." the doctor said. "So it's not that those rotten priests were right. Medicine isn't a waste of time or against the will of the Goddess..."

Tears began to pour down his face. I couldn't help but feel guilty about all of this, but I wasn't lying. People in this world thought of Celes as a goddess, but in reality, she was just a highly evolved life form. My ability to create potions was due to extremely advanced science, not due to magic or the Goddess' miracles.

Humans could never hope to replicate it, but yeah! It's science! They do say "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," after all...

I couldn't let myself nip this world's medical development in the bud... though I did cure that soldier without even touching him. I wondered what the doctor thought about that...

No, no, let's not sweat the small details!

"So... I was hoping you would keep the events from earlier today a secret. I wouldn't want the Temple to get credit for this, nor I don't want hard-working doctors and apothecaries to lose public esteem," I said.

"What? But we could just tell everyone the truth..." the doctor replied.

Oof, that's a good point...

"Well, this technology is not yet widespread in this country, so I can't..." I argued.

"No, no, that's exactly why we must spread the word! And this is the perfect opportunity... Keeping technology and knowledge a secret is pure foolishness! We must share it for the sake of medical progress!"

All right, I need to take a different approach...

"That's confidential technology developed by my country! The punishment for leaking it is severe. Using it to heal people isn't a problem, but it can be used for evil, so I have to keep the method a secret. That's something you and the people of this country must discover for yourself. If you gain something simply by copying others, you won't be able to advance any further!"

"That's not what you said earlier!" the doctor argued.

Damn, he's not buying it... I have no choice.

"Shut your face! This is a message from the Goddess, you stupid jerk! You'd better not tell anyone! And tell that apothecary or assistant of yours to stay quiet about this too!"

Okay, I'm outta here!

"And that's how I made sure they won't talk!" I announced.

Kyoko and Reiko said nothing.

"Huh? Something wrong?" I asked.

More silence followed.

"Um..."

Still more silence, then they finally spoke.

"Kaoru..."

"What were you thinking?"

"Thought you might say that..." I said.

"So, I was hoping you would keep yesterday's events a secret..." I said to the two people across from me.

"I understand. If your secret was to reach the ears of the nobles, royal family, or the Temple, someone will certainly get some bad ideas. Fortunately, she only revealed her origin to us in a whisper, and the others likely didn't hear her. Even if someone asks, we could claim she lied about being related to the trade company and that we have no idea who she is. Back then, she reacted as if we had met for the first time, so no one should suspect anything. And rest assured, we won't mention this to anyone else. She

saved the person who saved Corey's life, so we as a company owe her. We did tell Corey to keep quiet about this yesterday, but we'll make sure to press the point again."

The assistant manager nodded along to the branch manager's words.

Thank goodness they're capable merchants who know how to handle this. Looks like things are gonna be just fine here.

I was visiting them as the convoy commander instead of Edith. I had told them I was a friend of Edith's, and that I was the one who had asked her to visit the clinic. If I didn't, there would've been no explanation for Edith's appearance, nor would I have a reason to tell them to keep their mouths shut from my end. Anyway, things seemed to be all good here!

"But wouldn't word spread from the guards?" the branch manager asked. "That soppy couple may not be a problem, but that officer will likely make a report up the ranks. The guards are a bureaucratic organization, after all. It will all depend on how that officer reports the events and how his superiors receive it. There's no telling whether they'll trust him or laugh it off. Do they believe in miracles, or will they dismiss it as foolish ramblings from their subordinates? Will they be drawn to the potential for power and riches? Will they keep the intel for themselves or report it higher up the ladder? There are far too many unknowns to tell..."

"Ah... Ahhhhhh!!!"

I had completely forgotten. Nobody would take the couple seriously as long as they were blabbing about the "miracle of love," but it was far too late to stop the officer of the guards. Actually, there was no way a superior officer would decide not to report such an incident just because some random commoner told them not to. Even if I told him to keep his mouth shut as Edith, there would be no stopping him.

This is bad. Reiko and Kyoko are gonna get mad at me...

The silence was painful to bear.

"Kaoru... How could you forget to tell us the worst part of all this..."

"Sorry..."

It wasn't time for our regular call, but I had contacted Reiko and Kyoko with an emergency transmission to explain. Sure enough, they were stunned, then promptly scolded me.

"We'll need to make massive adjustments to the plan," Reiko said. "You're done with your deliveries, right? Kaoru, come back home right away. You should come back as soon as possible too, Kyoko. Let's regroup at Little Silver and talk this out."

"Roger that!" Kyoko replied.

"Okay..." I said.

There was nothing I could do. It was completely my fault this time. I had been a lot more cautious before, but maybe I felt too at ease with Reiko and Kyoko here and had let my guard down. Knowing that we could easily flee if worst came to worst, I had gotten sloppy. This never would've happened in "Season 1," before the Item Box incident. I would've handled things better. Because of us, someone had sustained permanent injuries that would affect them for the rest of their life. I had gotten tunnel vision when I found out it happened to a virtuous, hard-working young man.

I really need to learn from this mistake... But for now, I need to get back home!

By the time I returned to Little Silver, Kyoko had already arrived. The kids started going nuts now that all three of us were home. We treated them to a fancy dinner, and once they tired themselves out, we carried them to their rooms and put them to bed. Afterward, we moved to the underground headquarters, prepared some drinks, then began our meeting.

"I know you panicked because someone got caught in the crossfire of our plans and almost had their life ruined," Reiko said. "You always lose your cool whenever someone else goes through trouble because of you... but you got way too sloppy this time."

"I know. I'm sorry..." I said.

She was right. We had come up with a plan together, and we were likely going to need to change course dramatically because of my selfish actions.

"I accept your apology!" Reiko said.

"Same!" Kyoko agreed.

And that was that. Reiko and Kyoko had also screwed up and caused trouble for the other two in the group many times, so we were all in the same boat. Therefore, if the mistake couldn't be avoided or there were extenuating circumstances to be considered, we let it slide as long as the offender apologized and promised to make the necessary effort so that it wouldn't happen again. I did sincerely feel bad, of course, but now it was time to move on and work together to figure out what to do next. There was no reason for me to hold back from contributing to the conversation out of guilt.

"First, let's reassess the situation. What do you think will happen now? Kaoru, you should explain, since you know the situation best," Reiko started.

"As I reported in our call, a good man was about to lose his job and marriage partner because of a serious injury he sustained getting caught up in our operations, so I healed him with my potion powers," I explained. "I failed to guarantee their secrecy because I was in a panic and therefore left three groups of witnesses. The first group is a merchant house we have connections with, and it's highly unlikely that information will leak through them. The second is the doctor and his assistant, and there's a small risk of information leaking through them. The last group is related to the guard squad. Out of those three related individuals, it's unlikely that anyone will believe the injured victim and his lover, so there's minimal risk there. But the third person, the injured man's superior officer, is the biggest problem of all. How did he report the incident to his superiors? What did he mention? How will the higher-ups take that information, and will they believe it? Will those people report it higher up the chain? Will anyone else believe the report or show interest? Will anyone try to take advantage of this information, or just pray to the Goddess? There's too much we don't know at this point..."

Reiko and Kyoko seemed unsure what to say. After a moment, Reiko gave a suggestion. "Before we worry about people figuring out who you are, let's deal with Kurth Trade Company first. If we leave them alone, they might start getting funny ideas again. We don't want to get blindsided by them while we're dealing with other stuff. The next time they hurt someone, it might not just end with someone injured. What happened to the attackers, anyway?"

"They got away..." I replied. "The guard was injured, the merchant got hit hard, and there were three of them, so there wasn't much they could do. It was a miracle they managed to prevent the kidnapping and chase them off. They probably backed off

because the guard was fighting back so much, and they knew they were going to maim him really badly or even kill him if they kept going. Whoever hired them must have called it off because if they murdered or severely maimed someone, there'd be heavy consequences if they ever got caught. There would be other opportunities to attempt a kidnapping, and they didn't have to go for that specific employee anyway"

"That makes sense to me," Reiko agreed. "Even if we catch them, they're probably just some disposable thugs who don't even know the name of their employer. I'll bet they got part of the payment upfront with a promise of more once the job is done. The goons shouldn't have a problem with that, since they can ask for it in exchange for the kidnapped employee. So, let's forget about the kidnappers. The guards should catch them once we find the mastermind and make him talk. We need to give the guards something to do too, after all."

I was on board with that idea. It was a good idea to let them earn a little credit, since a certain young guardsman had worked so hard while off-duty.

"Also, about that clinic... Maybe it's because you're more of the scientific type or because of what happened during your "Season 1," but you tend to side with anyone who contributes to medical progress while being critical of the Temple's side. You do know you're supposed to be a Goddess-sider here, right? It might not be a good idea to praise science and put down the Temple," Reiko warned.

"What...?" I said.

"You mean that fizzy stuff...?" Kyoko asked.

"No, that's cider!" Reiko and I pointed out.

"Kyoko, let's stay quiet for a while, yeah?" Reiko glared.

"Right..." Kyoko said sheepishly.

"Ha ha, you got scolded!"

"Kaoru..."

Uh oh, Kyoko's on the verge of snapping!

"S-Sorry..." I apologized.



Anyway, we had to take care of Kurth Trade Company first. We could figure out how to deal with the aftermath of the report from the officer of the guards after that. And so, the conversation went on for the rest of the night with idle chit-chat in-between.

