

Story by
FUNA

Illustrated by
Itsuki Akata

17



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



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

VOLUME 17







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

VOLUME 17

BY
FUNA

ILLUSTRATED BY

Itsuki Akata



Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHI, NORYOKU WA HEIKINCHI DETTE ITTAYONE! vol.17
©2022 FUNA, Itsuki Akata/SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.
First published in Japan in 2022 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.
English translation rights arranged with SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. and
SEVEN SEAS ENTERTAINMENT, LLC. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

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

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

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

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

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

ISBN: 978-1-68579-659-4
Printed in Canada
First Printing: January 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



CONTENTS

CHAPTER 118: THE WARNING, PART 2

CHAPTER 119: A PORTRAIT OF WAR

CHAPTER 120: AFTER THE BATTLE

CHAPTER 121: HALF A YEAR LATER...

CHAPTER 122: A NEW LAND

CHAPTER 123: THE PORT CITY

CHAPTER 124: THE INSPECTION

CHAPTER 125: THE CHASE

SIDE STORY: THE ADVICE SERVICE

BONUS STORY: MARCELA QUESTIONS MARIETTE

AFTERWORD

Japan



-Kurihara Misato-

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

C-Rank Party "The Crimson Vow"



Mile

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



Mavis

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



Pauline

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



Kingdom of Tils



Reina

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



Marcela

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



Elder Dragons

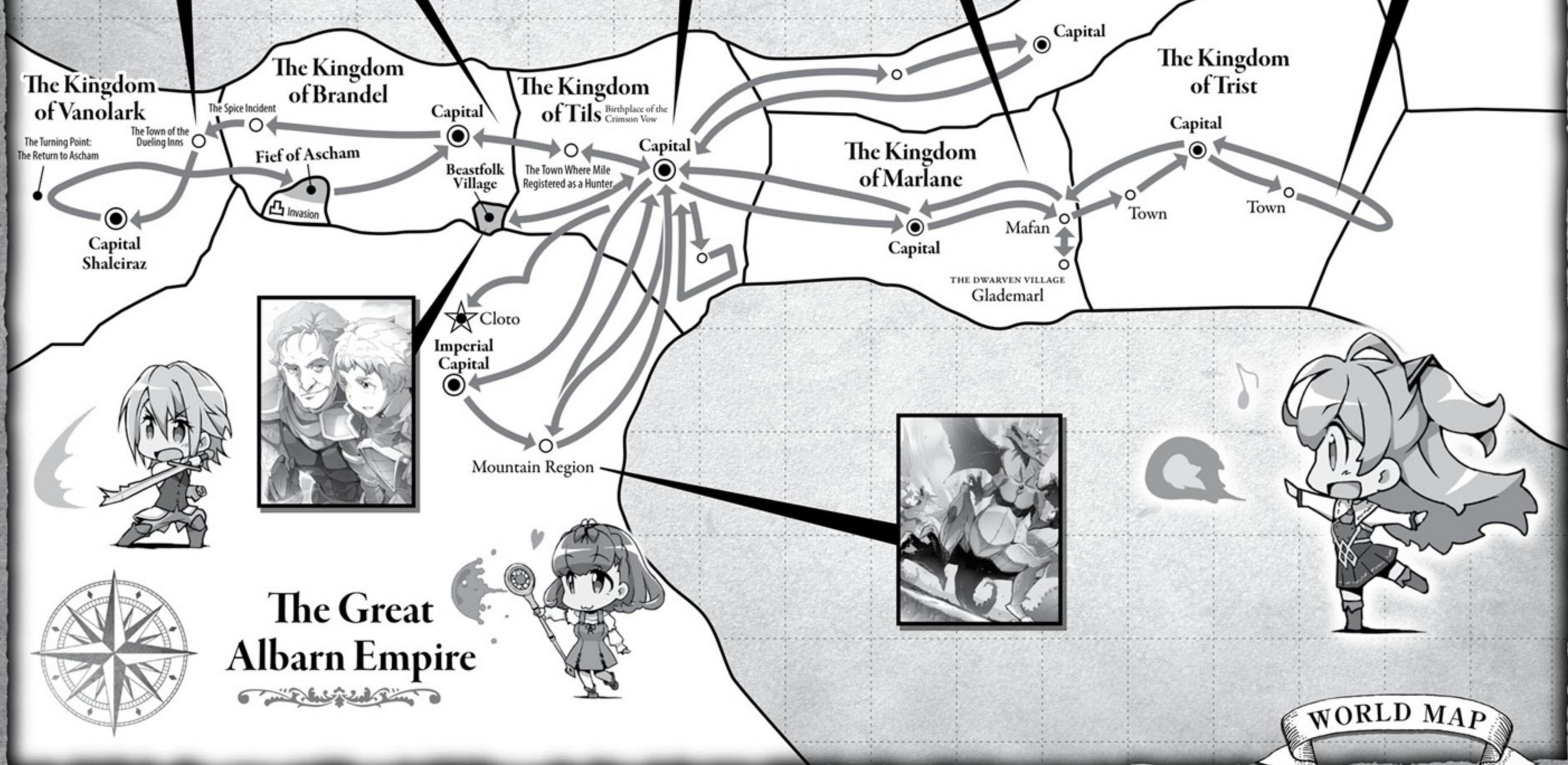
The strongest, most intelligent beings in the world. Can speak human languages.



Telyusia

A young swordswoman. Leader of the six-person all-female party the Servants of the Goddess.





PREVIOUSLY

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

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

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

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

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

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

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

The four traveled from the beastfolk village to the home of the demons, helping people wherever they roamed. They saved some children, and then, following a mysterious mechanical bird, discovered the Slow Walker, a machine that had been operating since the time of their forebearers. This machine revealed to them a great truth: Every living thing on the planet was in danger!

With that, the Crimson Vow's greatest battle ever begins!

CHAPTER 118

THE WARNING, PART 2

“L-L-L-LADY MARCELA! Aureana! Outside! You gotta look!!!”

“Goodness me, Miss Monika, whatever has gotten into you? A lady should never comport herself in such an unseemly fashion,” Marcela chided, exasperated, as Monika came pelting full force, breathless, into the room of the inn where the three of them were currently staying.

“L-L-L-*Listen!* It’s *fine!* That’s not the *point!* Outside! You gotta come outside! Pronto!!!”

It was clear to the other two from her behavior that this was no ordinary happening. They followed her outside at once.

“Wh-wh-wh-what the heck is *thaat*?!?” Marcela screamed, while Aureana stood frozen, slack-jawed and speechless. The other people around were largely in the same state. Then, the bizarre form floating in the sky up above them let out a deafening sound.

“Rawr!”

* * *

“There’s something weird up in the sky!”

A C-Rank hunter ran into a guildhall with a yell.

Those who had the free time to be kicking back and relaxing at the guildhall were largely mid- or high-ranking hunters, who could tell instantly from the state of this newcomer that whatever was going on should not be ignored. Swiftly, they grabbed their weapons and rushed outside. Naturally, the guild staff followed suit. They all looked up at the sky, wondering if there was a wyvern incoming, or a gryphon, or hippogriff. Instead, they saw...

“Rawr!”

"I heard some hunters saying that Miss Mile and the rest of the Crimson Vow have gone MIA and are probably dead... but I know that they would never be defeated so easily! Still... what in the world is she doing up in the sky?! Oh, wait... If she's floating in the sky, I suppose that means she really is dead? Huh? Wait *what*?!"

As people across the continent gazed up into the skies, the digits on the timer above the mysterious lion girl's head hit zero. And then...

Slam!

The panel on which the lion was painted fell forward, bringing a girl into full view. She had smooth, glittering silver hair. She was not remarkably beautiful, but she had a gentle face, the sort that would put anyone who looked upon it at ease. Her -modest bosom appeared to be around a B-cup, but that was simply -because the tanner who had crafted her armor had molded it on the larger side, overestimating her future growth—beneath it was still room to spare. Her lips, though unpainted, were glossy. And the first words that passed from those glossy lips were:

"My name is Mile. Take me to your—"

Smack!

From outside of the frame of the image, a hand holding what appeared to be a rolled-up tube of paper smacked the girl across the head. Another hand then stretched into view before both wrists rotated and one pointer finger flicked out in the girl's direction. This was seemingly some sort of command.

The girl continued speaking, as though nothing had happened. "M-my name is Mile. I have been entrusted by God with the protection of this world..."

All those who watched this proceeding seemed to cry out as one:

"What the hell is going on?!?!"

Naturally, it caused a bit of a mass panic.

Unfortunately for those watching the broadcast, there was no way for their voices to reach the giant girl floating in the sky. As much as they might like to offer some response, they had no choice but to simply sit back and watch her.

"I am a completely average ordinary girl who was asked by God to protect this world."

"*No way! Nuh-uh! No friggin' waaay!!!*" the people cried. A singular thought united each of their hearts:

You ceased to be a "normal" girl the moment you received that instruction!!!

And this bewildering performance did not end there.

"People of the world. Humanoids, beastfolk, demons, fairies, elder dragons, all other sentient life-forms, spirits, animals, plants, and every other creation that exists within this world. God has an important message for you all."

Mile drew in a deep breath. Then, making a reference that only she would know, she uttered two final sentences. "*My name is Mile. This world is in danger.*"

The people were quiet. But, by and large, they understood.

Mile explained to the people about the civilization that had governed this world in the distant past, as well as the calamity that had befallen them when monsters invaded from another world. Though the ancients had somehow overcome this disaster, they chose to leave this world, leaving only a fraction of their number behind. Next, she told the people of the Seven Sages, the benefactors of this world, who took pity on those who remained. In the hope of equipping the survivors to survive future attacks, the sages came to a decision:

"We must make the people stronger!"

The people of the forest, who could live in harmony with nature even if civilization collapsed—the elves.

The people of the mountains, skilled at refining and -working metal, who could maintain the foundations of society—the dwarves.

The people with strong constitutions, equipped with all the abilities of animals—the beastfolk.

And those with the sturdiest bodies, gifted with skill in the art known as “magic”—the demons.

The sages then gave birth to many other races.

The fairies: miniature beings, only one-seventh the size of a normal person, who could subsist on the smallest amounts of food and persist even when said food became hard to come by. They were granted wings so that they might survive despite their minuscule forms.

And the humans: those gentle, too-frail creatures who were granted intellect and large bodies with which they might protect and lead. As in the “One-Seventh Plan,” they received divine assistance and blessings, to support their massive forms and keep them upright.

The sages then put various emergency measures in place around the world—the golems and the Scavengers. They were to be allies to every last one of this world’s inhabitants and would never attack them.

Finally, there came the crux of Mile’s message.

“Our combined forces currently face off against only a fraction of our enemy’s might. Their main force will emerge from a dimensional rift in the mountains of the Albarn Empire in thirteen days.”

People across the continent shrieked as Mile dropped this bombshell. Among those alarmed by her announcement were the very combined forces she had mentioned, who were about to engage a horde of monsters.

If they could win this fight, they had believed, the world might be saved. But just as they were about to put their lives on the line, they received the devastating news that the foes they faced were nothing more than a small fraction of the actual enemy forces! That most of said forces would be approaching from the opposite side, attacking those soldiers’ own homelands, which were currently undefended! It was no surprise that the men were shaken to their cores. That said...

“Brave soldiers stationed to the east of the capital of the kingdom of Aubram, please

hold strong against the monsters before you. Should you turn back now, attempting to travel with your heavy weapons and armor on your backs and your supply -wagons in tow, you will never make it back to the Albarn Empire in time. Furthermore, not only would your troops be battered from a dozen days' forced march, but also, with no one left to stop them, the hordes you face would overrun the cities and towns of Aubram and move on to assault your bedraggled forces from behind... Therefore, I ask that you remain where you are and face the monsters of Aubram, as planned, after which you might recuperate, and then make an about face. Do not rush. Please care for your own well-being."

Mile then flashed a brilliant smile.

"My people and I will stomp the tar out of the fiercest -monsters that appear in Albarn—all those of A-rank and higher; most of the B-ranks, and as many as we can of the C-ranks. Those of you who live in small villages not defended by walls, please take refuge in the nearest citadels. Those soldiers and hunters who remained at home to keep the peace and defend your towns, please do your best to keep the B, C, and lower rank monsters that get past us at bay, so that we might buy time for the combined forces to finish their assault in the east and return to aid us."

No matter how you sliced it, Mile's proclamation amounted to this: "We're going to fight to our last breath to take down the high-ranking monsters, thereby protecting people all across the world..."