“So, does that sound good to everyone?” I asked.

““Yeah!””

We had figured out our general plan. First, we would hit Kurth Trade Company. The whole reason my identity was in danger of being exposed was because of them, so I decided to add that to their list of crimes. We would confirm whether there was some sort of reaction from the guards in the meantime, then come up with a plan for how to deal with it. There was nothing we could do on that end until they made a move, so we would deal with it later.

If the guards ended up taking action earlier than expected, we would prioritize them first. Hopefully, whoever received the report would dismiss the whole thing as a ridiculous, made-up story, or otherwise assume that the initial diagnosis was wrong. If the information at least stopped going up the chain at some greedy, low-ranking aristocrat who decided to keep it to himself in hopes of gaining something from me, I could just deal with the people who knew about me up to that point. No, I wouldn’t go and kill them or anything... I’d just discourage them from talking.

Anyway, all I could do now was hope for the best.

“Okay, I got confirmation. We got our evidence!” Kyoko said as she came home two days after our meeting.

She had closed up her shop for now, claiming that it was so she could stock up on new products. That excuse couldn’t be used all the time, but going to another country or territory took days or even weeks, so it wasn’t uncommon for the head of a trade company to take an extended amount of time off for business meetings or purchasing trips. The reason I had asked Kyoko to handle the investigation, despite her being busy running her shop, was because Reiko told me to refrain from roaming around the royal capital during the day. Sure, I could disguise myself, but she said it was better to be safe than sorry.

As for Reiko, she was out on a purchasing trip of her own. Kyoko was faster in her ship

for long-distance travel, but Reiko was faster when it came to making multiple trips to a closer location, since she could use her magic (well, her science-magic, anyway). Kyoko could only land her ship at night and had to find a spot to land a bit away from the cities when she did. Besides, she hadn't gone to any other regions for purchasing yet, so she wasn't used to doing business negotiations there.

"Welcome back!" I said.

With Reiko's optical camouflage magic and the spy gadgets that were made in Kyoko's mothership, gathering evidence was an easy task. Really, as long as the evidence was convincing to us, that would be enough. We weren't getting evidence to submit to the officials or to convince anyone we were right. After all, even if we tried to use that, we'd be the ones in trouble if they asked how we got it. Instead, this was merely to confirm who the mastermind was, so we wouldn't accidentally attack the wrong target. We didn't want this to be one of those cases where we accused someone suspicious, but the real culprit ended up being someone else... Of course, this time, we had been right all along.

"I secured our headquarters too!" Kyoko added.

"Got it! Great work."

As we had discussed during our meeting, Kyoko had secured a location in the royal capital for us. We would be operating in the capital a lot and staying at an inn all the time would be a pain. The three of us had to go back and forth between the royal capital, Kyoko's shop, Little Silver, our clients' cities, and a bunch of other places. There would be times when we returned late at night, and we wouldn't be able to hold meetings in an inn, what with their thin walls. That was why we had rented an affordable house. It wasn't going to be used as a shop or anything, so it was located away from the town center, where we wouldn't stand out too much when going in and out of it late at night. We would find a better location for Kyoko when she established her shop in the royal capital. The building we got this time would still be used as our secret base, though, even after we eventually opened a store in the capital, but that would be later down the line.

"All right, let's go take down Kurth Trade Company!"

If they had only messed with Kyoko's shop, we would've let them off after teaching them a little lesson. But once they hired thugs to attack an employee from the Tavolas

Trade Company branch store, they went from “merchants who used dirty tactics” to something more like “the masterminds of heinous crimes.” If someone stole a few products or betrayed someone, making them reflect on their mistakes and regret their actions would be enough...

But heinous criminals, you’re not getting off that easy!

Not to mention, they were likely—no, it was pretty much guaranteed that they would do it again. No matter how many dirty tricks they used, as long as they came at us as merchants, we would have fought back with dirty tricks as merchants ourselves. But since they had stepped out of bounds and used violence instead, we weren’t obligated to play by the rules either. And our methods wouldn’t be violence, but the power of magic and science.

“Oh, Kyoko, you’re back...” Reiko said. She had just returned from her purchasing trip. Well, we called it a trip, but it had only taken a few days for her to go around each region.

I guess we’ll take it easy today... then start our activities tomorrow.

“Where’s Roberto?” the head of the Kurth Trade Company asked.

“I’m not sure... He shouldn’t have taken the day off, so he’s either visiting clients, checking inventory at the warehouse, or running late because he overslept,” the chief clerk replied.

Roberto, one of the head clerks, was a responsible person and a married man. He wasn’t the type to be tardy for work from oversleeping, and he wouldn’t have been able to become a head clerk in the first place if he was.

“I see,” the head of the company replied. “Tell him to come see me later.”

He had some business with Roberto; didn’t plan on rebuking him or anything. Head clerks were allowed a certain amount of discretion, so they were free to act without reporting their every move.

The next day...

"What happened to Roberto?"

He still hadn't shown up to see the head of the company, which meant he had been absent from the shop since yesterday.

"W-Well..."

The chief clerk had thought it odd when Roberto hadn't appeared yesterday and sent someone to his home to check up on him. Roberto's wife was surprised to hear he had been missing, claiming she thought he had been staying at the store. It wasn't uncommon for him to spend the night at the store when things were busy, so she hadn't found it odd that he was missing. This meant that no one knew his whereabouts after he had left the store two days ago to go home in the evening.

"What?! Send a report to the guards immediately! Get the available shop boys and sales clerks to search for him! Check the back alleys and Irma Swamp too! I want them searching every corner for information!"

The back alleys and Irma Swamp were the go-to places for criminals to dispose of corpses.

"Yes, sir!"

The employees were moved that the head of the company was so desperate to find Roberto when he was only one clerk out of many, and not even a chief clerk. They assumed he was a man who cared about his employees and would give his utmost if something happened to them. In reality, he simply didn't want to lose all the time and resources spent training the missing head clerk, but the end result was the same.

"Hyde hasn't been seen this morning..."

"What?!"

The head clerk Roberto was never found, and the head of the company was in a bad mood when he received a report saying a sales clerk had gone missing. Sales clerks were live-in workers, which meant he had disappeared some time between dinner last

night and breakfast this morning. Perhaps he had gone out to drink after dinner, or went on a tryst with a lover.

The next day, another report came in.

"Roltos hasn't come in. We've also confirmed he hasn't been home since last night..."

"Salowin hasn't returned since leaving for an outing!"

"Ertis hasn't..."

"Just what is going on?! Is some merchant house or secret organization trying to threaten us? Why aren't the guards doing something about this? We're going to talk to the count about this! Prepare the carriage now!"

With that, the head of the company headed out to visit the nobleman he was close with so he could put pressure on the guards to take action. He still hadn't realized who he was up against...

"How many people now?" I asked.

"Seven. Besides the chief clerk, we've also got one head clerk, and the rest are sales clerks. We haven't been targeting any shop boys," Kyoko explained.

It was just as we had discussed in our prior meeting. Shop boys were at the bottom of the employee hierarchy and were never tasked with important duties, so they wouldn't know anything about the inner dealings of the company, which was why we had excluded them from our plan.

"There are a lot fewer mid-level and higher employees at their store now. It's like Agatha Christie's..." I trailed off, and Kyoko finished the sentence with me, "And then there were few."

After we had put the Kurth employees to sleep with my potions, we carried them to another location, interrogated them in disguise, then put them to sleep again. It was a lot easier to deal with them when they were sleeping, since they didn't scream or try to flee, and they didn't ask to eat or use the restroom while they were unconscious. I did make sure their health wasn't adversely affected, though. For hard workers who

weren't involved in the crimes at all, I even alleviated any chronic illnesses they had, as a sort of inconvenience fee.

Abducting and interrogating employees was something they were intending to do, so they couldn't complain if we did the same. We weren't sure whether they were planning on releasing the victims afterward or making them go away to ensure their silence. If I had to guess, it was probably the latter. It would've been way too obvious if they had kidnapped someone and asked about the purchasing routes of certain products instead of mugging them or demanding a ransom payment... Especially if someone suddenly interfered with a certain merchant house's secret supply route after such an incident.

Yup, they were definitely planning on silencing the abducted employees.

I wondered if Kurth Trade Company realized that what they were planning to do was being done back to them many times over. But it wasn't like they could tell the guards, "They're doing to us what we were trying to do! So the culprit must be..."

Besides, they probably assumed we didn't know they were the ones behind the original attack. There were lots of merchants interested in the supply routes for the products being sold at Tavolas Trade Company's royal capital branch, and since their attack had failed, they'd think we didn't know it was an attempt to gain information. Most likely, they assumed we thought the attack was just a random mugging by some hoodlums. Though, even "just a mugging" was a serious crime, both robbery and assault, and any culprits found would be arrested and their lives ruined. This wasn't just true here, but back on Earth as well.

Shoplifting, for example, could also be considered grand larceny. If a shoplifter pushed a customer or employee out of the way as they tried to flee, that would make it robbery, and if they ended up injuring someone, it could turn into aggravated assault or even manslaughter if the person died. The penalty for such a crime could be indefinite imprisonment or death, even in a country that was lenient on criminals like Japan. If someone attempted to shoplift without taking it seriously and touched an employee as they fled, they could end up being guilty of manslaughter. It was a far more serious crime on Earth than most culprits imagined.

Anyway, it was highly unlikely that Kurth realized we'd kept an eye on them ever since the incident occurred, or that they would be the first suspect. In truth, the whole reason we started dealing in large quantities of seafood in the first place was to target

Kurth Trade Company. Since we had been attacked only after that, they were obviously the first logical suspects.

They probably assumed the incident at Kyoko's shop had already been wrapped up as just an event that happened at some small provincial town, and that we believed a small shop called Theitos Trade Company was responsible. Since Theitos wasn't a branch of Kurth Trade Company and had nothing to do with Kurth, they wouldn't see the connection between that event and Tavolas Trade Company's royal capital branch and Hawkes Trade Company beginning to sell seafood. And even though there was no proof and they thought there wasn't any way for us to find connections between them and the culprit, well... there was no stopping the power of magic and super science.

So, we were getting them back on a scale several times greater than what they had done, but we were letting them go afterward, so on balance we weren't being nearly as severe.

We're letting them off so easy...

Sure, they'd had no choice but to follow their boss' orders, but it wasn't good to be so lenient. If that excuse was going to fly, then anyone could get off from punishment by saying "I was just doing what my boss told me to."

Guess we'll just have to deal with any situations as they arise...

"What in the world is going on?!"

He had already sent numerous reports to the guards, of course. He had even asked the officers of the guard squad, an aristocrat he was close with, and several others, but the situation hadn't moved forward even a little.

"Tell the employees they aren't to walk around alone at night! And have the head clerks stay at the store overnight!"

It may have sounded like the orders were from a place of concern for his employees, but he simply didn't want to lose his useful mid-level employees or have his store adversely affected by their disappearance.

"If they stay overnight, I can make them work from early morning to late night too..."

He was a fine merchant, but questionable as a human being.

"Anyway, we'll deal with this tomorrow. I'm going home now. I haven't gotten any sleep for the past few days... You handle things here," he told his employee.

"Yes, sir!"

The head of Kurth didn't live at the shop. If he'd had a living space at the back of the store, people like messengers sent by aristocrats could bother him late after closing or on days off, so he lived some distance away with his wife and kids. And, of course, there was a small building near his house with bodyguards on duty.

By not living in the store, there was the added benefit of him and his family staying safe even if a bandit invaded his shop and his employees' lives and his money were put at risk. And the chief clerk, who had been given the living area inside the shop where the family of the owner would normally have lived, was deeply impressed by the benevolent treatment and felt a renewed loyalty to his boss.

Damn it! Why are my employees vanishing one after another? What did we ever... Well, we've made so many enemies that I can't even begin to guess who could have done this! But still, none of them would've taken such blatant, forceful action... They've been so persistent, even though they could lose everything if they're caught. Besides, their first two or three victims should have been enough! None of them could withstand torture, and none of them know anything that could compromise me. They may know of our somewhat-underhanded business practices, but the chief clerk and I talk about the truly problematic things directly with the intermediary between us and our secret contacts...

The head of the Kurth Trade Company mulled over such thoughts as he headed home to his loving wife and children, when suddenly...

"Urgh..."

He felt his body go numb, then lock up.

"Ah... Uh... ngh..."

Unable to speak, he soon lost consciousness.

“Ugh... Where am I...?”

When the head of Kurth Trade Company awakened, he found himself in an unfamiliar place. He could tell he was indoors somewhere, but didn't recognize the interior or furnishings. The room was pure white, seamless, and had a smooth-looking ceiling and walls. Mysterious machinery took up most of the available space. He found that he had been sleeping in a strange-looking bucket seat that seemed to wrap around his body. He wasn't constrained, but his limbs wouldn't move for some reason, even though he could move from the neck up, speak, and look around. Even without moving his head, he could generally see parts of the room that were higher than the strange chair he was lying in. He tilted his head to the left to see what was moving around in the corner of his vision, then it came into view.

It was a kind-looking young girl adorned in a fluttering white outfit with thin fabric. There were white wings on her back, and a ring of flickering light floating over her head. The girl was moving her arms around like flapping wings...

It was Kyoko, who had changed her face and wore a disguise.

“An... angel? Am I in heaven?”

There was nothing that could be done if he had died a spontaneous death. A set lifespan for all humans was ordained by the heavens, after all. But he couldn't help but feel fortunate to find himself in heaven despite all of the wrongdoings he had committed in his life. And so, he didn't feel sorrow for his death, but joy at his own luck.

“You're awake.”

A little girl with a demonic look in her eyes suddenly looked into his face from the blind spot above his head. It was Kaoru in disguise, but she had kept her eyes unchanged in order to make her interrogation more intimidating.

“Urgh... So this *is* hell after all!”

“Shaddap!!!”

Kaoru was quite furious.

"So you're saying this isn't hell yet?"

Afterward, the girl with the fiendish eyes had revealed the wings on her back and floating ring over her own head, and convinced the head of Kurth Trade Company that he wasn't in hell. He still couldn't move his body, so he had asked his questions while still lying in the mysterious bucket seat. Kaoru had explained that he was being subdued with divine power because some people panicked and lashed out, and he calmed down after she told him he would be released in due time. He couldn't do much other than talk while immobile, so it seemed rather reasonable.

"Correct," Kaoru explained. "This isn't the world you came from, nor is it heaven or hell. This realm exists above all of those places, and from here, we watch over the world."

She wasn't lying.

"This is how the world looks from here. Take a look."

The head of Kurth's upper body was raised up slightly, and a blue sphere appeared in front of a black background on a screen that could be seen from his position in his bucket seat.

"Wh-What is that...?"

Kyoko ignored the man's questions and operated the controls as told by Kaoru, and the sphere grew bigger and bigger on the screen. It eventually filled the screen entirely, then continued to zoom in until...

"Is that the sea...? And land? Don't tell me..."

A continent came into view, then a coastline, revealing a familiar shape.

"Impossible! Th-This is... my country..."

A certain city could be seen; meanwhile, the view continued to zoom in.

"The royal palace... It's the royal capital... The world... is round? The continent is so small... and humans are smaller than ants..."

The head of Kurth thought he was just in the royal capital, but they were far above the city. Indeed, Kaoru wasn't lying when she told him they were far above his world, heaven, and hell.

They were in outer space, on the bridge of Kyoko's mothership, which was in geosynchronous orbit.

The head of Kurth talked without holding anything back. In a world where the Goddess existed, no one was so foolish that they wouldn't bow down in faithful deference to angels after being shown such a thing... not even the most devious of villains. Even if one didn't bat an eye at killing others for money, not many could stand the thought of being responsible for an entire continent sinking and the loss of tens of millions of human lives, along with the flora and fauna. Not to mention, there was no way the Goddess would let the cause of all those deaths die peacefully. They would likely be cursed with an undying body to live a life of eternal suffering. Death was far kinder a fate... that went without saying.

He not only had to take care not to anger the Goddess, her angels, and any other deities, but he had to exercise utmost care not to cause even the slightest bit of annoyance for them. If anything happened to offend them, it was his duty as a human being, or rather as a creature living on the continent, to apologize on the spot and commit suicide to reduce the probability of the continent's extinction by even one percent. It was said that long ago, a certain heroic individual once admonished the Goddess Celestine as she intended to destroy the continent, but no ordinary human could accomplish such a feat.

This was no longer a matter of profit, business development, or personal prosperity. Although the head of Kurth was an evil man, he wasn't willing to let himself be responsible for the death of all living things on the continent. Most people would cave far before that point, especially when their immediate and extended family members were at stake.

The head of Kurth talked desperately, the thought of lying not even crossing his mind as he answered questions.

"I see. So, the treatment you received as a child when you were poor has been ingrained in you, and you grew up only believing in money and crushing all who

opposed you. Is that right?" Kaoru asked.

"Yes, ma'am..."

Well, this is awkward... I'm starting to sympathize with him...

"What should we do?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Kyoko responded.

I had told the head of Kurth that I was bestowing him the nectar of the gods and handed him some alcohol (potion). He was now sleeping with a blissful expression on his face.

"We had no choice but to snatch up the big boss because we couldn't get much info even after abducting seven of their employees, and it turns out he's not as terrible of a villain as we thought... I mean, sure, there was the attack, but he had a plan to extract information from his targets without his company's workers being suspected, and he was going to let all of the kidnapped employees go without harming them. Supposedly, the guard only ended up getting hurt because the hooligans panicked at the unexpected interruption. The guard was in his off-duty outfit, so they thought he was just some youngster trying to act tough in front of his girlfriend, but when they tried to scare him off, he came right at them and got into an unfortunate accident. Their contract said they were allowed to punch people in the stomach a few times or twist their arms a bit when restraining them, but they weren't allowed to cause any injuries, so as per the terms, they aborted the mission and fled. I think the story checks out. If they really intended to kidnap someone, they'd have just broken the target's arm and taken them away by force. After injuring one of the guardsman's arms, they could have easily beaten up the frail merchant and abducted him. Besides, judging by his reaction, I don't think he was lying to us," I said.

"Yeah..." Kyoko agreed.



CHAPTER 74

LEGITIMATE COMPANY HEAD

“So, that’s what happened.”

“...”

Afterward, we had taken the sleeping head of Kurth Trade Company and returned to Little Silver in the dinghy. As for the other employees we had kidnapped, we’d interrogated them in our basement and put them to sleep without taking them to the mothership.