A deep silence swept over the land as people in every corner of the continent froze in their tracks. Just how great a fighting force could this girl, this child, command? An army of a few? Of dozens? Typically, the largest group that a girl of her age could hope to amass on her own would be a single party's worth of fighters—and in the presence of such powerful monsters, very few would opt to face what was certain to be an instantaneous, meaningless death.

As people considered this reality, they silently began to ponder what they themselves might be able to do against the monsters soon to emerge from the Empire.

Just then...

"Now, please allow me to introduce my allies—the brave fighters of the monster-stomping patrol!"

The image changed from the silver-haired girl who had been speaking, now showing a handsome golden-haired girl of around eighteen or nineteen.

“Leader of the hunting party the Crimson Vow, daughter of Count Austien, and disciple of the Ladimarl School of swordplay—holy knight Mavis von Austien!” the silver-haired girl announced. Mavis gave a winning smile, her teeth flashing. Apparently, it was Mile who was going to be making all the introductions... which was probably for the best, as Mavis would have been embarrassed to call herself something as lofty as a “holy knight.” Her brilliant golden hair was cropped short as a male knight’s would be, and her clothing and armor were equally masculine. Were it not for the swell of her chest, one could not be blamed if they mistook her for a particularly beautiful male swordsman. She was the fairy-tale prince all women dreamed of, possessed of a strange and magnetic charm that plucked at the heartstrings of all sensitive young maidens who cared not for the boorish, violent, callous creatures known as “men.”

A shrill cry rose from women across the continent, from schoolgirls all the way to grandmothers...

“Member number two of the Crimson Vow, and the last surviving member of the hunting party known as the Crimson Lightning—grand sorcerer Crimson Reina!”

A girl with a long shock of vibrant red hair, dressed primarily in black, was next to appear. She had sharp features and a haughty look upon her face, but her petite physique gave her the endearing air of a spirited child who was doing her best to stand up alongside the adults. Supportive cheers bubbled up from all the men, and the women of more big-sisterly dis-positions.

It was unclear whether she heard their voices, but Reina’s face took on a serious expression. Just as she had always dreamed, the name the Crimson Lightning would be written in the annals of history. What she had assumed would not be possible until she became an A-rank hunter and could pen a memoir was becoming reality right now. They would forever be known as the party who gave birth to one of the four heroes who faced down a great army of monsters all on their own...

“Member number three of the Crimson Vow, daughter of the late owner of the Beckett Company—arch-saint Pauline!”

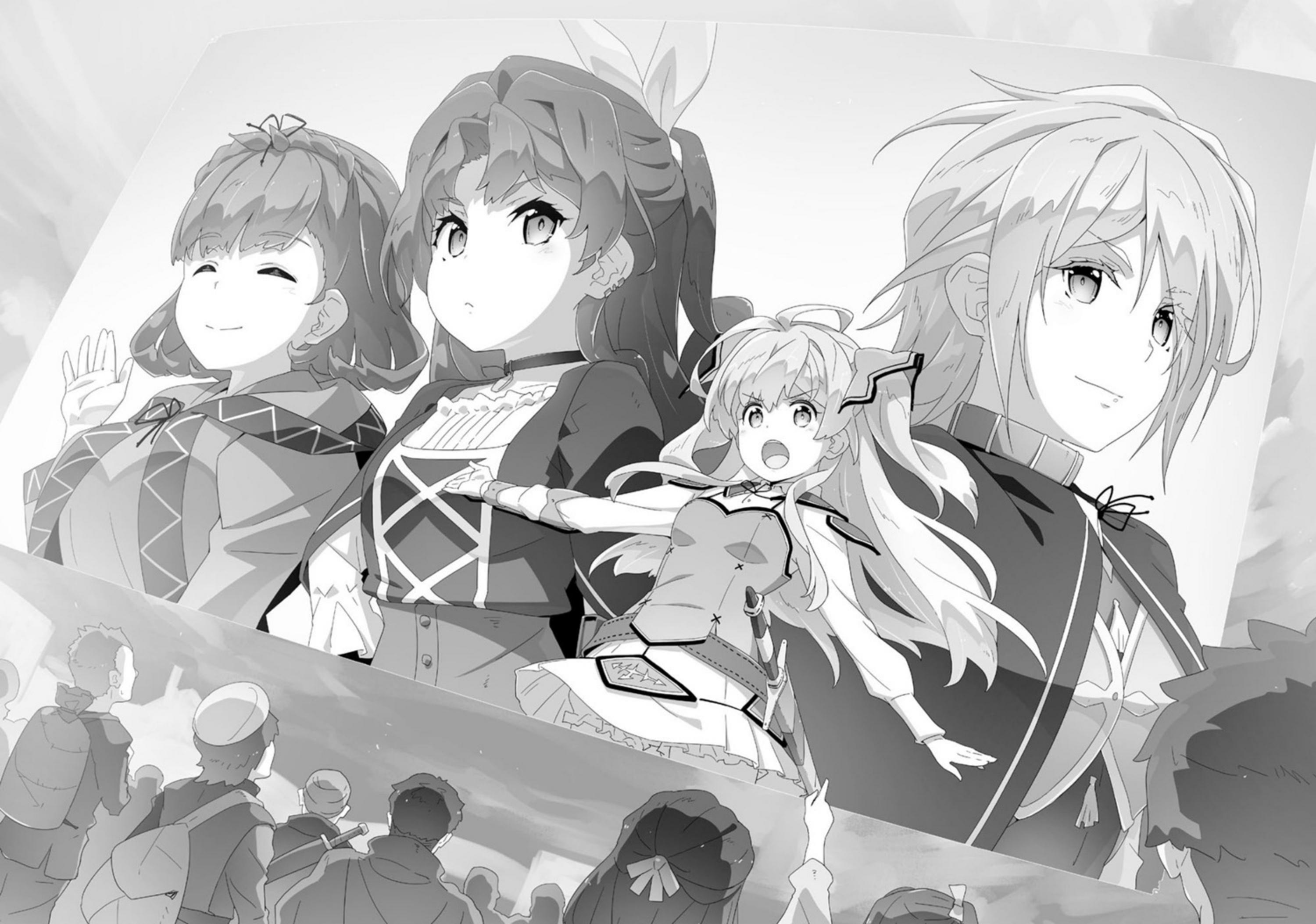
This girl wore thick pink protective gear shielded by a custom breastplate—which molded to a chest that would draw praise from most men and jealousy from certain

women. She wore not a blackhearted grin but a serene, businesslike smile. To all but those with keenly honed animal instincts or a child's sensitivity for ill intent, she gave the impression of a young lady filled with kindness and affection. Though an *impression* was all it was...

Pauline stood straight with her staff in hand. Now, her family's business would be known throughout the land. Even if she were to perish, her mother's and brother's futures would be secured, along with the shop her father had left to them.

The image then once again displayed Mile.

Finally, it was time for the main event.



“Once, I was the daughter of a viscount. Once, I was a scholarship student at Eckland Academy. Once, I was an employee of a bakery. There was a time I was Viscountess Adele von Ascham. And yet another time, I was renowned author Miami Satodele. And yet *another* time, I was a messenger from God. However, my *true* identity is...!!!”

On cue, Mile struck a pose.

“Average, commonplace, ordinary girl and member of the hunting party the Crimson Vow, C-rank hunter Mile!!!”

“*Nuh-uh. No way! No way! NO FRIGGIN’ WAY!!!*”

From the depths of the hearts of every citizen of the continent rose a unified cry of protest.

In truth, there was a reason Mile had chosen to introduce the others with such impressive titles. It had all begun a little bit earlier that same day.

“Mile, I have a request,” Mavis had said. “Would it be possible for you to remove all of my physical limitations?”

“Uh...”

“I’m sure I’m capable of much greater physical feats, aren’t I? I was able to withstand an earth dragon’s attack—I must have a great deal more strength available to me. I understand that you’re worried about pushing my body past human limits... but I need that strength right now. As a hunter. As someone striving to become a knight. And, most importantly... as I, Mavis von Austien!!!”

“Mavis...”

“And please let me use the Flame Body technique I came up with!”

“Sure...” Mile stared at her wide-eyed.

“And I have one more request...”

“Yes! Sure! Whatever you want!”

Mavis was her ally until the bitter end. Mile would gladly grant her whatever was in her power.

“Make me your knight!”

“Uh... huh?!”

Her final request came completely out of left field.

“Oh! Me too, Mile!” chimed Pauline. “Receiving an appointment from a servant of God would be far more prestigious than from any king or archbishop!”

“...In that case, maybe I should ask for some kind of appointment, too,” said Reina. “Something that will make the Crimson Lightning proud up in heaven...”

“Wh-wh-what?!” Mile was stunned.

Mavis grinned and said, “Pauline is right. Forget lords and kings—I want *you* to appoint me as your knight, Mile. I don’t care if the crown never recognizes it or if I don’t make it onto any formal registers. I don’t want to wait to serve some old dude who only sits on the throne because some ancestor he’s never even met was a king—I want to serve *you*, Mile. Please, Mile, let me stand beside you on the battlefield as your official knight! I will put my life on the line to protect someone who truly deserves my protection here and now—”

Though she did not say the words, one could easily imagine how Mavis might have ended that sentence: “for our final battle.”

Logically, there was no way the four of them could survive -going up against an army of monsters alone. Regardless of their strength, they were powerless against the sheer numbers they would face. A hundred absurdly powerful warriors might have a slim chance of victory against a thousand foes, but there was simply no way a mere *four* could win against tens or even hundreds of thousands, no matter how powerful they might each be. Their bodies and their magic had limits. Even the mildest scratch could kill if multiplied by the thousands.

If this was to be their final battle, Mile wished to see her companions happy, even if she could grant them nothing more than words. And so...

“Very well. If you all truly insist... Mavis von Austien. In the name of Mile, divine

servant, I hereby appoint you as holy knight. Crimson Reina. I appoint you grand sorcerer. Pauline. I appoint you arch-saint."

"*We most humbly accept,*" said all three. And with that, a holy knight, a grand sorcerer, and an arch-saint were born.

* * *

"The monsters will flow out of a dimensional rift that is going to open up in the wilderness outside the small town of Cloto in the Albarn Empire. Citizens of Cloto, please evacuate at once to a fortified settlement. We will be standing by in Cloto until the enemy appears, so I hope you don't mind us making use of your inn. We'll be sure to leave payment on the counter..."

Obviously, if they were going to be camped out in a town, an inn was far preferable to a tent. Though, of course, they would be making use of the courtyard of any inn to set up their own portable baths and toilet.

"With that, I pray for safety and strength for you all."

Shoop!

The image in the sky vanished.

"It's over..." sighed Mile.

"It's over..." hummed Reina.

"It's over..." murmured Mavis.

"It's over..." nodded Pauline.

The four were rightfully tuckered out after such a nerve-racking operation.

"Now that we've warned them, the combined forces facing the monsters in the east should be able to face the onslaught without retreating halfway through," said Mile. "We just need the people holed up in citadels to hold out as best they can until the armies return."

"They might be able to survive this with only minimal casualties," Mavis agreed. "But in order for that to happen..."

"We have to kick the majority of the stronger monsters' butts," concluded Reina. "That's the most essential thing."

"Well then, let's keep prepping. We have a prolonged battle with some extraordinarily powerful monsters to train for!" said Pauline.

"All right!"

* * *

"Fire Lance!"

Ka-boom!

"That was lovely, Reina! A little excessive, though. You'll tire yourself out more quickly if you use more power than you need. You need to regulate your output a bit better."

"Of course," said Reina, dutifully accepting Mile's instruction. This was not the time for sassy retorts, and she did genuinely value Mile's guidance.

Naturally, Mile herself was receiving real-time feedback from the nanomachines to aid her in tutoring her comrades. This made her feedback incredibly effective, since it was essentially coming directly from the entities responsible for making magic happen.

"Pauline, offensive spells aren't your forte, so let's concentrate on leveling up your healing. If any of us end up seriously injured and unable to fight, you can get us back in the fray, which will make anything we accomplish from there on to your credit as well."

"Understood!"

Pauline had been feeling down on herself for being much weaker than the other three in terms of combat skill, but Mile's encouragement was helping her realize how crucial a role she played. Plus, she currently had the power of "hot" (both in terms of heat and spiciness) magic. Her spells might not be ranged or precise, but they could do plenty of short-range damage—to monsters. Pauline's contributions had value. Realizing this, a newfound confidence bubbled up in her timid heart, and she finally felt she

could stand shoulder to shoulder with her comrades...

"Mavis, for this battle, forget about your Wind Edge—it isn't strong enough. If you're going to expend the time, energy, and focus to let off a Wind Edge, the EX True Godspeed Blade would be a far more effective use of those resources."