We put the head of Kurth in the same room as the others. Of course, we had put them all to sleep before bringing them here, so none of them knew where this place was. They had just lost consciousness and woke up inside some building, so we just had to do the same thing when we got them out of here, and they’d be none the wiser.

Reiko had been taking care of the kids at Little Silver in our absence, so we briefed her on what had happened when we interrogated the head of Kurth in the mothership.

“So, you want to change plans now?” she asked.

“Yeah... Don’t get me wrong, he’s used a lot of underhanded tactics, but not a lot of things that are outright illegal. According to him, he panicked and messed up because his company was on the line. In other words, he crossed the line to protect his business because we cornered him,” I explained.

“You’re saying we’re partially responsible?” Reiko asked.

“Yeah...”

“If a business he worked his entire life to build up was about to be destroyed by some conspiracy, I guess it’s not unreasonable for him to get upset and use illegal methods to find the culprit and stop things from getting worse...” Kyoko, who had heard the reformed head of Kurth’s confession, added to assist my case.

Reiko said nothing, looking cool as a cucumber. She was always the calm one and never let emotions get the better of her, like Kyoko and I did. She wasn't the kind to let evildoers off so easily, and her stance was, "Condemn the crime, not the perpetrator? Of course I'll condemn the perpetrator; they're the bad guy!"

"Never fail to reward a meritorious service or let a fault go unpunished." "Karmic justice." "Evildoers have no rights." "Kill them before they kill you." Such were KKR's mottoes, and Reiko was the one who applied and carried them out most religiously.

People say Kyoko and I were the spark or fuel for the fire, but we were surprisingly humanitarian in our beliefs. As for Reiko... she could be mild-mannered and kind, of course, but she was the type that didn't enforce rules arbitrarily. She believed that anyone who committed a crime should be punished, no matter who. Although she may follow up in some other way if there are extenuating circumstances, punishments must be dished out fairly. Those beliefs were at the core of her very being.

"Okay..." Reiko said. "Let's reconsider the plan."

"Huh?"

"Are you sure?"

Kyoko and I were shocked. We couldn't believe Reiko was agreeing to change a plan about "divine retribution" for any reason other than to avoid a potential obstacle.

"You two reconsidered in light of changing circumstances, right? I can take in new information and do the same. It's not like there's a rule saying we're not allowed to change our minds after we first decide something. So, does our reformed company head seem useful?" she asked.

That was the issue at hand, but Kyoko and I had already confirmed it.

"Yup!" we answered.

Bad guys who pretended to be remorseful but hadn't fundamentally changed had to be dealt with so decent people wouldn't be harmed in the future. But if they had truly reformed, we believed in having them atone for their wrongdoing. Of course, criminals must be punished, but that company head wasn't necessarily considered a "criminal." Strictly speaking, he had done things that were against the law, but since he hadn't been sued or sentenced to any punishment, he technically wasn't accused of any

crime. Therefore, if we punished him, it would be considered vigilantism, and we'd be the bad guys.

To be honest, that part didn't bother me. We had always operated according to our own laws and not this country's laws in the first place. We followed the local laws if they weren't problematic, of course. We didn't want to cause trouble for people who were just living honest lives. But if bad guys ever messed with us, no laws were going to stop us. We couldn't be too obvious, of course, since we didn't want to get arrested, but it wasn't a problem as long as no one found out. When operating under our own laws, we were able to change up our plans... as long as Reiko agreed. And she had just given the green light.

"He has money, business connections, connections with officials and aristocrats, and is completely loyal to us Angels," I explained.

"He doesn't have any qualms with getting his hands dirty to reach an objective, but he won't harm anyone senselessly, and won't overstep the bounds of a 'shady businessman.' He might include a clause in a contract that could be somewhat misleading, but he wouldn't change the details after the fact or make someone sign it by force. This was the only time he committed an unreasonable act of violence, and he had no choice but to do it in self-defense," Kyoko added.

Reiko responded, "Hmm... Then instead of just shutting down his business, letting all of its employees lose their jobs, and bankrupting its clients, we should have him pay monetary compensation to everyone he caused trouble for. The victims wouldn't get a single copper coin if we brought his business down, after all."

She was right. That was the best course of action if there weren't going to be any more victims. It wasn't like the company head had gotten involved in robbery or murder. In this world, there were truly evil people who weren't just "shady." He was far better than those people in comparison.

"All right, let's come up with a new plan, then!"

"Yeah!" we chorused.

"Urgh... What is this place?"

One of the kidnapped head clerks had regained consciousness.

"I remember getting abducted, and then someone interrogated me... Ah, you guys!"

Since he had been kidnapped, he hadn't seen anyone but the girls who had interrogated him. They hadn't tortured him, but merely asked him questions... But now, he was surrounded by his colleagues who had been taken before and after him. Each of them were rubbing their eyes and shaking their heads as they, too, got their wits about them. Strangely, everyone seemed to have woken up at the same time. Then...

"Everyone, stay calm! Don't worry, you've all been rescued already!"

"Boss!!!" everyone yelled at once.

Standing before them was the head of Kurth Trade Company.

"Wh-Why are you here?"

It was a valid question.

"Since all of you were getting abducted one after another, I went out in the middle of the night to bait the culprits and let myself get caught on purpose. Once they took me to their hideout, I used the tool I had hidden on myself to cut the rope, take down the kidnappers, and rescue all of you. Now we're back in one of the living quarters in the store."

The employees cheered in jubilation.

"I've been through rough times when I was younger" he went on. "I know how to defend myself and fight to protect those precious to me!"

How many people out there would be willing to put their lives on the line to protect replaceable employees?

Tears poured down the faces of the awestruck workers.

"B-Boss..."

"Hooray for the big boss!"

“Hooray for Kurth Trade Company!”

“Hooray! Hooray!!!”

They raised their voices together in praise.

Their voices seemed to alert the servants that they had awakened and they brought in some easy-to-digest rice gruel and diluted wine for the employees' weakened bodies. The servants had also been informed of the situation beforehand and were casting admiring glances at the head of the company.

“I’m only doing what the Angels told me to, but this is so embarrassing I could die!”

He had never received such looks before in his life and it took all his willpower not to writhe around in discomfort.

“Think he pulled it off?” I asked.

“I mean, he’s the head of a big company. Of course he’s a smooth talker and a skilled actor.”

“Guess you’re right...”

After our talk, we had moved the head of Kurth to a different room, woke him up, then prepared for our plan. No, we didn’t mind-control him with some shady potion, but just bestowed “the Angel’s message” upon him. During this conversation, we basically obscured the incident where we had kidnapped seven employees and their boss, so it was like it never happened. We had told him to explain to his employees, “We’re not sure who was responsible, but the culprits are all dead. Our name could get dragged through the mud if we made this public, and whoever hired them won’t try messing with us anymore.” Since the head of the company had saved them himself, no one would oppose his wishes.

Now we just had to reduce the amount of seafood we were selling to Tavolas Trade Company’s royal capital branch and Hawkes Trade Company, so that things would go back to normal. As for the punishment for what Kurth’s puppet store had done to Kyoko’s shop and the harm done to the Tavolas royal capital branch’s employee and the guard who was trying to protect him... Well, the head of Kurth had agreed to be

useful to us from now on, and he would compensate any business partners who had suffered major losses because of him. We weren't going to make him pay reparations for every single client of his who lost money, but only in cases where they weren't at fault at all, and payment was to be made directly to the person involved, or their wife or children. Otherwise, we'd make Kurth go bankrupt. Besides, he wouldn't need to pay the victim's cousins, uncles, or other relatives unrelated to the case. In other words, if the other party had agreed to borrow money knowing they would owe high interest, or if the terms were terrible but they were clearly outlined in the contract, I would say to the head of Kurth..."Ye not guilty."

The incident had met an unexpected conclusion and things wrapped up without any serious issues. We ended up obtaining a seemingly useful pawn too...

"This isn't over yet! We don't know what's going to happen with the guard squad yet!" Reiko pointed out.

"Oh..."

Well, guess we'll just have to see how the situation unfolds.

And so, we had returned to our normal routine. We had kept the rental house Kyoko had secured in the royal capital as it was and decided we would use it when one of us needed to go to the capital for inspections, product delivery, or shopping. We wouldn't need to use it in earnest until Kyoko moved to the capital, but it was good to have it available. We had also asked the realtor to check on it from time to time to avoid vagrants trying to live there in our absence or hooligans using it as a hangout spot... They had charged us extra for the service, of course, but it was better to pay a proper fee for these things, since it solidified the responsibility. They might end up feeling less obligated to follow up with free services, which could result in trouble down the line. If you expected duty and responsibility, it was best to bind it with money and contracts.

Oh, and the branch manager had reached out to me and told me that the officer from the guard squad from that incident had come by and asked him about the priestess, but that he had sent the officer away, saying all he knew was that she was an acquaintance of the convoy leader. He had explained that he wasn't the one who had hired them, and he no longer had any contact with the convoy, which had only been

contracted to transport a delivery that one time. It should have been obvious by our demeanor that the stray priestess was meeting the branch managers for the first time. I wasn't sure if the official had visited the branch manager of his own will or under someone's orders, but he should have officially been out of leads by now.

All right, so far so good!

"You're the so-called free priestess who isn't affiliated with the Temple? You're coming with us!"

I was surrounded by children in the garden of an orphanage in a certain town, stewing potatoes in a big pot, when four soldier-like men suddenly approached me. I figured there would be no point in denying it, and that was how I had introduced myself to the staff and children at the orphanage, so there was no hiding my identity. The men were likely working for the higher-ups at the Temple, who didn't like that a priestess unrelated to the Temple was gaining renown, or they were messengers sent by an aristocrat or a big business trying to gain popularity among the people by making me serve them. Whoever they were, it was clear from their attitude that they weren't going to treat me (Edith) with respect. I doubted any good would come of doing as they had said, but I didn't want to cause trouble for the orphanage by refusing. If I was to make a move, it would be once I got away from this place. But first...

"It appears you have some business with me, but would you mind waiting until the children finish their meals? This is a rare opportunity for them to eat their fill. To ruin such an opportunity because you are unwilling to wait a few moments seems a bit, well, inhumane..."

The children stared at the soldiers at once, all of them on the verge of tears.

"Ngh... F-Fine, hurry up!"

There weren't many people out there who could withstand those puppy-dog eyes. Besides, traveling to a neighboring city took hours in this world, so another hour or two of delay was no big deal. At least, it wasn't so important that it should be prioritized over a group of orphans getting an extremely rare opportunity to fill their stomachs... If they had a conscience, that was. Despite their dismissive attitude toward me, the soldiers didn't seem intent on treating the children poorly. The children of low-

ranking soldiers could eventually end up in orphanages, after all.

"I would be happy to, but I can't control how quickly the food cooks..." I replied.

"Shut up and just do it!!!" the soldier shouted back.

Oops, guess I upset him. I suppose I should've held my tongue...

I could ask who had sent them and why later, but why was I getting detained? Well, I had been going around the area treating minor injuries and illnesses, and donating food to orphanages, so if someone knew about me and wanted to get in contact, they could plot out the places I had appeared and estimate where I might show up next. It would be easy enough to do, since I was simply going around each location in order without trying to throw anyone off. There were considerable gaps between some of the visits, but those were from when I was staying in the royal capital or at Little Silver, though the in-character reason was because Edith needed to earn money to fund her charity work, or had to go train as a priestess.

So, anyone who wanted to capture me could do so pretty easily... and I had intended for it to be that way. Once Edith's name spread to the royal capital, I had been anticipating someone coming to get me. This was another step in the plan where the stray priestess Edith would become Saint Edith. However, this was just one part of our plan for Edith to gain enough power to step in if Little Silver started getting in trouble with nobles or big businesses, and I wasn't going to let any particular party take me in or take advantage of me.

"Is it almost ready?" one of the orphans asked.

"Oh, it should almost be done..."

Oops, I should prioritize the hungry animals (kids) for now...

"Thank you, miss!" the kids shouted after me.

I was seen off by the children and worried-looking staff as I left the orphanage with the soldiers. I smiled and waved as we walked away. Not only did the soldiers not have a carriage, but they hadn't brought any horses... which meant we would be walking all the way.

You guys do realize I'm going to be slow, right? I go at two-thirds of an average adult male's walking speed on a good day. I'll need tons of rest too.

These soldiers were probably low-ranking grunts and there may have been other parties going around looking for me. It would've been expensive to prepare horses and carriages for all of them. Bringing horses would also have meant that they would need to stay at inns with a stable, and caring for and feeding horses would cost money too...

The men accompanying me were dressed like soldiers, but there was no telling if they worked for the state. They could've been members of some noble's territorial army, a private army operated by a big business, well-off mercenaries or hunters with matching armor, or something else entirely.

I had refrained from asking unnecessary questions at the orphanage, but we were in the clear already. I wouldn't be able to stand walking for hours on end without talking, and I needed to start gathering information so I could decide what to do.

All right!

I lightly clenched both fists and brought them in front of my mouth to do my best cutesy pose.

“Excuse me, but might I ask who sent you fine gentlemen?” I asked with a smile adorable enough to make a sound effect.

Wait... Why did they just back away looking creeped out?! My eyes are even cute and droopy right now as Edith, damn it!

CHAPTER 75

CONTACT WITH NOBLES

I changed how my eyes look... so why are they so weirded out?!

“Sh-Shut up and walk!” one of the soldiers ordered me.

I said nothing.

I was trying to be nice... Fine, I'm done acting friendly! Looks like this one's a miss anyway.

“I asked you who the hell you’re working for, damn it!” I yelled.

“So vulgar! I suppose that’s to be expected of a commoner...”

“Shut the hell up! I’m gonna tell your employer that I was planning on being cooperative but changed my mind because of your rudeness and that you’ve angered the Goddess!”

“Whaaat?!” they yelled in unison.

Why are they so surprised? Of course negotiations won’t go well if the messenger offends the other party. Do they not realize they’re representing their organization?

“Wait! That would put us in a very bad position...” the soldier said.

“Like I care! You should’ve known that when you treated me so rudely! Don’t tell me you acted so stupid and pompous without knowing who you were coming for and how much say and influence I have regarding your employer?”

The soldiers were at a loss for words. Their employer didn’t have to treat me as an equal, but if they had at least been polite and intended to treat me like a guest, I would’ve at least heard them out. I wasn’t going to let them take me in under their command, but it never hurt to have influential people on your side. I mean, the whole point of Edith was to gain more influential allies in the first place. But since they had

given these men orders in a way that made them think it was okay to treat me this way, well... it was very telling. That was why I knew this one was a "miss."

"Well, goodbye!" I said.

And so, I left them behind and went on to the next village...

"Wait! Wait just a minute!"

Or not.

"If we don't bring you with us, we'll be in big trouble!" the soldier said.

Well, duh.

"But even if you force me to go with you, I can tell your boss what I said earlier, and add that I don't negotiate with kidnappers, and that I'll report the abduction to the appropriate authorities in the kingdom..."

"Noooooooo!!!" they all cried out.

I figured they wouldn't like that.

"Wh-What do we do...?" one of the soldiers asked.

"What if we let her leave and pretend we never found her?"

"That's it!"

One of the soldiers had made a suggestion, and two of the remaining three agreed, but the remaining soldier brought up a counterpoint.

"And what do you think will happen if another team finds her or another noble house takes her in, and then the truth comes out?"

The others didn't say anything. If that happened, they would be considered traitors for making a false report. If their boss wanted me badly enough, he could end up striking them down in a rage.

"Then maybe we should make sure that doesn't happen? Say, for example, if she

suddenly died for some reason..." one of the soldiers suggested.

"Good idea!" the others agreed.

"No it isn't!" I objected.

Of all the things they could have come up with...

Okay, I need to remove that option to keep myself safe.

Ahead, I could see three merchant wagons approaching our direction. There were some armed escorts protecting the wagons to their front and rear. Behind us, there was what seemed to be a party of five hunters walking in the same direction as us. They seemed to be solid mid-level hunters in their early thirties or so. They had been some distance away before, but they were much closer now, since I walked slowly. There were others walking along the main road, but they were too far away.

They'll do for an audience.

I took in a deep breath, then yelled as loud as I could.

"What?! Your employer wanted you to pick me up, but you're going to kill me to cover up your mistake? You intend to kill me, a priestess, then make up a convenient false report?"

The hunters and coachman looked at us with startled expressions and the soldiers began to panic.

"If something happens to me now, it won't take much effort for your employer to find out what really happened," I said.

"You're heartless!" the soldiers complained.

Really?

"You're the ones plotting to kill me!" I shot back.

The merchant wagons ahead stopped in their tracks and the hunters were running toward us, so I went back to speaking like normal.

The hunters ran over to us and called out, “Wait a second, are you the wandering stray priestess, Saint Edith?”

Oh, I'm getting famous!

“I have never referred to myself as a saint, but I am indeed the stray priestess Edith,” I replied.

I couldn't proclaim myself a saint or the Temple might complain. Besides, that title was earned, not one you gave yourself.

“What are you planning to do with Her Holiness?!” the hunters shouted at the soldiers.

“Her Holiness saved a member of our friend's party. You'd better not be trying anything funny with her!” another chimed in.

“Yeah!”

Even the escorts for the merchant caravan had joined in.

“The stray priestess has been hosting soup kitchens and donating food at orphanages all over the place. As former orphans ourselves, we won't stand by and let you mess with her!”

Ah, that's right, hunting was one of the top three employment opportunities for kids who grew up in orphanages and on the streets...

“Would you mind explaining what's happening, Your Holiness?” one of them asked.

Well, I might as well tell them the truth.

“I was hosting a soup kitchen at an orphanage up ahead, then these men appeared and took me away, just like that. When I asked who sent them, they refused to tell me. And just now, they were planning to kill me and pretend none of this happened, because they didn't want me to tell their employer they had mistreated and upset me,” I said.

“What?!” The hunters' expressions grew dark.

I had been a bit theatrical when I yelled earlier, and no one would've expected anyone to be plotting murder out in public, right in front of the potential victim. The hunters

must have figured we were having an argument, but it couldn't be that serious. But if a group of unidentified men had abducted a young girl and were planning to kill her to cover up their own mistake, that would be no laughing matter. Abducting a girl was bad enough already, but if the target was the saint who had been gaining recognition as of late, the culprits could be planning to use her as a path to fame, or worse, they could use her like a toy, a tool, their own personal comfort girl, or as a slave.

Some of the hunters had put their hands on the hilts of their swords. A spearman removed the cover from his spear, and an archer gripped his bow, pulling an arrow out of his quiver...

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait!!!" the soldiers shouted, flustered.