"Got it! Instead of relying on cheap tricks, I should fight using my strengths as a swordfighter—no, as a holy knight. If I can't rely on my own power and my beloved blade in what's to come, then what *can* I rely on?"

Mavis did not use magical attacks, so she had little trouble regulating her power, even with the increase in her authority level. That said, she had still been blessed with enhanced abilities: Not only were the effects of her Micros capsules far greater than before, but her physical prowess was immensely boosted by the nanomachines in the atmosphere that came in contact with her body. The effects were not as strikingly apparent as they were with Reina and Pauline, both mages, but this was still a big change for Mavis, a swordswoman. An already top-class fighter had now become fractionally faster in her movements. This was nothing to scoff at—and Mavis, of course, understood this.

"Everyone, let's make the most of these last few days!"

"All right!!!"

* * *

"Only one day left," sighed Mile.

"Only one day," hummed Reina.

"Guess tomorrow's it," chimed Mavis.

"Tomorrow..." nodded Pauline.

The four sat on their beds at the inn where they were staying. The situation had progressed swiftly since the continent-wide broadcast, and the joint forces in the east of Aubram had been fighting valiantly against the hordes of monsters for some days now. They had defeated the bulk of the enemy but taken heavy losses in the bargain. Somehow, they had managed to regroup and were heading for Albarn, leaving any easily slain low-ranking monsters to Aubram's own royal army and the local

mercenaries and hunters. However, their progress was slow, and there was no way they would reach their destination before the rest of the monsters appeared. At this point, it was unclear if they would even make it in time to offer relief to those biding their time in the citadels.

Meanwhile, the Crimson Vow had found themselves a room at an inn in the small, deserted village of Cloto, which sat atop a hill—an inn which, they found upon arrival, had a piece of paper affixed to the door which read: “Welcome, members of the Crimson Vow. Please help yourself to our rooms and refreshments. No payment necessary.”

As planned, the four of them had spent dawn to dusk each day in training. Most of their practice was focused on getting comfortable with the increase in magical output that came with their advanced authorization levels, as well as preserving their magical and physical strength to withstand the rigors of a prolonged combat situation. Mile also was developing a sort of liquid diet so that they would be able to replenish their nourishment and hydration stores mid-battle.

And so the days passed, until finally the nanomachines informed Mile that the main dimensional rift would appear the following day. Put another way: Tomorrow, the gates of Hell would be flung open...

“Well, all things considered, I really enjoyed my life as a hunter,” Reina said, a grin on her face.

“Yeah, we really never wanted for anything, thanks to the food and baths and toilets Mile provided us,” Mavis cheerfully agreed.

“Forget not wanting for anything—we’ve been living like royalty! If Mile ever opened an inn, she could charge a gold piece a night!” Pauline laughed.

“Forget being knighted by a king—I must be the first person in the history of the world to ever be honored as a holy knight by the servant of a god. Plus, my very first duty is to protect our world from hordes of monsters pouring in from another dimension. This is the stuff of legends! The thing that every knight in the world dreams of! I’ll be mythical, known throughout the ages! To think someone like me would be so blessed... Thank you, Mile. I can’t thank you enough!” Mavis crowed.

“You changed my life, too!” yelled Reina. “Just when I found myself heading down the

path of a life fueled by anger and vengeance, y-you... made me into a total pushover! You'd better take responsibility!"

Then Pauline chimed in. "You helped me rescue my mother and brother, and take back my father's business... Plus, my plans to save up capital to establish my own business have far exceeded my expectations. I'm never letting you out of my sight, Miley!"

"Ah ha ha," Mile laughed dryly.

Those few days passed far too quickly for the foursome. By daylight they trained, and by candlelight they sat on their beds, laughing and reminiscing about all of the fun times, the happy times, the sad times, and all of the friends they had made along the way. This night was to be the last of those nights. None of them were eager to die, but they could not deny that the odds were not in their favor. What was certain was that Mile would not back down until the bulk of the highest-ranking monsters had been defeated.

Why?

Because she was Mile.

Mavis surely felt the same way. And so, it was little surprise that Reina and Pauline were happy to stand by them. They were the Crimson Vow, bound to their very souls, and their friendship could never be torn asunder.

"We should get to bed," Mile finally said. "We've got an early morning tomorrow..."

And thus, their final night came to an end.

* * *

IT'S MORNING! IT'S MORNING! IT'S MORNING!

Oh, good morning, Nanos. Thanks for the wake-up!

Now that her authorization level had risen, Mile had begun using the nanomachines as an alarm clock. Actually, she had occasionally done so even before this, but it had now become an every morning sort of thing.

"Mm... Morning already?"

“Yep. Here you go.”

“Th-thanks...”

The other three soon awoke, perhaps as a result of Mile’s shuffling around. It was dark still, the sun yet to rise, but they had gone to bed early, and all four were wide awake.

They sat on their beds, eating a simple breakfast of sandwiches and hot tea from Mile’s inventory. Normally, it would be foolish to fill one’s stomach right before a battle. It slowed your movements and made it less likely you’d survive being pierced through the gut. Today, however, stamina would be key. Stuffing themselves to fullness was obviously out of the question, but it seemed smart to at least have a little something in their bellies.

Once they were done, they tidied themselves up in their second-story toilet and bathhouse, then put everything but their clothing, gear, and other key items—Micros, energy drinks, and such—into Mile’s storage. Then their preparations were complete.

“Everyone ready?” asked Reina, taking charge until the very end. “Let’s get going. Crimson Vow, roll out!”

“All right!!!”

By now, even Mavis had come to accept this as the status quo...

CHAPTER 119

A PORTRAIT OF WAR

“HM?”

As they descended the dim staircase, Mile suddenly stopped, a puzzled look upon her face.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought I smelled some tea...”

“That’s because we were just drinking tea! Your nose is as sharp as your eyes and ears.” Reina exclaimed, not without exasperation. “Just go down already!” At her urging, Mile once again started to move. However, as they proceeded toward the dining hall on the first floor—

Now, she was certain that she smelled tea brewing. Before her in the darkness, Mile’s night-sharp eyes saw...

“M-Miss Marcela... And Monika? And Aureana...? Wh-what are you doing here...?” said Mile, nearly lost for words.

Marcela, who sat at a table with a cup of tea in hand, looked back at Mile with a mischievous and slightly annoyed look upon her face. “What are we doing here, you ask? Miss Adele, you could not truly have thought that we, your dear friends, would not come running to your side as you stood before the world during this once-in-a-lifetime happening?”

The other two piped up. “We’re going to watch this show—and we’ve got exclusive front row seats!”

“Also, Her Highness the princess did order us to *bring Viscountess Ascham home safe.*”

“Ha! Ha ha...” Mile laughed, tears welling in her eyes.

"I'm also certain that our magic, which has somehow become even more powerful thanks to *someone*, will come in handy here," said Marcela. "Now then... Let's get going."

"And no suicidal explosive finishes!"

Hearing this warning, Mile suddenly recalled that she had told some of her so-called folktales back in her Eckland days as well.

"I never thought I'd die fighting side by side with the villains who keep trying to steal our Mile away," said Reina, "but fighting beside a friend... I can do that."

In response, Marcela stood from her seat and raised her right hand. So did Reina. And then...

Pap!

The satisfying clap of a high-five rang through the air. Marcela smiled, and Reina grinned with teeth bared. Everyone else merely shrugged.



“Okay then! Let’s get going already! Crimson Vow, Wonder Trio, roll out!”

“All right!!!!!!”

Mile took the lead, with Reina and Marcela flanking her on either side and the rest following behind. She gripped the doorknob and gently pushed open the door, stepping outside to find...

“You girls ready to go?!”

...six women waiting for them.

“Miss Telyusia! And the rest of the Servants?”

“How could we stand by when a messenger of the gods is going to battle? Especially when we call ourselves the Servants of the Goddess!”

As Telyusia said this, Reina almost tripped over her own feet, her face going red.

“Big sister...” she mumbled.

Ah... The other three members of the Crimson Vow knew exactly what was going on.

“Who the heck are you?!?!” The Trio, having never seen Tsunde-Reina’s “dere” side, were utterly flabbergasted.

“Anyway,” Willine continued, “if people were to find out that we sat on our hands and left our cute junior hunters to die while they were putting their lives on the line to protect the whole world, our reputation would never recover!”

“There you go with that again...” Philly chided.

“Ah ha ha!” Leatoria chuckled. “Seriously, as if I’d pass up the chance to let Miss Mile and the others see how I’ve grown! Even if my father *was* in tears trying to stop me...”

Ah... The members of the Crimson Vow sighed internally. There was no father in the world who wouldn’t try to hold his daughter back at a time like this. If anything, it was surprising that she had managed to shake him off and come anyway.

Surprised as they might have been, the members of the Crimson Vow smiled as they looked upon Willine the swordswoman; Philly the lancer; and Leatoria, daughter of Baron Aura, wielding her magical club. This wasn't the time or place for declarations like, "If anyone is going to be marching to their deaths, it'll be us and us alone!" or "All of you need to take cover, quick!" If the Servants of the Goddess could be deterred by such warnings, they wouldn't be here in the first place. Protestations would only be wasted on such brave women.

Also, the members of the Crimson Vow had no intention of dying. If they made it out of this alive, they could return to the fray, fighting monsters and coming to the aid of those -sequestered within the fortified citadels. If they died, they would be of no use to anybody. They wouldn't set foot on any other battlefields, and they wouldn't be able to save countless other lives.

They could not allow the strongest monsters to get past them—and they did not intend to die. These two notions were not compatible in the least, and yet they did not plan on giving up on, either. They could only hope, with stalwart allies fighting by their side, there would be no reason for them to worry.

The group of young women, now thirteen in number, proceeded down the still-dim thoroughfare...

If this scene had background music, it would definitely be "Midnight Merry-Go-Round," the insert song from The Time Étranger! Actually, I suppose the theme song from Doggie March might be more fitting...

Mile, as ever, pondered things that no one else could possibly understand.

"Howdy. Looks like y'all have once again managed to pull off the unthinkable... We told you to let us know if anything fun was ever about to go down!"

"The Roaring Mithrils..."

"Ah ha ha!"

At this point, Mile was no longer even surprised.

And so, the Crimson Vow and friends continued onward.

“After this battle is over, we should start an orphanage just for young girls...”

“The Devils’ Paradise and Fellowship of the Flame...”

“I’ve never seen such a huge death flag!”

“He’d be better off dead...”

“Fellowship fellows, please try not to get curbstomped by the monsters...”

“I always knew you’d be good entertainment. Days filled with thrills and excitement, boredom nowhere to be seen! My eyes never deceive me!”

“We rarely see eye to eye, but I can agree on that point.”

“Dr. Clairia! And Aetelou and Sharalir!”

Sitting under the eaves as they passed each major intersection. Popping up from side roads. One after another, familiar faces -appeared to join with the Crimson Vow.

Next came the two parties they had partnered with to guard the merchants on the way to Amroth, when they had gone out to exterminate bandits.

“Looks like you’ve knocked us off our feet once more!”

“Thanks to you, we’ve had no problem recruiting new mem bers!”

“The Dragonbreaths and the Flaming Wolves!”

“Ancestor!”

“Huh?”

This time, the voice came from above.

“Oh, you’re from the fairy village. Your name was...”

“It’s Millelina! All the other villagers are here as well! Allow us to aid you by being messengers!”

The ranks of the Interdimensional Invaders Counterattack Corps had swelled to nearly forty. With ten times their original battle strength, there were now a number of options on the table. Once they had wiped out the upper ranking monsters, they could turn back and start all over again. They could also use defensive tactics to hold back the monsters and buy time until the joint forces could return from Aubram.

They could survive. They could survive and live a happy, normal life.

“Everyone, let’s go! And let’s make it back alive!”

From the crowd there came a resounding, *“All right!!!!”*

* * *

The little town of Cloto sat atop a hill, and as such, offered a clear view of the surrounding lands the moment you stepped outside the town limits. As far as the eye could see stretched nothing but wild and rocky terrain, unsuitable for farming or ranching. Hardly a favorable location for a human settlement—so why had this little town stood atop this hill for so very long?

Maybe this was once an ancient sentry point. That must be why it’s been here all this time. The citizens of this town have been told from generation to generation that this is where they ought to live, even though they no longer recall why it made sense for their ancestors to settle in the midst of such a bleak landscape. That must be why the dragons’ village is in this country as well, as are so many ruins...

Mile had no way of knowing whether or not her theory was correct. All things were worn down by the passage of time, eventually fading away...

The sun had yet to rise over the sprawling wastelands and the distant mountains. The lands were dim, not a thing to be seen. But with her heightened senses, Mile caught sight of something wriggling at the base of the hill. “Hu... man...?” she muttered. Sure enough, the forms appeared human, or at least humanoid. “But... why?”