With the five hunters who had come up from behind us and the six escorts for the merchant caravan, there were a total of eleven men arrayed against them. There were only four soldiers, meaning they were outnumbered nearly three to one. Hunters didn't just train like soldiers; they fought in actual combat against the likes of monsters and bandits every day. Not only that, but the soldiers' group was composed only of swordsmen, while the hunters had twice as many swordsmen, spearmen, and archers. They were hopelessly outclassed in terms of numbers and variety. They didn't stand a chance.

One of the five hunters said to me, "Your Holiness, would you like to hire us as your bodyguards? We'll give you a discounted fee of one silver coin to escort you to the city. If you sign us up here and now and report it to the guild later, they'll charge a fee, but if something goes wrong, the guild will take care of it. Even if we happened to be up against some low-ranking noble or some big business' idiot son..."

"Huh...?"

"Bossman, lend me some paper for the contract and something to write with. I'll pay you back later," the hunter in the five-man group said. It seemed their merchant employer was also the coachman, perhaps to save on overhead costs. But since it was the hunter from the five-man group instead one of the merchant's escorts who had said this, perhaps they knew each other already. It wouldn't be unusual for a hunter and merchant to know each other from previous escort missions or from when they sold materials.

"I'll be happy to help, and there's no need for payment," the merchant said. "I would

bring shame to my company if I accepted money for helping you do the right thing!"

I guess I'm hiring them then...

Afterward, we had the merchant review the contract that had been written up on the spot. Once he confirmed there was nothing wrong with it, we made it official, and the five-man group of hunters had officially become my bodyguards. The price was one silver coin, which was equivalent to about 1,000 Japanese yen. To be honest, they had pretty much agreed to work for free. The price was just there to make it official, since it wouldn't have been a formal contract if they weren't getting paid. They were obviously doing this as a courtesy.

I was very grateful, but I still had one... well, four big problems: the soldiers who had tried to take me away. They were still behaving because they were completely outnumbered, but once the merchant wagons leave in the opposite direction, it would be five against four. Plus, I was a slow runner, so the soldiers could move ahead and wait to ambush us. We would have to constantly stay on our guard and keep an eye out for danger, which would wear us out mentally. Meanwhile, their side could rest up and attack us at the most opportune moment, like after we fall asleep at night. Still, we couldn't capture or kill the soldiers when they hadn't really done anything to me yet.

Hmm, what to do...

"Let's change directions once we get over there," the merchant said.

Huh?

"One moment as I turn the carriage around, please..."

Whaaat?!

"Y-You mean..."

"Yes, we're accompanying you back to town, of course. We need to make sure these men don't bother you again."

I was at a loss for words. For merchants, time was the most important thing, next to

their lives and money, but this man was spending it to look after some girl he didn't know. I had to make sure I repaid him on the business side later.

Hm? The four soldiers aren't looking so hot...

They had already been panicking when they were surrounded by the hunters and caravan earlier, but they weren't nearly as pale then as they were now. They had clearly been acting strangely ever since the merchant made his comment, which meant...

"Hey! You assholes were thinking of attacking me later, weren't you?!" I shouted.

The silence was deafening. The soldiers were clearly shaken by my words, and the hunters and merchants stared at them coldly.

Yeah, I'm sure your employer wouldn't be happy if you go home empty-handed after finding your target.

If I went to the guild after this to handle some post-processing paperwork, do some shopping, and stay at an inn, it would be easy to find out that I had been in the area. So, if these soldiers were assigned to this place, one could easily infer that they had captured me. I would be explaining what had happened at the guild, and word would spread from the orphanage about my appearance there. It wasn't like I was keeping my charity work there a secret anyway. Publicizing such good deeds, giving them praise, and promoting them was the right thing for them to do, since it encouraged others to follow suit. In fact, Edith's name was becoming quite well-known thanks to orphanages talking about me.

It wasn't like these soldiers could slaughter the children and staff at the orphanage to make sure they didn't talk. That wouldn't just bring this territory's guards down on them, but it would be such a big deal that an investigative team would be sent from the royal capital to look into it. If that happened, the soldiers' heads rolling wouldn't be enough; their employer would be eradicated along with their entire bloodline.

In other words, these soldiers had no choice but to take me with them, even if they had to tie me up and drag me. They might get scolded for angering me, but that was the least terrible option they had available to them. That way, the employer could blame the soldiers for angering me and claim they had ordered the men to treat me with respect, in an attempt to salvage our relationship. The other option was to claim

I had suddenly tried to flee and fell off of a cliff on the trip back. As long as no one was around to prove otherwise, it wouldn't clash with any other eyewitness accounts. There would be no explanation for why I suddenly tried to run, but they could claim they didn't know, or that I feared getting exposed as being a fake saint. That would still earn them a scolding, but at least their heads would still be on their shoulders.

Anyway, it would've been ideal for them to bring me back with them. Which was why they were probably planning on finding a chance to kidnap me once the merchants split up from us, leaving just me and the five hunters. The hunters were all male, so there could've been moments when I would be alone, like if I needed to answer nature's call. If worse came to worst, they also had the option of killing all of us and saying bandits did it, assuming these soldiers were that evil. But alas, that option had been squashed too, thanks to this merchant deciding to turn back for a complete stranger despite the tremendous cost he would incur. His actions made him a failure as a merchant, but a spectacular human being, and I had to repay him for it later.

And so, we headed toward the next town, which was the town the caravan had come from, leaving the four soldiers standing there, dumbfounded. As for the five hunters, I wasn't sure if they had been on the way out or back. The escorts and hunters were on foot, so I was prepared to walk too, but they instructed me to get on the carriage. I tried to turn them down, but one of the bodyguards said, "You've been going around the towns and villages on foot, so we know you can walk. But if we match your walking speed, it'll take us twice as long to get there. You'll be doing us a disservice by being courteous."

"I understand... I'm sorry," I said. He was right; I couldn't trouble them any more than I already was.

I sat in the coach box as I was told, next to the merchant who was the leader of the caravan. Apparently, the other two wagons had been hired to help. We proceeded forward, and the merchant had told me we would be camping for the night on the side of the road once it got dark, and we'd arrive at our destination around noon tomorrow. There were several villages along the way, but we would be ignoring them and camping out because there was no advantage to staying in any of them. He had also warned me not to expect much in terms of food.

The orphanage I had hosted a soup kitchen at was on the outskirts of town, but it

wasn't so far from the city center. Since it hadn't been too long since I left there, there was still a good way to go until the next city. If the journey wasn't a particularly long one, caravans didn't carry more food than necessary, because that became extra baggage and lost freshness over time. It was much better to simply purchase fresh food in the next city instead. Of course, they carried emergency rations in case an axle or wheel broke, or there were unexpected delays due to muddy roads caused by bad weather, but those rations were designed only to last long and be portable and tasted terrible. We would likely be having them for dinner, and it was all my fault.

...Okay then!

"We'll be camping here tonight," the merchant announced.

As it became dark out, we had parked the carriage in a space on the side of the road, which was designed for night camping, resting, and repairing carriages. It seemed we would be eating here and sleeping on the grass afterward. There was no room in the wagons for humans to sleep in, because if there had been, it would have been occupied with more wares. Of course, they couldn't simply overload the wagon with heavy objects, because then the horses wouldn't be able to move the carriages, the axles could break, and the products on the bottom could get crushed. It seemed a merchant's skill lay in how efficiently they chose the right cargo, with their weight, volume, sturdiness, and profit margin in mind.

Just as the group was about to prepare the rations... well, they were rations, so they only needed to boil some water...

"I'm going to look for some food!" I announced.

"H-Hey! Wait here, I'll go with her," one of the hunters said.

"No, stupid! That girl's trying to be alone. Read between the lines, will ya?" another replied.

"Oh..."

You're reading too far into it!

The hunters seemed to assume I wouldn't be going far and that it wasn't too dangerous

around here, so they waved their hands in response. Since I was a stray priestess, they must have figured I spent a lot of time traveling by myself. If that was true, it stood to reason that I would be aware of the dangers of going off the main streets and how to handle myself... The fact that I remained unharmed until now was proof enough.

Any sort of food like edible wildflowers so close to the rest area would have already been scavenged by travelers looking to add a little color to their meals, so the others must have assumed I was making up an excuse to get some privacy. I mean, they weren't wrong, but that wasn't all...

And so, I found a spot a good distance away from the others to answer nature's call, then killed some time before...

"Oh, that was quick. I'll bet others have picked this place clean already, r... ight...?"

The hunters were frozen with their mouths hanging open when they saw the wild plants and two horn rabbits I was holding in my hands.

"She actually found some food! And she even brought back some horn rabbits..."

The merchant and hired coachmen were also staring wide-eyed.

Of course, I had pulled the wild plants and horn rabbits out of my Item Box. They were super fresh too!

"May I borrow the pot?" I asked, and the merchant repeatedly nodded without a word.

I would've had a hard time explaining myself if I had pulled a pot out of my Item Box.

Guess I'll treat them to a meal as thanks.



"This is delicious!!!" everyone shouted.

With my cooking skills and potions, of course it's delicious!

I used a potion that tasted like soy sauce and a potion that tasted like dashi stock, spices, and more. There was no way the wild plant and horn rabbit hot pot wouldn't taste good with such seasonings. There wasn't really a culture of making stock for cooking around these parts; the priority was filling and nutritious food, with flavor being an afterthought. Making stock required hours of simmering and firewood wasn't free. It was far less wasteful to use wood for heating in winter.