Though it was not yet daybreak, the wilderness and everything beyond it still dusky, the base of the hill was starting to grow gradually brighter. There, in the growing light, swarmed humanoid figures—hundreds, or even a thousand or more. Mile was certain her eyes were playing tricks on her, as amongst them she saw banners and flags.

“Is that... the flag of the Albarn imperial forces? And on those banners, it says H, O, L, Y, M, A, I—Holy Maiden’s Personal Guard?!”

“Yeah.” Gren, from the Roaring Mithrils, was the only one to reply. “Apparently troops from a bunch of different parts of Albarn’s imperial army all banded together. Seems they all had their lives saved by some girls who called themselves holy maidens back during the invasion of Ascham. All the troops that were stationed at the borders of other nations are here, too, and the troops that stayed behind in every country to keep the peace, *and* the royal guards and other defenders, seems like.”

“Wh...”

Leave it to Gren, an A-rank hunter, to have looked into all of this ahead of time. As it grew gradually brighter out, the others, too, were eventually able to catch sight of the soldiers at the base of the hill. Like Mile, they thought their eyes were playing tricks on them, but unlike her, they were unable to discern the details of what they were seeing.

Nanos, could you enlarge the target by optical means?

LEAVE IT TO US! IMAGE ENLARGEMENT AND AUDIO DUCT CREATION WILL PICK UP ALL YOUR ACQUAINTANCES...

A “duct” was a phenomenon where electromagnetic or sound waves were constricted to a small area by reflection or refraction caused by atmospheric and water temperature or density, allowing their conveyance across long distances thanks to lowered rates of attenuation.

A large image appeared before Mile and her companions... who, at this point, knew not to be surprised by such things.

"That's the flag of the Brandel royal guard... They've left the palace unprotected, then? Wait, is that the *royal family*'s banner? Huh? Her Highness Princess Morena and the female royal guards! What are *they* doing here?!" Monika shrieked.

"I wonder if sending her that last letter was a mistake..." Marcela said calmly.

"You mean the one where we wrote, *No big news here—everyone is fine. We are off to offer up our lives to help our friend. Farewell?*" asked Aureana, deadpan.

"Gah! Aaaaaah!!! You all have *got* to be kidding me! I-I'm a part of the Wonder Trio, too! I'll never forgive you all for leaving me behind!"

"Wait, this picture works both ways?! And they can hear us, too? N-next! Please move on to the next one!" Marcela frantically demanded, and the image shifted.

"Are these... the forces of the house of Ascham? The Ascham lands are close to the border of the Empire, so I guess they weren't dispatched eastward..."

"My lady!!!"

"Juno?" In that moment, the only thing Mile could think to say to him was, "Juno, please... protect Ascham, and the world..."

The images kept rolling, one after another.

"These are the final fighting forces left behind to keep the peace in each country—royal guards, rich folks' personal retainers, mercenaries, and hunters," Gren explained.

"And everyone from the elven village. All of the dwarven troops. And everyone from the beastfolk village..." Mile muttered, flabbergasted, as more images flashed before them.

"Well, obviously. Did you really think the elves wouldn't show up for this?" said Clairia, laughing haughtily.

"There must be hundreds here... No, thousands! At this rate..." Marcela muttered.

"That's right—if we each take down five hundred monsters, the fight's won!" chimed Aureana.

"Ah ha ha..." Monika laughed at her unwarranted optimism. Only an A- or S-rank hunter would be able to accomplish such a thing.

Their surroundings then finally grew brighter, as more distant lands gradually came into view.

"Uh..."

Before them, they saw... people. People, people, and more people. Innumerable hordes of people packed the entirety of the expanse before them, and even more people were approaching from all sides.

"Thousands... tens of thousands... No, far *more* than that... Why? There's no way that the joint forces out in the east could have made it back here in time," Mile murmured, eyes wide.

"Mile," Gren replied, "do you know how many people there actually are in the armed forces who can swing a sword and take down an enemy?"

"Huh? Um, well... A military also has supply corps to transport food and supplies to the front lines, chefs, medics, weapons specialists, messengers, and a number of other roles, so I'd say that the combat specialists who actually train to do battle comprise about half their numbers. But wouldn't those support troops be accompanying the other soldiers? They shouldn't be here right now..."

"Come on—that ain't the whole story. How many citizens would you say there are in a country whose army is one hundred thousand strong?"

"Uh... Well, in peacetime, a standing military only consumes resources and doesn't produce anything, so it should only comprise two to three percent of the population—maybe as many as five if the country in question is especially prosperous. No nation would ever be able to support more than that. Even with an overabundance of surplus resources, the most they could sustain would be about ten percent, and even that, only temporarily. So if we assume the military to be five percent of the population, the total population would be twenty times that, or around two -million... Wait, don't tell me!"

"That's right. If you take out five percent for the soldiers, there's the other ninety-five percent—the civilians. This is just a subset of that number. The farmers, the workmen, the merchants, and all kinds of people, armed with their hoes and their hammers, their kitchen knives and their mop handles. It's their world, and they're gonna defend it

themselves. No way they'd let some young ladies sacrifice themselves while they get to live."

Mile was lost for words as the image shifted to a group of wizened elders.

"Wait! Are those the old men and women who used to visit the bakery?" Sure enough, there stood the elders who frequented the bakery where Mile worked part-time during her days at Eckland Academy.

"Huh?! Those are the former members of the A-rank party, the Reaper's Scythe! I can't believe they're still alive," Gren yelped, face contorting.

"Oh-ho, long time no see, little Adele! We must truly be blessed. Just when we thought we'd be left to rot to nothing, along comes a cause worth dyin' for... Thanks fer all the fun, little lady!"

"...And that's the elder corps," Telyusia explained from behind. "All the retired hunters and mercenaries and soldiers volunteered to take the vanguard. They said it's the elders' job to die first, and the youth's job to survive and build a better future."

"They're all great big idiots—every last one of them!"

"You're one to talk," Reina said with a sigh and a shrug. "You're the greatest, biggest idiot of all."

Then, the image changed to...

"That's the Eckland Academy emblem!"

"Yeah, that's the academy coalition. All of the capable students and teachers from academies across the continent are—wait a second, that's *Eris the Infernal!* What's that old bag doing here?! I thought she was definitely dead!!!"

"Eris who? That's the dorm matron!"

At the head of the coalition's formation stood the matron who had looked after Adele during her time in the academy dormitory. For some reason, the sight of her was sending Gren into a tizzy.

"It's been quite some time, Miss Adele. How splendidly you've grown," the matron said

with a smile—in response to which Mile said something incredibly rude.

“Shouldn’t she be with the elder corps?”

Crack!

It was the snap heard ’round the world...

“Heh... Heh heh... Heh heh heh... Quite the jokester, aren’t you? Let’s talk later. Once the battle is through, come and see me at the Eckland Academy guidance office,” said the matron, smiling softly.

“Oh Gaaaaawd!!!!” All of the hunters and guild staff who were familiar with Eris the Infernal, the legendary S-rank hunter, shrieked.

At a desperate signal from Mile, the nanomachines changed the image again.

“Th-that was scary,” Mile sighed, breath ragged.

“Oh, that’s the August Academy emblem. And at the head of their company is... M-Mariette?”

“You know Lady Mariette, the holy maiden?” Gren asked, surprised.

“Oh, yes... Wait, is Mariette famous or something?”

“I mean, she’s super famous with temple folk and magic healers. Actually, among ordinary folks, too. And definitely among hunters—she’s been known to heal serious injuries for free.”

“Miss Mile! This power that you granted me—it was all meant for today, wasn’t it?! I’ll do my best to protect every living thing in this world!”

“Of course you had somethin’ to do with her.” Gren’s shoulders slumped.

“Ah ha ha! Take care out there. Be safe!”

"Oh, that must be the group from the Hunters' Guild. There's No-Hope Felicia, Raoh, and the guild master who recommended me to the prep school..."

"It's *Laura!*"

Behind the company was a group of orphans, led by Veil, Mile's classmate from the Hunters' Prep School. They were likely there as a rear support team. Beside Veil stood a girl who looked vaguely familiar...

"Seems you are still in good health, Mavis!"

"Master!"

There stood Ladimarl, head of the Ladimarl school of swordplay, along with his disciples.

"I told you, didn't I? You ought to rely on your fellow pupils. And here we are. Now that you've shared our name with the whole continent, business at the school is about to be booming! We owe you for that endorsement—and we are here to repay you with our lives, if need be! Wah hah hah!"

"Master! Everyone...!"

Next up were the reserve forces of the Count Austien's personal army, led by Mavis's third brother, who had been left to take care of their lands. A royal regiment, led by Eltreya, the girl Mavis had saved. A baron's troops, led by Kelvin the Inferno, from near the border of the Empire.

One after another came the familiar faces: blacksmiths, stable hands, chefs, shop employees, scribes, shepherd boys, local thugs. People of every age and every profession under the sun...

"Th-that's..."

Up in the sky above the volunteer army swooped a single wyvern with a young girl upon its back. A royal flag was painted on the underside of its right wing, a lord's banner beneath its left.

"Lobreth and Chelsea?"

"I suppose that's one way to tell friend from foe on the battlefield—and proclaim to surrounding countries that your territory employs wyverns who can deploy any necessary weapons without hesitation... That lord is always trying to achieve the greatest effects for the smallest effort," muttered Mavis, simultaneously exasperated and impressed.

"It's really something," said Pauline, who felt similarly.

Mile turned to Reina and declared, "When it comes to combat, numbers are everything, bro!"

"Who are you calling 'bro'?!"

They could do this. Though the bulk of their forces were ordinary civilians, their enemies would mainly be goblins, kobolds, jackalopes, and the like. The high-ranking monsters were but a fraction of their foes. Plus, they had a massive advantage in terms of coordination and tactics. Two armies of a hundred thousand combatants facing off against each other did not mean a hundred thousand one-on-one battles would simultaneously take place. Only a small percentage of the forces would actually be fighting at any given time. There would be plenty supporting the front lines, waiting to take those fighters' places when they grew tired or were injured.

They could lure some of the enemy into their own ranks, thereby creating a temporary numerical advantage, if only briefly and within a very limited area. Even a mutant orc or ogre couldn't withstand a beatdown from dozens of fighters wielding reach weapons and magic—and even typically utilitarian magic could fell a monster if used in the right way. The enemies they faced were monsters hell-bent on destroying them and everyone they loved, which meant it wouldn't weigh heavy on anyone's conscience to use whatever was at their disposal.

Mile knew only too well how exaltation of battle could thrill—how the exhilaration of fighting back one's fears might turn to madness as blood spilled and the smell of copper filled your nostrils.

It was enough to transform a timid soul who had never killed more than an insect or a rat into a berserker in an instant.

Mile and her platoon climbed down the hill, toward the spot where the rift was set to appear. Masses of people followed behind them.

Soon, the gates of Hell would open...

* * *

Everyone had positioned themselves for the counterassault. Now, all that there was left to do was to wait.

There was no point in feeling nervous. That would only tire them out, sapping their physical and emotional strength before the battle even began. Still, no one could help feeling *some* trepidation.

“Hey, Mile,” Gren sniped mischievously. “Give us a speech or something to lift everyone’s spirits! We could use the morale boost!”

“What?! M-Mr. Gren, what are you saying?!” Mile was taken aback, waving her hands back and forth in front of her face in denial.

“C’mon, it should be fun! It’s boring just standing around here waiting, and we don’t want to give folks too much time to get up in their own heads. It’s a commander’s job to keep morale up and wash those worries away.”

“Wait, who’s the commander?!”

“You are,” said Reina.

“You, Mile,” Mavis chimed.

“It’s you,” Pauline agreed.

“Whaaat?!” Mile was stunned.

“Mile, who did you think brought all these people together in the first place?” asked

Mavis.

"And who the hell else would you expect to take over as commander here?" asked Gren.

"Guh... uh..."

Mile had no rebuttal to offer. This was absolutely not her forte, but Gren had a fair point. She could push past a bit of stage fright if it meant boosting everyone's morale with a little speech that might ease their own fears and make it easier for them to operate. If she could lower their chances of dying even slightly, then...

"G-guess I've got no choice."

And so, Mile took in a deep breath and began to speak, using amplification magic so that her voice could reach every fighter.

"Everyone," she boomed, "thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to join us here today!"

"What the heck?!" A peal of laughter rose up from the crowd.

"Right now," Mile continued, "is where our legend begins. A legend is not something we simply stand and face... It is something we create. That's right! Today, we are penning a legend! As servants of our goddess, we will save this world!!!"

There came a riotous cheer from all around.

"She could seriously start a cult one day," Reina muttered to herself.

* * *

WE HAVE SENSED A DIMENSIONAL RIPPLE. A DIMENSIONAL CORRIDOR HAS FORMED. DIMENSIONAL -EMERGENCE OCCURRING IN 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... NOW!!!

Ker-slash!!!

Suddenly, in the air several hundred meters in front of them, there was a vertical rent, which then began stretching sideways at high speed until it formed a vast circle...

"From the side, it has no thickness—it just looks like a flat plane. But from the front it

looks like a tunnel..."

Indeed, what could only be referred to as an extradimensional tunnel had formed before them. And, from out of it...

"Here they come! The vanguard of the main enemy forces!"

At the head of the battalion were jackalopes and kobolds. Perhaps they had been sent to check for traps, or perhaps it was merely that the most thoughtless creatures had come leaping forth first. Regardless, Mile's forces could not waste their own energies on the likes of these smaller monsters. They needed to preserve their limited strength for taking down the more fearsome enemies when they arrived.

"Only bother with the jackalopes, kobolds, and goblins if they get in your way! All the rest, just let them run on by! I trust our allies behind us to take care of them!"

Someone was issuing orders—likely one of the military officers or a veteran hunter, who understood intuitively that killing these lesser monsters was not a priority. There was no time to finish off every single enemy in the heat of battle, and, in fact, aiming to do so was dangerous. There was no reason to waste unnecessary resources when it wouldn't make a difference to who would win the day.

With the monsters issuing forth in waves, fighting on the edge of the rift would be an exercise in futility, spelling doom for even the most elite fighters. To preserve their precious military strength, they would maintain some distance and face them there.

The monsters were fast approaching, nearly upon them. And then...

"Engage!"

The battle had begun.

* * *

Mile's allied forces were arranged in a broad two-layer -formation. The first column of fighters was comprised of soldiers, the mercenaries, hunters of C-rank and above, elves, dwarves, beastfolk, and so forth—anyone who was well trained in battle or possessed heightened combat abilities of any kind. This column was gathered at the foot of the hill, with the most powerful of these individuals spearheading the front lines.

The second column was the civilian volunteer militia—who were, with a few exceptions, those less capable in combat.

Together, these layers formed a thick wall to hold back the monsters.

The Crimson Vow were of course on the front lines, alongside the elves, dwarves, beastfolk, high-ranking hunters, and other seasoned fighters of the first column, who would be the ones primarily making contact with the monsters.

Others were stationed around them, the idea being that the elites would aim to take down the big game while those surrounding them would be in charge of cleaning up the small fry. The goal was to ensure that the elites were not outmaneuvered by less threatening monsters, and to avoid having them expend their energy before the arrival of the B-rank and higher monsters that would be coming later. The understanding was that D-rank and lower monsters might be let through to the second column, along with any C-rank monsters that had been roughed up enough to no longer pose much of a threat. They could not afford to slip up and let any C-rank monsters through with fight still in them.

In order to help the supporting forces, Mile and the others did their best to confuse any C-rank monsters with magical -attacks, disrupting the flow of the onslaught. While they wanted to preserve their energy, it would be asking too much of the soldiers and hunters positioned behind them, no matter how capable they might be, to simply let all of the C-rank monsters past. There was a big difference between a mass of monsters crashing down upon them unimpeded and a scattered, demoralized group of monsters that had been already wounded by magical assaults.

Shunk! Bwoosh! Slash!

Mavis, Mile, and the others positioned at the vanguard of the first column cut down any monsters that headed toward them—after all, they could not ignore an enemy that was approaching directly. To help, the mages around them peppered the area ahead with explosive and needle-type area-of-effect attacks. These weren't their most powerful spells—those they would save for the stronger monsters—but even so, they were enough to have a demoralizing effect. Any monsters that made it through the front line would face the volunteer militia of civilians, who could make use of their numbers to beat the tar out of any already battered and bruised enemies who wound up in their path.

In terms of sheer numbers, the monsters may have had the advantage, but if they were savvy, the humanoids could win that numbers war by being strategic about precisely when and where they actually engaged them in combat. Wisdom and strategy—such were the components of what we call “tactics.”

Boom! Ka-bwom! Shoom!

Explosions rang out all around, and the percussive sounds of attack spells began to resound from a short distance away.

The joint force of soldiers, hunters, elves, and beastfolk that comprised the first column formed a front line to crush all of the B-rank monsters that Mile and the others on the vanguard had let slip by them, along with as many of the C-rank monsters as they could handle. The only ones they allowed back to the second column—the volunteer civilian militia—were the more battered C-rank monsters and those D-rank and below. An unscathed aberrant monster, even a humble orc, would be a dangerous foe for a civilian to face, no matter their numbers advantage. And so, the first column’s fighters had to injure the larger monsters and stagger them as best they could before they escaped.

The volunteers, meanwhile, stood fast with their farming implements and work tools and mop handles in hand. They were staunchly determined not to let a single beast, be it goblin or kobold, get past them—though perhaps an exception could be made for the jackalopes, which were edible. Adults, the elderly, and those not yet even of age—men, women, and those of indeterminate gender—all stood together, resolute.

“We can let some of the orcs through! Have faith in the -soldiers and hunters! But ogres? Your time is up!!!”

Standing at the vanguard, Gren of the Roaring Mithrils fought fiercely against the enemy. An aberrant ogre would be too much for any normal soldier or C-rank hunter (well, C-rank hunters *other* than the Crimson Vow).

Though the members of the Crimson Vow were stationed at the vanguard themselves, they lacked the ability to command other fighters. As such, they left issuing directions to others, focusing instead on executing their own attacks as a single battle unit.

LADY MILE, SHALL WE RELAY IMAGES FROM THE VARIOUS CORNERS OF THE

BATTLEFIELD? THERE IS A CHANCE THAT MISS MARIETTE MAY END UP IN A DANGEROUS SITUATION...

Mile happily accepted the nanomachines' proposal. *Oh, please! The battlefield must be hectic, so I'll let you all decide which images to display. Besides me, feel free to broadcast to anyone who has a moment to watch as well! As many as you can!*

This way, she thought, others would be able to rush to the aid of those most in need.

ROGER THAT!

It was impossible for even Mile to see the nanomachines with the naked eye—and so, naturally, she could not see the wicked grins that danced upon their faces in that moment.

Woom!

A number of screens popped up around her. Each of them showed the image of a friend or acquaintance. Apparently, the nanomachines had decided to prioritize the individuals Mile was most friendly with over those in the most danger.

As far as the nanomachines, who had no real stake in any particular humanoid's life, were concerned, this was the most logical course of action. Even fairy tales never had grand battles with zero fatalities, and there was no way for help to reach all those in need. That was why the nanomachines decided to prioritize those whom Mile knew, whom she held the dearest. (It bears mentioning that as agents of magic, the nanomachines were largely unfazed by the concept of death; they took the lives of plenty of sentient life-forms on a daily basis, regardless of any concepts of justice or morality.)

"We've got some mixed groups of orcs and ogres incoming! There are some scattered manticores, gryphons, hippocrits, earth dragons, and wyrms behind them as well. We'll take the earth dragons!" Mile announced.

"Sure thing!" Gren shouted back. "Just leave the small fry to us!"

The so-called "small fry," in this case, were A- and B-rank monsters.

"Phaser Beeeeeaaaam!!!"

“Hellfire!”

“Hot Cloud!”

There were no artillerists in this world to rain shells down on the enemy from the heavens, but one after another, Mile, Reina, and Pauline let off magical attacks that allowed them to target the approaching monsters. Mavis, meanwhile, was quiet. Her Wind Edge would have little effect against powerful monsters, so she’d wait to make her debut until they entered melee range. There was no point in her wasting her strength prematurely.

Both sides were prepared to fight to the last breath—no retreat, no surrender. If the humans pulled back, their cities and towns would be swallowed by monsters, one after another, and countless humanoid lives would be lost. The monsters, meanwhile, simply *had* nowhere to retreat to. This battle would continue until one side or the other was annihilated.

It wasn’t the sort of war where one might call for a surrender, deeming the fight hopeless once thirty percent of your forces were slain. It was true slaughter. Every single enemy had to be taken out, foot soldiers and generals alike. A protracted battle was inevitable.

Finally, it was time for Mavis to break the seal.

“In the name of Mile, I, Mavis, command you! Sword number one, be as you once were!”

Glistening golden particles began to fall, both ominous and divine, as the blade of Mavis’s favored sword was restored to its former glory. And then...

“Sword number two, be as you once were as well!”

Her spare knife gleamed. The sword in her left hand and the knife in her right, Mavis took up a dual wielding stance. With her seals removed, she could easily wield the sword one-handed with her powerful artificial left hand, while her flesh-and-blood right hand held the light and quick knife. When facing monsters, it was best to be as equipped as possible. The creatures were rarely a match for a skilled swordfighter, after all...

“EX True Godspeed Blade!”

Neither the usual Godspeed Blade nor her True Godspeed Blade would be enough to challenge a truly powerful monster. And so, Mavis decided to start off on the strongest possible foot, using her Micros and a two-handed EX True Godspeed Blade.

Her body, which had been magically modified to withstand the recoil from her nanomachine-crafted left arm, was now able to withstand the strain on her muscles, tendons, and bones caused by using the Micros. The sword she wielded had been specially crafted by Mile, and all restrictions had been lifted on her left arm and the supporting segments of her body. As long as she avoided any extreme or violent movements, she could keep fighting for an extended period of time.

More importantly—she had been appointed as a holy knight, and this was a fight against invaders that were threatening their entire world.

Mavis could not be any happier.

“*Gaaaaaaah!!!*”

Suddenly, a scream rose from the front lines.

“Oops...”

Apparently, the wind had blown some of Pauline’s hot magic onto their allies. As she couldn’t cast her hot magic at long range, such things unfortunately happened sometimes. That said, this was still an extremely undesirable turn of events for the elites on the vanguard of the humanoid forces.

“Pauline, fall back! Focus on healing, not attacking! Keep the most seriously injured from dying. Anyone who can return to the battlefield, get them up to fighting strength. Emergency measures will suffice—it doesn’t have to be pretty! We can take our time and heal them back up to full abilities once the battle is over!” Mile commanded.

“Understood!” Pauline replied, standing down. She was not all that skilled at combat magic to begin with. Her hot magic gave her great offensive power, but a close-quarters fracas such as this was far from ideal for those spells. She could do more good concentrating on healing those high-level fighters who had already been forced to fall

back from the battlefield.

I'd really like it if Marcela and the others did the same, thought Mile. It'd be safer. Those three never had that much magical talent to begin with. They elevated their skills with the things that I taught them, but I still can't imagine that they're all that good with combat spells. Besides, they might be even more effective than Pauline when it comes to healing, since they've been taught extensively about the structure of the human body...

Mile's eyes darted to the midair screen that was projecting the image of the Wonder Trio. The nanomachines had been thoughtful enough to craft an audio duct to that location as well, which allowed Mile to hear them shout:

“Lady Marcela! It’s time to do it!”

Aureana appeared to be proposing that they implement some sort of special technique.

“By your lead!” replied Marcela.

“Let’s go!” shouted Monika.

Then, the three of them struck a pose.

“Wonder...”

“Pulse...”

“Machine Gun!!!”

In the folktales that Mile—or rather, Adele—had told, there was a magic weapon that could repeatedly attack at high speed. The three members of the Wonder Trio had devised an original attack spell based on that concept. Monika created a magical barrel in the air. Aureana controlled that barrel and directed its aim. And Marcela supplied the magical ammunition.

Pewpewpewpewpewpewpewpewpewpew!

Minuscule beads of magic were fired continuously at high speed, mowing down the monsters. Because the magic consumed by each pulse was minimal, it required less magic overall than firing off a wide beam or a spreading fireball... And, because of each

bead's surprisingly high penetrative strength, it was a fairly powerful assault. Since they did not have to aim before firing each magical bead, they could work unusually quickly. A lot of ammunition was wasted because you simply swung the weapon around while watching the point of impact, but the hit rate was still quite high.



This was an ultimate technique the three of them had devised for emergency use in mass battle—a way around their relatively modest individual magical abilities. Initially, the spell had lacked killing power, and each of the shots had been weak. In light of this, they had planned to use it primarily as a means of distraction. However, once their authorization levels were raised and they got their own personal nanomachines, their powers had grown considerably. The technique was now effective against larger targets. Where it had once been about as powerful as a submachine gun, it had now flown right past light machine gun all the way to heavy machine gun—a jump akin to that between a pistol and a 12.7mm round.

Mile quietly averted her eyes from the screen...