The potions I had used to season the meal also included benefits like gently healing internal diseases, adult infirmities, old wounds, joint problems, cavities, periodontal disease, calcium stones, and more. It didn't have noticeable effects like immediately curing major injuries or diseases, but it would quietly treat issues that they may not even be aware of themselves. These effects were subtle enough that they could be dismissed as a whim of the Goddess rather than an outright miracle. I had, and still was, causing so much trouble for them that I had to pay them back in whatever small way I could. Besides, it would benefit me if rumors went around saying that treating the saint (me) kindly brought good fortune. I had prayed for the Goddess to bless everyone before our meal; hopefully, they would assume their improved health was thanks to the prayer.

I was the only woman... or rather, girl in the group, and maybe they wanted to thank me, because the men unpacked some things from the carriage and made me a makeshift bed in the wagon with capes and other items.

Such gentlemen!

Oh, and the hunters had told me during dinner that their base was the city we were heading toward, and that they were on the way home after finishing a job. Apparently, the caravan was made up of merchants who had shops in the same city, and the six bodyguards escorting them were from the local Hunter's Guild.

That explains why they knew the five-man hunter group.

Maybe part of the reason the caravan had turned back with us wasn't just to make sure I got back safely, but to protect the five hunters too. Not that that made me any less grateful if it was true. This caravan wasn't heading somewhere far away, as they were

peddlers who went around nearby cities and villages to buy and sell goods. Their rough schedule was to show up sometime around the middle of the month, and there was no problem if they were a few days late. There had been times in the past when they had been delayed several days because of serious damage to their carriage, or worse, they'd had to give up on their trip completely and head back. That was about what I would expect from caravans in this world.

Anyway, the day was coming to an end. It seemed I would be able to get some sleep, even on the hard boards, thanks to the cloth goods the others had given me. I mean, I could use a potion to put myself to sleep, but I didn't want to rely on things like that.

In the morning, we had some rations, drank some water, then departed right away. It would've been far too suspicious to have had a fine meal and soup prepared when everyone woke up, so I had decided to refrain. I wouldn't have been able to explain where I got the ingredients, after all.

We didn't want to waste time, so we didn't even bother boiling water. We would arrive at our destination a little past noon, so we could just fill our stomachs then. The five-man hunter group was on their way back, so their pockets should already be filled with coins. As for the merchant and escorts... I'm sorry to say, they didn't make any money, thanks to the wasted trip. Actually, it would just be the merchant who got the short end of the stick, since the escorts and coachmen were paid on a per diem, pro rata basis.

I really need to make up for this with that merchant... He's clearly a good guy.

One of the reasons I hadn't prepared breakfast was because I would've made noise and likely woken everyone up in the process. They had to be exhausted, so I wanted to let them rest as long as possible. If they could sleep through my rustling without waking up, they wouldn't survive long as bodyguards and hunters. They took turns standing watch, and just napped with their leather armor still on and weapons in their arms, so they would have likely shot awake if there had been any suspicious noise. That was probably why they had slept spaced away from each other on the grass...

And so, we had safely arrived in the city a bit past noon without getting attacked by

monsters, bandits, or four strange, masked men pretending to be bandits. There had been some strange people along the way who were rolling their shoulders and bending and stretching their knees as if they were checking something, but they only glanced at me without saying a word.

Good, they know the deal...

The city was a decent size. It wasn't fortified with walls surrounding its borders, but an ordinary, open regional city.

I and the group of five hunters went straight to the Hunter's Guild to process the contract for the escort request... or at least that was the plan, but we ended up going to the merchant's shop to drop off his carriage first, then he and the six escorts for the caravan wanted to follow us to the guild headquarters. According to them, it was better to have more witnesses, and the more testimony there was from people other than the five who I had signed a contract with, the more credible my account of those soldiers would be. Come to think of it, it would be better to explain everything at once so that if the soldiers' employer, who was likely a nobleman or some rich person, tried to fight back, the guild's protection would also extend to the hunters who had been escorting the caravan.

As for the merchant, the Commerce Guild would be protecting him. The town where Kyoko had opened her shop was small, so they had an Industry Guild that was a combination of the Commerce Guild and Artisan Guild, but they were separate entities here.

We hadn't seen those four soldiers since we left them. They had likely been secretly following us or had otherwise gone back to report to their employer. If they said that they found me but couldn't do anything because I was with eleven hunters, merchants, and coachmen, they probably wouldn't get too much flak for it.

But that also means whoever sent those guys will probably be coming for me... Maybe I should stay in this city for a while so I don't cause trouble for everyone.

"Ah, so you'll be staying in this city for a while, then!"

The guildmaster had come flying over after I had finished the paperwork for the escort request and explained what happened. He had asked me about my upcoming plans, so

I told him I was tired from camping for so long and would be staying here to rest and continue my work, and he welcomed me with open arms. It seemed the stray priestess... or rather, "Saint Edith," was quite well-known here.

I don't know how I feel about this...

Then, the guildmaster told me where the orphanage was, along with the location of a small chapel, which was like a branch office of the Temple, or a sub-branch office, or a branch shrine, or whatever.

So you're telling me to work there, huh?! Well, I guess I don't mind...

I would have felt uneasy if I hadn't visited the orphanage here. It would have been expected of me, anyway. Plus, I wanted to do something that wasn't just a momentary act of charity like cooking and donating food, but something new that could create an avenue for the local aristocrats and rich people to provide ongoing support. Feeding hungry orphans once wouldn't give them true salvation. Truly saving them would be to protect them from starvation and cold until they could at least become independent and leave the orphanage.

There are hunters and merchants who are willing to protect "Edith" here... So I'm going to take a bit of a detour. I have plenty of time...

Besides, it was about time those soldiers, their employer, or someone else plotting something similar would appear. It would be more effective to strike back where I had allies rather than alone on some empty fields...

SIDE STORY 1

THE CHILDREN'S DAY OFF

"So... the cursed day has once again arrived this week."

The children listened with serious expressions and nodded at Mine's words, who was the coordinator of the group.

"Until now, at least one of the ladies—Kaoru, Reiko, or Kyoko—has always been home, but either they've been busy with their work in the royal capital and other cities or they have finally come to trust us more, as they've allowed us to handle the maintenance, business, and defense of this place ourselves. And for the first time, we face this dreadful day without one of them here with us... The question now is, what in the world do we do?"

Everyone was at a loss for what to do on their detestable rest day. Even during their orphanage days or when they had been tricked into thinking they were foster children but were really just used for unpaid labor, there was no such thing as a rest day. Every day, they had woken up and gotten to work as soon as it was bright out, had two meager meals, then gathered in the common area to sleep alongside their fellows.

Their purpose in life was to be useful. Everything was about survival and how they could contribute to the good of their group, and that had been especially true when they were in the orphanage. Perhaps they had been rewarded for their work, but they were finally able to serve the Goddesses, and they all had the same thought in mind: "I want to work. I want to work more and be more useful to the Goddesses. More. More. More. More!!!"

All they had wanted to do was serve Kaoru and her friends and be as useful as possible, and yet they had been assigned a day on which working was prohibited. That was akin to torture and nothing short of abuse. When Kaoru had declared there would be *two* days of the week like that, they had clung to her, half-crazed. They had cried and pleaded desperately, threatening to die if they were prohibited from working for two whole days of the week, and she had reluctantly agreed to reduce rest days to once a week. Even now, Mine felt a cold sweat running down her spine whenever she recalled that moment.

"So, about how we're going to spend our rest day... Lady Kaoru told us to play or lie around without doing anything, but to 'lie around' and 'not do anything' are contradictory orders, so we will assume she made a mistake, rendering them nullified. And to 'play' would be to do something we enjoy and find fulfilling, so..."

"We should work!!!" the children shouted in unison.

However, Mine replied, "No, Lady Kaoru specifically told us we can't work. That's why..."

"Yes?" the group asked.

"We'll have fun fishing," Mine said confidently. "We'll play a game where we process the fish we catch into dried goods. We're going to play shop, so we'll go to town and sell the goods we make. We'll also play a game where we make toys and handicrafts..."

The children cheered in excitement. This was exactly why they counted on Mine's brilliant mind. Everyone voiced their satisfaction with their decision to make Mine their leader, even though she wasn't the oldest of the group.

"All right, Ellie and Lucy, you two deliver the processed goods to our clients... as part of 'playing shop.' After that, you'll play the 'shopping game' by going to the market to buy seafood to be processed. Meanwhile, we'll pretend to be working as manufacturers by conducting sales activities to develop new customers. Fria and Aral, you two play 'base defense' by keeping an eye on this place. Sound good?" Mine said.

"Roger that!" the children said, imitating Reiko's trademark salute.

Although Mine had called it 'base defense,' she was actually having Aral stay home because he was too young, and was assigning Fria to look after him, but she had made it sound like an important mission so Aral wouldn't complain. Though, perhaps it could be considered an important mission, in a sense. There might be someone out there trying to learn about their manufacturing process, or someone might assume Kaoru was hiding a fortune somewhere in her home, so the kids couldn't leave it completely empty. If even one of them was home, they would protect it with their life. There might be many people out there who were willing to steal without much of a second thought, but the same couldn't be said for killing children. Aral and Fria truly were members of Little Silver after all.