The battle had now moved beyond the vanguard of the first column, and those behind them were starting to engage with the monsters that had broken through. Some members of the humanoid forces would be injured. Some might even die. But this was inevitable. Even if Mile possessed half the strength of an elder dragon, she could not breathe fire or have a dragon's massive frame. There was only so much one girl could achieve against a swarm of hundreds of thousands of monsters. She might have made headway with something like a "Sunshine Destroyer" move, but the weather was overcast today and the sky thick with clouds, so she was unable to amass enough energy to unleash a concentrated powerful beam.

Elder dragons had not existed at the time of the previous invasion. They did exist now, but there were none present on the battlefield. Their power was so absolute that they had no interest in watching lesser life-forms slaughter one another—in fact, they had the luxury of being certain that even an invasion by powerful creatures would have almost no effect on them. In any event, asking them to get involved right now would be out of the question, as that would require them recognizing the fact that they—the ultimate life-forms, the closest thing this world had to divinities—had been created by *humans*. That there had been a time when they were nothing more than puny pet lizards.

You can only play from your own hand, with the cards that you've been dealt. And in truth, the members of the Crimson Vow held far more cards now than when they had intended to face this fight alone. They had allies they could depend upon. They were surrounded by many people who were betting their own lives for the safety of the world. They could not afford to let down the people who were risking it all out of faith

in them. They had to win, no matter what, and share with them the spoils of victory.

It was with this in mind that the Crimson Vow faced down monster after monster.

“Wah!”

An ogre brought a log down on one of the C-rank hunters who was operating around the Crimson Vow, helping to take out any lesser targets. Had it found that log somewhere nearby? Or carried it all the way from its origin point? The source of the log was irrelevant to the person whose head was about to be crushed by it.

There was no time to avoid the log. Trying to deflect it with a sword was similarly useless.

I'm dead, he thought, but at least he would not die in vain. He had rushed to the side of a divine messenger and become one of those who would die in the great battle to save the world. Surely, that was a feat worthy enough for him to be called to Valhalla.

His thoughts ran at breakneck speed, a proverbial life flashing before his eyes, but his body could not move with the same swiftness. And so, he could only stare, speechless, at the solid wood of impending death racing toward his skull...

Crack!

At the last moment, someone caught the log single-handed. They had a sword in their hand, but even if they had sliced the log in half, the bisected section would have maintained enough kinetic energy to instantly kill the man. So instead, they had simply caught the log. But how? Where had this person come from? This individual who could single-handedly catch a log swung by an ogre?

More shocking still, this impossible individual was not some burly man. The hand that had caught the log was a woman's. One woman's left hand...

“That's impossible. This can't be happening. There's just no damn way!!” the hunter muttered, so stunned at the impossible sight before him that he forgot that his life had been in danger.

“Did you know?” Mavis quipped with a grin. “As long as blood flows hot through a

hunter's veins, there's no such thing as 'impossible'!!"

And then, with the short blade in her right hand, she cut down the ogre—who still held the log, frozen in astonishment—in one fell swoop.

Mavis was riding high. She had finally gotten to say one of the awesome phrases she had set aside for just such an occasion! She truly couldn't have been happier.

* * *

"Gwah!"

Marcela took a direct hit from an orc.

Like Mile, the members of the Trio were all fourteen years old and rather petite. Lacking the advantage of height, they had to rely on direct rather than high-angle fire, making it inadvisable for any allies to be positioned between them and their enemies.

It was for this reason that they had placed themselves right on the front lines. They were surrounded by some normal C-rank hunters, who were there to protect the girls and clean up the riff-raff—which was fortunate, since the chaos made it impossible for the girls to fully intercept every enemy. Though strong on the offensive, their defenses were still paper thin. Even a weak blow was enough to send them flying, and they were easily battered.

In the mad rush, the bodyguards had failed to cut down this orc, who had succeeded in knocking Marcela to the ground. However, she soon propped herself up with her right arm, getting right back up even as her left arm swung slowly back and forth, bent in a way that an arm should not bend.

"Oh ho ho ho hoh! *Ooh ho ho ho ho hoh!!!*"

"L-Lady Marcela..."

"No pain can wipe the smile from my face! A broken arm and a few snapped ribs won't stop me from casting spells! We can deal with the healing later. Now is not the time to be wasting any unnecessary magical energy. Now! Back at it! Time to settle this!"

"*Yes, ma'am!!*"

“All right then... Er, huh?”

A faint light seemed to envelope Marcela’s body, and suddenly her arm was healed. Her ribs as well... She looked all around her but saw no one who could have cast a healing spell.

“A random heal?”

Adele’s stories had mentioned such mysterious happenings. There certainly weren’t any hunters around who looked capable of using such effective healing powers. Which meant...

“I suppose you must have some time on your hands, Miss Adele.”

It was just as Aureana had supposed. While fighting her own battles, Mile was keeping tabs on various parts of the battlefield, watching her screens and utilizing ducts to launch support and attack spells from afar. The images were only an optical effect, but the ducts, constructed to transmit voices, chained nanomachines between Mile and the places she was viewing. She could use the same chain of nanomachines to transmit magic. The magic would not bend or refract like sound but work just as it always did—as a command executed by the nanomachines.

Mile did have a level-7 authorization now, after all.

“Aaaaaah!!!”

Suddenly, Mile let out a scream.

“Wh-what happened?!” Reina asked, startled. She could see Mile hadn’t been injured, and while there were enemies all around them, she wasn’t in any immediate peril.

“M-M-M-Mariette’s been hurt! Right on her beautiful faaaaaace!”

Mile was still moving around and smacking down monsters, but she seemed horribly dismayed.

Reina glanced at the screen she was pointing to and saw Mariette (or as Mile would call her, “the precious, angelic Mariette”), for whom Mile had once served as a tutor.

However...

"Hurt? I don't see a single scratch on her!" Reina protested.

"Enhance! Enhance the image!!!" Mile commanded, and the image of Mariette was enlarged. Mile pointed at Mariette's right cheek in the expanded view. "There! Right there! She's woundeeed!!!"

There, where Mile pointed, was something that could scarcely even be called a scratch—a nick but a millimeter long and only 0.1 millimeters deep. Not even a single drop of blood had been spilled.

"Her adorable face has been marred! I'll never forgive them!!!"

"I mean, you're here to smash monsters," said Reina. "I think forgiveness is beside the point."

But her words fell on deaf ears as Mile trembled in fury...

* * *

Mile had been inching forward little by little, but after seeing Mariette's scratch, she finally emerged, all alone, from out of the vanguard. Her combat strength was in a league of its own, which meant that she could not unleash her true power when fighting beside other people. It was easier for her to fight a bit ahead of the rest of the pack. Plus, this would give her an additional advantage: She could disrupt the movement of monsters before they reached the other fighters, thereby making things easier for her comrades in arms. The others had faith in Mile's strength and would not keep her from doing as she pleased. But then...

Ka-boom!

An ogre gave Mile an upward kick, which sent her flying in spectacular fashion. Her scrawniness was often her downfall; whenever she was on the receiving end of attacks like this, she flew right off into the air. It was simply physics. The good thing was that this also meant that she avoided much of the force of the blow and took little damage. So, each time this happened, she just got back up and rushed back to her original position. However...

Bam!

"Uh..."

This time, she crashed violently into a hard-looking crag that jutted from the ground... headfirst.

"Waaaaaaah!" the people around Mile cried in panic.

This was very bad. No matter how sturdy Mile might be, the only thing protecting her head was bone—her own thin cranium surrounding her brain, neither of which were specially reinforced.

Mile lay stock-still on the ground.

Ugh, my head is swimming. I can't think straight...

She hadn't lost consciousness, but she could neither move nor think clearly. Her mind was hazy. She was lying face down, so the only thing that she could see before her dazed, unfocused eyes was the ground. Was this just a concussion? Or something far grimmer? Really, it was a wonder she hadn't perished instantly.

Huh? Where am I? I think I was trying to save a little girl... Oh, right. I got hit by a truck... I guess I'm in another world, then... It feels like I was just having a very, very long dream...

Either her memories were temporarily jumbled, or she had suddenly forgotten everything that had happened since her reincarnation. However...

I remember something warm... Something that I never had. Something that I wanted but could never get. If I died before I could ever get it, why does it feel like I finally did...?

Her consciousness began to fade, and she could no longer think at all. Countless balls of light danced before her clouded eyes.

Beautiful lights. Warm lights. Familiar lights...

Farewell, everyone...

...

.....

.....

..... *Wait, who is “everyone”?*

It wasn't her family.

Who, then?

She should know this. This was something that should be impossible to forget.

Someone kind.

Someone noble.

Someone hot and cold.

Someone she fought beside.

An undying friendship. Allies, bound at the soul.

They were... Their names were...

“The Crimson Vow!!”

As Mile lifted her head with a shout, eyes opening wide, she saw the backs of three girls: one with golden hair, noble in spirit, one redhead with a heart that was a hotter red still, and one brown-haired girl with kindness hidden deep down in her inky heart.

Though two of them weren't at all skilled in close-quarters combat, all three now stood even further ahead into the field than Mile, holding back the swarms of monsters to buy her time to recover, as they were certain she would. Though they were already covered in wounds...



“My allies! My precious friends!!”

Mile stood.

“Do you really think I’m gonna let my friends be killed by some stupid monsters?!?! Take this! Red Hot Helix Fire Lance!!!”

The fiery lance spiraled forward, tearing through the pack of monsters.

“*Mile!!*”

“Mile!”

They grinned at each other.

“Well then...”

“What do you say we...”

“...take this from the top?!”

“All right!!!”

And with that, the Crimson Vow went right back to mowing down their enemies.

* * *

After quite some time had passed...

“We’re gonna need a lot more power to break through this lineup,” Gren muttered. Mile had come to the same realization. The monsters continued cascading out of the rift, and though Mile and the other members of the first column vanguard were trying their best, the creatures’ combined numbers were forcing them back by gradual degrees. More and more C-rank monsters were slipping past them, and in the last few minutes, B-rank monsters had begun to make it through as well.

The front lines as a whole were moving gradually backward. No matter how much they might resist, there were limits to their numbers and what they could accomplish.

Strength. Endurance. The ferocity that inspired one to push on despite all odds. At the

start of the battle, these were sufficient, but as the fighting drew on, the difference in the two sides' tenacity was becoming evident.

"Dang it, we don't have enough tanks! Things are only gonna get worse from here."

There were a number of fighters among the hunters who regularly served as tanks, but they were used to facing humans or B-rank and lower monsters. Almost none of them were capable of tanking a monster of A-rank or above. Indeed, most people couldn't survive a single blow from such a monster.

At this point in the battle, the humanoids' lack of tanks put them at a huge disadvantage. Even the Crimson Vow, with all their offensive power, could only do so much to defend themselves against a head-on blow. Mile would take little damage in such an event, but her light body weight still proved disastrous, with a single blow capable of sending her shooting off into the distance. "Safe" as she might be, she was certainly no tank.

"We have enough offense. If only... if only we had more tanks..." Gren muttered to himself over and over, knowing that no matter how much he grumbled, he could not ask for what did not exist.

Just then...

Boom!

Behind him, a monster was sent flying.

"Wh-what the hell?!"

"I-It's..."

Gren and Mile looked behind them to see...

Sturdy bodies of towering stature. The immense power to squarely catch a monster's attack and repel it. This could only be...

An improbable squadron rushed in and pushed out past the front lines.

Bodies of earth. Bodies of stone. Bodies of iron.

“The great big guys who never let you down! G-Goda... No, no, no, the golems!!”

Sure enough, it was a group of golems who had been created with the purpose of defending this area, their base of operations. There were clay golems, rock golems, and iron golems—even a small escort of Scavengers, likely only a fraction of their number, as they would be participating mainly to direct the golems. The Scavengers’ primary purpose was to maintain their bases and repair and manufacture golems; they did not specialize in combat. Perhaps they had felt it necessary to take the lead in this battle, as the golems’ limited intelligence did not readily allow them to adapt to new situations on the fly.

“Did they abandon their basic commands to prioritize defending their own bases and territories? I didn’t realize that the golems and Scavengers could make that sort of judgment—Oh, wait! This must be Slow Walker’s doing!”

Indeed, Slow Walker would be able to make that call and give those directions. Perhaps its communication pathways had been restored by now...

Mile knew one thing for sure: The golems were their allies. Thanks to Mile’s continent-wide broadcast, everyone else knew it, too, so they didn’t hesitate to push forward, the golems at their sides. They could be both Mile’s tanks and escort.

“Okay, let’s do this! Time for a comeback!”

“Yeah!”

Though they were exhausted, the allied troops raised their voices in a cheer. Lobreth whirled in the skies above, unleashing ultrasonic attacks whenever things looked dire.

“Huh?”

Mile glanced upward, suddenly noticing something off about Lobreth. When she looked all around him, she saw...

“Oh no! When did they get here?”

Apparently, at some point, a number of wyverns must have flown out of the rift. They weren’t the wyverns of this world, which had grown frail over the generations—these were big and burly, clearly used to surviving in a harsh environment. Lobreth and Chelsea, who had been fighting against the monsters on the ground, had suddenly

found themselves surrounded.

They were greatly outnumbered, and even Lobreth's ultrasonic attacks were not truly invincible. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before he was ripped to shreds by the claws at the ends of the monstrous wyverns' wings, dismembered by their sharp talons and beaks—and Chelsea with him. Unfortunately, the humanoids did not possess the weaponry or artillery necessary to reach that high up into the air—and there was no time to go about preparing any ballistae.

Shiiiii... ing!

Lobreth let out another ultrasonic wave, but it was incredibly difficult to strike a flying target when they were both airborne. His foes couldn't unleash breath attacks like his, but with the advantage of their superior numbers and physical strength, it was still easy for the invader wyverns to back Lobreth into a corner. With Chelsea on his back, Lobreth couldn't execute any extreme maneuvers, making it even more impossible for him to strike back. If he shook Chelsea off, he might be able to muster all his strength to take flight and escape—but naturally, the thought had not even crossed Lobreth's mind.

With Lobreth cornered, Mile pondered desperately what she could do to help. Then...

Hyoom! Ba-boom!

A ball of fire shot from the thick clouds that covered the sky, knocking one of the wyverns pursuing Lobreth straight out of the air.

“What admirable form! Though you are but a pseudo-dragon, you would continue to fight to the last, never betraying the one you carry upon your back! Bravo!”

“It’s the elder dragon soldiers—with a whole platoon!”

Indeed, numerous elder dragons had appeared from out of the cloud cover.

Any elder dragon was more than strong enough to challenge a mere monster. And so, they all appeared to have come along—not just the soldiers but the entire clan. Maybe it wasn’t so surprising. Given how long they lived, elder dragons couldn’t possibly pass up a chance to be part of such a historic moment—one that they could boast about for centuries or even millennia to come.

Besides, this was the very reason for their existence—the desperate desire of their ancestors, their creators, and the gods themselves.

“Huh? There, on their backs...”

Looking closely, Mile spotted something on the elder -dragons. Mere moments later, the group of elder dragons alighted at Mile’s side, having made quick work of the wyverns. And, from their backs...

“I’ve been watching you! I’m here to help, human holy maiden!”

“Who’s coming in like they’re Kamen Rider number two?!” Mile exclaimed. “Oh, wait—it’s Miss Holy Maiden! And the demons!”

Atop the backs of the elder dragons were a host of demons, including the holy maiden.

“We’d meant to come in when the timing was right, but these fellows asked us to swing by their village and give them a ride, so we ended up a tad delayed. Then again, the star of the show always comes in last, don’t they? Soldiers, let us fight!”

The elder dragons let the demons down from their backs and launched into battle.

Fwoooom!

All at once, the elder dragon soldiers released not just fireballs but a continuous rush of flame. The civilian dragons clearly hadn’t been trained in the same way as the soldiers, but they could still let off scattered breath attacks.

“Wiping out the foes in the east was scarcely a challenge. Now it’s time for us to get serious...”

It had been assumed that the desperate defensive battle east of the capital of Aubram had ended in a decisive victory for the humanoids, despite heavy casualties. As it turned out, the elder dragons had lent a hand there as well. Unsurprisingly, they’d returned to their village to rest up before the next foray, but had no choice but to rush back into battle when the demons, who carried out so many tasks for them on a daily basis, pleaded desperately for their assistance.

The elder dragons were an arrogant race, but they could be kind to the lower life-forms they often thought of as beloved pets. The demons, likewise, had no choice but

to rely on the dragons—traveling on their own steam, they would have never made it to the battle in time. Missing the fight would embarrass their whole race. They would be the laughingstock of other races for centuries to come.

“Well then,” said Mile, “I’ll be trusting you with my life.”

Ker-swoosh!

The dragon breath tore through the enemies ahead, even exposing patches of the ground that had so recently been packed tight with monsters. Soon, though, those places were once again covered—this time with the monsters’ corpses.

“Hrmph...”

An elder dragon’s breath was a powerful thing. The only beings capable of defending against it were other elder dragons and Mile. Still, for them to wipe out one hundred monsters in a single go, one thousand had to be unleashed. Before they could vanquish one thousand, there had to be ten thousand...

The boundary between friend and foe was no longer a single line but a sprawling, tangled front. While the first column had largely broken into a series of skirmishes, the second column was somehow persisting in their assigned cleanup duties. If any powerful monsters that truly outmatched the first column made it through to the rear, all hell would break loose. And if the elder dragons placed a foot wrong in the places where ally and enemy fought in close quarters, they might damage those allies alongside their foes. So the dragons hung together in front of the rest of the fighters, letting loose a barrage of dragon breath.

However...

“How vexing!”

No monsters usually dared stand against an elder dragon. Faced with such supreme might, most tended to simply follow their instincts, turn tail, and run. These monsters, however, could neither stand down nor flee, spurred ever onward as they were by the others flooding in behind them. They had no choice but to continue forward. And unlike the monsters that had grown soft during their time living in this more temperate world, these evolved, high-ranking creatures had been hardened by their

harsh environment. If any creature might actually stand a chance against an elder dragon, it would be one of these monsters.

Perhaps they would scratch off just one scale. It might cost them their lives, but in exchange, they could take advantage of that tiny chink in the dragon's armor and sink their teeth into the opening to inject their deadly venom. Such a wound would not be life-threatening to an elder dragon, but it would be both unpleasant and vexing. And no matter how shallow each wound might be, an accumulation of hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of them could certainly have an impact.

If the elder dragons were to attack solely from the air, the monsters would have no chance of reaching them, but doing that meant sacrificing the powerful melee attacks they could launch with their massive bodies, leaving them with their breath as their only means of offense. Then there was their pride. No elder dragon could be expected to do something as shameful as flee to the skies in fear of a bunch of vermin. Additionally, their breath attacks were not limitless. Sooner or later, they would grow tired, and their magical power would run out.

“Change targets! Everyone, fire your breath into the rift!” the leader of the dragon soldiers commanded.

Apparently, they had decided it would be more efficient to try and destroy the dimensional rift itself, rather than battling forever against the endlessly spawning monsters.

“That genius!” Mile exclaimed, impressed. “Elder dragons are so smart! We should just destroy whatever system is maintaining the rift!” In fact, the dragons had only been thinking that it would be smarter to fire at a concentrated choke point, rather than waiting for the enemies to scatter all over the place; they had no idea that the rift was being maintained by scientific means.

Besides, the range of their breath was not very long. Fireballs had a short effective range, and a flare attack could never hope to reach the other end of the tunnel-like rift.

“It’s no use. You’d need a powerful explosive device or a high-output beam weapon to do any damage on the other side of the rift or to destroy the dimensional tunneling system. If we’re talking physical weapons, I wish we at least had a 16-inch (40.6cm) gun like on the *Iowa*-class battleship the *USS Missouri*... That thing could even take down an alien combat machine...” As usual, Mile was chattering about things that no

one around her could understand, but it hardly mattered in the heat of battle. “If only I did have some kind of weapon like the Sunshine Destroyer, where I could just issue a verbal command to the nanomachines without any burden on me and fire as many times as I wanted...”

Sadly, that would be far too convenient. No single weapon could possibly solve their problems that easily.

Yet again, Mile glared up at the thick clouds blotting out the sun.

KER-FLASH!

“Huh?”

Suddenly, a single glowing blade pierced through the thick clouds, striking into the ground. The light quivered back and—

Plish plish plish plish plish!

It was like a ray of sun concentrated through a magnifying glass, incinerating a row of ants. One by one the monsters’ bodies came instantly to a boil beneath the immense heat, before bursting.

Plish plish plish plish plish!

Plish plish plish plish plish!

Plish plish plish plish plish!

“Wha...?”

Mile froze, dumbfounded, at this surprise salvo of salvation. And then...

“Oh my! The Goddess has come to our aid!!! Even the heavens are on our side!!!” Gren crowed.

“Yaaaaahhh!!!” the crowd of humanoid fighters cheered.

It didn’t matter whether what Gren said was true or not. Any competent commander knew to use any tool available to him to raise his troops’ morale. Furthermore, there

was no question that this blade of light—whatever it was—was clearly on their side. And so, Gren's words were passed from one fighter to the next along with their cheers, reaching all the way to the farthest ends of the battlefield in the blink of an eye.

"Wh-what *is* that?!"

AN ATTACK FROM A SATELLITE TARGETING SYSTEM. IT SEEMS THE SCAVENGERS UNDER YOUR COMMAND MADE THEIR WAY INTO SPACE VIA A PRIMITIVE CHEMICAL REACTION JET PROPULSION SYSTEM—IN ESSENCE, A ROCKET ENGINE—AND REPAIRED THE DEFENSE SATELLITES THAT REMAINED IN ORBIT. MOST OF THE SATELLITES ARE IN THOROUGH DISREPAIR AND REMAIN DISABLED, BUT ALL UNITS CAPABLE OF MOVEMENT HAVE BEEN BROUGHT INTO POSITION OVER THIS LOCATION. OF THEM, TWO OR THREE ARE NOW CAPABLE OF MAIN ARTILLERY FIRE. THERE ARE OTHERS, SUCH AS THOSE AT LAGRANGE POINTS OR CURRENTLY IN STELLAR ORBIT, BUT THOSE COULD NOT MAKE IT HERE IN TIME.

Just as the nanomachines wrapped up their explanation, two more blades of light came down from the heavens.

KER-FLASH!!!

KER-FLASH!!!

The two glowing blades pierced the earth, tearing through any monsters in their wake. Clearly, they could differentiate between friend and foe.

"Wait," Mile wondered. "Are the Scavengers on the ground to help them with targeting?"

The Scavengers and defense satellites were both products of a civilization far more advanced than that of present-day Earth. They had to be able to see the ground through a few clouds. And sure enough, after making a deadly sweep through the area where the monsters were concentrated, all three beams focused in on the rift.

"Yes! Looks like we're right on the same page!"

The rift was engulfed in elder dragon breath and beams from the defense satellites. The dragons' breath crushed the monsters that were swarming through, while the beams from the defense satellites shot through to the other side of the opening. The dragons might not have planned it this way, but the result was an effective division of

labor, which caused the influx of monsters to slow immensely.

"I wonder if that's the last of the monsters or if the beam attacks have just disrupted them temporarily... Well, either way, if we can just keep this up—" Mile started, but before she could complete the thought, one of the three beams fizzled out. "Uh?"

ONE OF THE THREE ATTACKING SATELLITES HAS EXPLODED. APPARENTLY, THE DETERIORATION WAS SIMPLY FAR TOO ADVANCED. THIS IS LIKELY THE RESULT OF PRIORITIZING PARTICIPATING IN THE ATTACK OVER MAINTAINING AN AMPLE MARGIN OF SAFETY, WHICH—

"They were meant for this, weren't they?"

COME AGAIN?

"My followers. Isn't this what they were meant for? For this very day. The Scavengers, who persisted for an eternity, waiting for the day when they would defend humanity and this planet?"

INDEED.

Then, one more beam winked out.

"Oh dear..."

APPARENTLY THE BEAM CANNON HAS BEEN DAMAGED, THOUGH THE SATELLITE ITSELF IS STILL INTACT.

"Thank goodness! That means only one of them is still operational, though. At this rate... Huh?"

A speck of light pierced the thick clouds, racing down to earth. It then plunged into the dimensional rift... and exploded.

THAT WAS FROM THE SATELLITE WITH THE DAMAGED BEAM CANNON. IT LIKELY JUDGED THAT IT HAD NO FURTHER REASON TO EXIST, WITH ITS PRIMARY WEAPONS LOST, AND DECIDED TO UTILIZE THE ONE MODE OF ATTACK AVAILABLE TO IT. ITS FINAL WEAPON: ITS DEVOTION TO ITS CREATORS AND ITS ADMINISTRATOR.

"Huh? What...?"

Mile could not grasp what the nanomachines were talking about.

Then, one after another, more specks of light rained down from the sky, slicing through the clouds.

THOSE ARE THE SATELLITES THAT HAD STATIONED THEMSELVES ABOVE OUR CURRENT LOCATION AND WERE IN THE PROCESS OF HAVING THEIR WEAPONS REPAIRED. WHAT NOBLE CREATIONS... HOW DEEP THEIR LOYALTY TO THEIR CREATORS AND THEIR ADMINISTRATOR...