Ellie and Lucy were ten and seven years old respectively, but they could handle purchases at the market without issues. The kids often went to stock goods by themselves, and when those goods were processed and delivered to businesses, they would tell the cooks at the taverns and cafeterias where they had come from, and those businesses would in turn let their customers know those items had come from Little Silver. If anyone sold poor-quality ingredients to the kids, they would be named and shamed within the industry immediately. No merchant was dumb enough to prioritize a tiny profit over ruining their reputation as the shop that sold damaged or defective goods, took advantage of hard-working former orphans, or antagonized the business that the local lord was close with. In other words, no one in this city would try to scam a member of Little Silver.

“All right... Servants of the Goddesses, move out!”

“Yeah!”

It seemed the children had made their own team name that would be used only when Kaoru, Kyoko, and Reiko weren’t around...

“I’m back!” Kaoru announced.

“It’s good to have you back, Lady Kaoru!” the kids replied.

“H-Hey... You know, you guys don’t have to be so formal. A ‘Welcome back, boss!’ would do...”

Kaoru recalled how everyone from the Eyes of the Goddess was much more casual when they spoke to her. They used to say things such as, “Kaoru, get out of the way! I’m trying to clean here!” or, “You need to get some sun once in a while or you’re gonna grow mold on your body!” but the kids of Little Silver were always uptight in that sense, and Kaoru couldn’t help but feel they were distant because of it.

They’re also orphans, and I had them live in a house I bought and take care of the chores just like before, so why are things so different? Oh! Maybe it’s because I’m actually working now? Maybe if I became a total slob like before, they’d look down on me and treat me more like an equal...

It seemed Kaoru’s thought process was moving in the wrong direction.

"So, did you guys play and rest on your day off while we were gone?" she asked.

"Yes!" the kids answered cheerfully.



SIDE STORY 2

KKR

At a certain university in Japan...

Some were taking a breather after making it through the fiercely competitive entrance exams, while the science students were busy with research and experiments without any time for part-time work. The science disciplines had many hardships that humanities students didn't understand, such as showing up at the lab every day to culture microorganisms on agar plates. Students in pharmacy, nursing, and medicine were busy, but chemistry and life science students were also perpetually swamped with work. The most difficult part was the sheer amount of practical training, experiments, and reports they had to do. This is not to say that mechanical engineering students weren't busy, but if a machine was properly built and operated correctly, it would work as desired, whereas experiments on living organisms often didn't work as expected even if set up correctly. As a result, there were often cases where experiments would take longer or fail completely, and students had trouble finishing their reports.

There were three particular science students among them...

“What about Kyoko?”

“She's stuck over there.”

Kaoru looked over where Reiko was pointing, where a male student and two female students were arguing over something. One of those students was Kyoko.

“The usual?”

“Probably.”

“Is it KKR time?”

“Looks like it...”

The name “KKR” was composed of Kaoru’s, Kyoko’s, and Reiko’s first initials. Of course, they weren’t the ones who had come up with the name, as it would have been quite embarrassing for university students to give themselves a group name. People had started calling them that before they knew it, and the name had stuck ever since. The other students knew them as “Kyoko the Saint,” “Reiko the Wise,” and “Kaoru the Ruthless.” The last one was earned because many of those who had picked fights with KKR had been ruthlessly punished.

However, the trio saw themselves differently.

Kyoko: Reiko is the resourceful one, Kaoru is the softie, Kyoko is the sensible one.

Reiko: Kyoko is the troublemaker, Kaoru is the softie, Reiko is the sensible one.

Kaoru: Reiko is the schemer, Kyoko is the one that brings disaster, and Kaoru is the sensible one.

They each thought of themselves as the sensible one, and they had thought so since they first met in middle school...

Reiko and Kaoru’s perception of Kyoko seemed harsh, but they didn’t think of her as evil. In fact, it was the opposite. She was always smiling cheerfully, had a bubbly personality, was kind to everyone, and had a strong sense of justice. Not to mention, she was attractive and her grades were decent. Just hearing these traits, she sounded like a wonderful woman, and any man or woman who met her would think of her as a goddess or saint... but they didn’t know what she was truly like.

Kyoko had a strong sense of justice. An extreme, overwhelming sense of justice. When there was someone in need, she would dive in without taking into account the surrounding circumstances, power relationships, or any other piece of context, and would often drag Reiko and Kaoru into trouble with her.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Left with no choice, Kaoru approached the three arguing students.

“Ah!”

Kaoru was somewhat annoyed that the male student had jumped back in surprise when she had called out to him with a gentle smile.

It's... fine. I'm not upset or anything. Just slightly annoyed. I'm used to it...

She then turned to Kyoko and said, "What's the overview of the emergency?"

"This man got enraged and tried to grab this woman when she tried to break up with him, so I stepped in to intervene, then he made a ridiculous offer to break up with her if I'd go out with him instead... Heh heh," Kyoko said with a smile.

"Aaahhh!" Kaoru and Reiko let out a scream of terror.

"Kyoko just giggled..."

"Another villain's going to be sent to hell..."

Indeed, when Kyoko's righteous anger reached a boiling point, she smiled and let out a cute giggle for some reason... and when she did, evil perished.

"Sure, I'll take you out..." Kyoko said.

"Really?!"

The man seemed thrilled by the thought of the kind-looking beauty agreeing to his proposal.

Kyoko then removed her jacket, bent and stretched her fingers, and lowered her stance...

She was preparing to take him *out*.

"*That's what you meant?!*" Both the male and female students were taken aback.

Yeah, this is what Kyoko is like... Kaoru thought to herself.

"Kyoko, you've been learning kenpo since you were a kid, right? And you're really good at it?"

Kyoko was in fact quite strong, despite her attractive appearance.

"Yeah, but I didn't get a dan. If I had an official ranking, it could get me in trouble if something happened."

If what happened?!

Kaoru couldn't help but go over the absurdity in her mind.

"You did kendo too, didn't you?" she asked.

"I went to a kenjutsu dojo, to be exact," Kyoko replied. "Mainly because it gives me a huge advantage if I can get my hands on a nearby stick or metal pipe. I did complete some training courses for it, but no dan rank for them either."

"Because having an official ranking could get you in trouble if something happened?"

"Yup!"

I think you'd be in trouble for using a metal pipe regardless of whether you had a ranking or not... Kaoru thought to herself.

"So, do you agree then?" Reiko suddenly asked.

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait!" the man shouted.

"Ready... Fight!"

"I said wait, damn it!" The man was in a full-blown panic now.

Thud!

"Urgh..."

The man groaned and crumpled to the ground.

"Guess we can't just leave him here... Does anyone know one of his friends or someone from the same classes as him? Or one of his professors, even. But maybe it'd be better for him if we didn't call one of his professors," Kaoru said. She was surprisingly kind, even to men like this.

"He said he would break up with you if he could go out with me, right? Well, I took him out, so you're free now. Just call me if he keeps bothering you and I'll take him out again. Here's my phone number," Kyoko said. She was relatively harsh about these things.

"I recorded a video on my phone showing you explaining the situation and the guy not denying it, and the part where he happily agreed to you taking him out. If he ever becomes a stalker, I can send a copy to the police. Oh, and let me know if you ever plan on posting it online so I can censor your, Kaoru's, and Kyoko's faces," Reiko said. She was *very* harsh about these things.

Yet for some reason, the story always changed so that Kyoko was the kind one and Kaoru was the harsh one whenever rumors spread. Whenever Kaoru found out about that afterward, she would scream, "Is it my eyes? Is it because of my eyes?!" and Reiko would shrug it off.

"Another case solved! Feels good to do a good deed, huh?" Kyoko said proudly.

Reiko and Kaoru sighed without a word.

It was the same story every time. Reiko and Kaoru didn't want to be the university's peacekeepers or defenders of justice, but they always got dragged into trouble because of Kyoko. And whenever the three of them got together, most issues ended up getting resolved, for better or for worse. Whenever they resolved incidents like this by chance, other female students would hear the rumors and come to them for help. The three of them weren't capable of brushing off a hand seeking help, and thus the rumors would spread even further.

(K)aoru, (K)yoko, (R)eiko... They had inevitably become the guardians of the female students.

AFTERWORD

This is volume 9 of *Potions!* And in February 2023, the *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* anime has been announced. I've written three titles since becoming a light novel writer, and all of them are still ongoing. All three works have been published in book form, adapted into manga, and turned into anime... I never imagined I would be blessed with such an opportunity as a novelist.

Kaoru had been left behind by herself, but I'm happy that she's finally able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Mile and Mitsuha. As the main characters of the three titles feature girls who look like they're twelve or thirteen, I wanted them to be on an equal playing field, so I was sad to see Kaoru left behind, but I didn't think it was possible for all three of my works to be animated. Although I felt bad for the illustrator and manga artists for *Potions*, I had completely given up on it happening. This may sound like a first-world problem to other writers, but I couldn't help but feel bad that out of the illustrators and team handling the manga versions for my light novels, only the *Potions* team didn't get an anime version...

But here we are, with our third animated title! Three hits, three home runs...

No freakin' way!

When I first heard about it from the person handling the project, they told me, "This isn't confirmed yet..." and I thought, "Oh, it's probably going to fall through."

And would you believe it? It's actually happening!

This is all thanks to all of you readers. Thank you so much!

To my editor, the illustrator Sukima, the binding designer, the proofreading supervisor, the publisher, distributor, bookstore workers, 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









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