The nanomachines seemed almost somber.

One by one the satellites plunged into the rift, the sounds of explosions continuing to ring out. However... the rift showed no signs of vanishing.

"Will their sacrifice be in vain?"

COME AGAIN?

"Will the Scavengers' 'deaths' be in vain...?" asked Mile, gritting her teeth. "I think they've just taught me something. Obviously, the energy that remains after sunlight filters through thick clouds is insufficient. But if you can gather that energy *before* it ever passes through the clouds... Nanomachines! *Je! Te! Commande!* All nanomachines on the battlefield, support the magic used by our friendly troops! All nanomachines beyond the battlefield, ascend, full power! As many as you can, and as high as you can!"

All the nearby nanomachines were vitally engaged in the battle against the monsters. But all of those not relevant to the present fight received that command from Mile, who held an authorization level of 7.

Up, up, and up!

The efficacy of magic used anywhere outside of the battlefield would be temporarily lowered, but that was neither here nor there. The fate of *everything* rested on this battle!

“Nanomachines, split into five groups! Groups one through three, pass through the clouds and move into space! Groups four and five, continue operating below the clouds! Group one, you form a massive reflector, solar system-wide, and aim the reflected light at a lens that group two forms! Group two, you make that lens and gather that sunlight!”

“Group three, position yourselves at the focal point of the light that group two gathers, and refract it straight ahead, no diffusion! Group four, diffuse the light that comes down through the clouds and spray it across the monsters. Group five, reflect a number of the diffused beams from group four and aim it at high-ranking monsters, or any places where our allies are in trouble!”

This was it: the ultimate magic, incorporating all of Misato Kurihara’s knowledge from her previous life. Knowledge of solar systems, focused light, homing lasers, spritzer beams, and reflective satellite cannons.

“If the sun’s rays are blocked by the clouds, then you just have to gather the sunlight from *above* the clouds. That way, a powerful beam can reach the ground, without any attenuation from the clouds. Why didn’t I think of something so simple?”

It was thanks to the direct satellite bombardment from the Scavengers that the thought had even crossed her mind. Really, they should receive the credit for this attack.

“Keep watching, Scavengers! This is our joint assault, yours and mine!”

LADY MILE, WE ARE READY TO LAUNCH!

“Okay then! *Sunshine Destroyer, fire!!!*”

Up in space, far above the battlefield, there was now a massive reflective field. The sunlight reflected by the field was poured into a giant lens and focused. At the point where the light was most concentrated, it was refracted into a beam which passed easily through the thick clouds without losing any of its power. It was then diffused by the optical prism the fourth group of nanomachines had crafted below the clouds. The light was shot down to the earth in dozens of superpowered beams, which the fifth group of nanomachines aimed at larger targets or monsters that were in the middle of the fray.

"Okay! Not only have we successfully disrupted them, but we've also annihilated most of the B-rank and higher monsters. We've definitely turned the tides in our favor. Now, all we've gotta do is smash that rift! I'm not sure that the spray gun laser mode that we've been using for wide area monster sweeps will be very effective against the dimensional tunnel, though. The magitech gun—er, the spray gun—is enough to defeat monsters, but that doesn't mean it's enough to smash the rift! We need to concentrate all the beams and focus them on the center of the opening!"

"Nanomachines, coordinate the satellite team and the spray gun team and reflect a focused beam straight from the second stage lens, no diffusion. Aim it right at the rift, full power! Tear into that other world with everything you've got and destroy the system generating that rift!"

Though Mile's conversations with the nanomachines typically took place in silence, she was now screaming with urgency. Now was not the time to worry about being overheard. Every brain cell she possessed was focused on this single attack.

"Let's destroy that rift! There's only one name suitable for this fearsome weapon, which not only destroys matter but also rips through dimensions. It tears through the time-space continuum with its sharp talons, shredding everything with its razor of a beak—Death Raptor, *prepare to fire!*"

(This was, of course, a play on "Disrupter," courtesy of Mile, who had once been a big fan of space operas. Even in the midst of her biggest battle ever, she was still herself.)

"And... fire!!!"

All of the energy sent down from the sky struck the dimensional rift tunnel. However...

"Huh?"

It was repelled. All of the focused sunlight struck something near the entrance of the rift and glanced off back into the sky. And at the point where the light had been reflected back, Mile saw...

"A robot!"

Indeed, there stood a robot—the same one they had seen back during their investigations in Aubram—though it was unclear if it was the same individual unit or simply the same model. Regardless, there were two facts that were obvious: that the

robot was there and that somehow it had completely deflected the attack of the Sunlight Breaker, which should have immediately destroyed any monster...

Again and again, it repelled what should have been a surefire attack.

"Is it a barrier? Or maybe a reflective field? If so, it doesn't seem like we can just power through it. We'll have to destroy the robot that's generating it. But how do we do that when it's deflecting our attacks...?"

One could assume that a creature with protections powerful enough to deflect Mile's Sunlight Breaker was also capable of repelling any magical attacks. If it could shield against attacks by scientific means, that meant it would be able to defend against any magical assaults, which were in fact scientific in nature, orchestrated via the nanomachines. Unless, of course, they were able to launch an attack of overwhelming force, something that far exceeded their expectations...

The long and the short of it was that Mile—who, no matter how strong she was compared to other humans, was still only half as powerful as an elder dragon—had no hope of piercing through a field that could deflect even a Sunlight Breaker. She bit her lip, falling deep into thought. Just then...

"Elder dragon soldiers—no, all elder dragons—prepare for a simultaneous assault! Aim it right at that defensive barrier that reflected Lady Mile's attack! Breath at the ready... Fire!"

BWOOOOOOOM!!!

A breath attack from every elder dragon. Then...

"All mages, join in with the elder dragons! Don't worry about preserving your strength now! Full power! Let's show them how bright humanoids—how bright *we* can shine!!!"

At Gren's cry, countless magical attacks fired forth from the humanoid ranks. Along with the dragons' breath, they poured down on the defensive magic protecting the dimensional rift. Physical ice and earth attacks came in from the front. Fire and other magics enveloped the barrier itself. No matter how well fortified the barrier was against full-frontal magic and laser beams, suffering physical attacks along with infernos and blasts that wrapped around its edges was too much for it to defend against. Though it was not shattered directly, the robot behind the barrier fell to its

knees, as if overwhelmed by the heat, and collapsed.

At that same moment, the barrier was dispelled. The Sunlight Breaker, the beam fired from Mile's ultimate attack, the Death Raptor, plunged straight into the rift.

"Let's gooooooooooo! Bore through it!"

The nanomachines took control of the beam. Though the makeup of the inside of the tunnel that formed the dimensional rift was unclear, its walls seemed to reflect the beam, which bounced back and forth from one side of the tunnel to the other. Electromagnetic waves probably couldn't make it through the discontinuities in space-time. But the beam, traveling through the tunnel, could spread in every direction—destroying everything in its path.

"Gooooo!!!"

Mile was, of course, only commanding the firing of the Sunshine Destroyer—or as it was now known, the Death Raptor. It was the nanomachines doing the actual operating of her new weapon, so there was no burden on Mile whatsoever. It would take far more than that to destroy the nanomachines, and even if they were to be destroyed, there were plenty more where these came from. Thus, they could continue this assault indefinitely. Until this system's star burned itself out...

With no more monsters incoming, their numbers swiftly dwindled, and the threat to the humanoid forces diminished. All that was left to do was take out the rest of the trash. And then...

Fwoomf!

The dimensional rift closed.

"Did we... do it?"

Though there were still monsters on the field, a number of the hunters and soldiers

froze, speechless.

“Don’t let your guard down, idiots! Think what an embarrassment it would be to make it this far just to die!”

The veterans stepped in to issue commands. However, though the fighting continued, everyone was of the same mind:

It's over. We won...

Yet it didn’t much feel like a victory—not yet. They had all been spewing words of optimism, but none of them actually thought they were making it home alive. It was hard to believe that they might just have won this battle.

“Just hold out a little longer! Be cautious, and let’s all make it home safe and sound!”

“All riiiiiiight!!!”

* * *

“It’s over.”

The last of the monsters had been cleaned up, and assistance rendered to the most severely injured. The death count would not be climbing any higher. Later, they could apply further healing magic to those who required it, but no one was in immediate danger at this point.

The death count was in fact higher than zero, but this was to be expected. In a battle of this magnitude, it was a small price to pay. Those who had died would be honored for their service in protecting the world, and their families could expect nothing but love and support to come.

Some deaths were inevitable and unavoidable.

“Those monsters must have come to this new land with their hearts full of hope, like immigrants... I suppose to the invaders, we, the savage life-forms attacking them, must have seemed like the monsters...” Mile said softly. She wondered what the people had thought when the previous invasion occurred, what decisions they made. There was not a soul in this world going around protesting the war against the monsters, claiming that monsters had a right to live, or that if they just talked things over,

perhaps both sides could come to an understanding.

When faced with an enemy, you had to defeat them. Mercy was a luxury afforded only to the strong.

Compared to the monsters they had just faced, the monsters of this world—who had come long ago and established themselves—were incredibly weak. Perhaps they had grown weaker after coming to this world. Or perhaps conditions had continued growing increasingly harsh in their original world, forcing the monsters who remained to grow proportionally more ferocious.

“I wonder if all of the Scavengers who went into space were destroyed,” Mile said sadly, looking up to the sky. Though they were manufactured rather than born, they revered her as their administrator, obeying her directive not to thoughtlessly attack sentient life-forms. And Mile, having once grown up in Japan, believed that all things had a soul. The grass, the trees, well-loved tools... and, of course, robots.

“Hm?”

Suddenly, Mile caught a glimpse of something twinkling up in the sky.

“Hmmm?”

One by one, the twinkling lights increased, gradually growing in size.

THOSE ARE BALLUTES. IT SEEMS THE SCAVENGERS ARE USING THEM FOR ATMOSPHERIC RE-ENTRY. APPARENTLY, THEY CONTROLLED THE SATELLITE DROPS REMOTELY, SO THE MACHINES SURVIVED, the nanomachines cheerfully reported.

“Really?!” Mile was stunned.

The word “ballute” was a portmanteau of “balloon” and “parachute.” They were bag-shaped deceleration devices formed of expanding gas, far sturdier than a normal parachute at high speeds. It was a technology that had been in actual use on Earth for over sixty years—not, contrary to popular belief, invented by a certain mecha anime. Given enough materials and time, they could have chosen a safer method, but time was of the essence here, and so they’d had to rely on this rudimentary method. They

had prioritized completing their duty over their own safety...

After descending to a reasonable altitude, one by one, the Scavengers opened up white parachutes and detached from their ballutes. The final stage of the descent was to be done via these parachutes, perhaps to dampen the impact of their landing, or perhaps because it was easier to control their trajectory with the parachutes. Mile had no knowledge of the mechanisms behind a ballute, but she did understand how a parachute worked. In other words—she knew that the Scavengers would land safely on the ground.

“Ah ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

Though emergency aid had been rendered to those most gravely injured, there were still others laying wounded on the ground. There were also those who would never rise again, -already gone from this world. To laugh in such a situation would be disrespectful.



Yet, here and there, laughter began to rise among the survivors. And so, one could perhaps forgive Mile for laughing in joy, knowing that her subordinates had survived.

The assembled forces paid their respects to the dead.

Those who still lived gave thanks to the gods and laughed from the joy of living.

* * *

"We won," said Gren, who had shown up by Mile's side.

"We really won," Mile replied, finally calm.

"That was amazing! What the heck was that crazy spell you used?! You have *got* to explain it to me later! Also seriously, people are going to be talking about and researching this battle for centuries to come! I *knew* my eyes didn't deceive me!"

"Centuries? I mean, don't you think you're exaggerating a little bit?"

No matter how hard-up for entertainment the elves may have been, surely this would not be something they would talk about for *centuries*, Mile thought, but Clairia was too excited to listen.

"'Twas an arduous task... Er, rather, I mean, it was tiring, no wait, uh... I, um..." said one of the elder dragons, thudding up to Mile. He seemed to be a bit befuddled as to whether he should be addressing a lower life-form with his usual arrogant manner or if he ought to be prostrating himself before an agent of the divine. Mile was unable to tell elder dragons apart by their faces, but she could tell from his manner that this was not Kragon. Kragon would not have hesitated to address her with respect.

"Please, feel free to speak as you usually would. I *am* a lesser life-form, after all..."

The elder dragon fell silent. He still seemed perplexed.

"She's crazy... She can jab at elves and speak to elder dragons like it's nothing..."

"I guess that's a divine messenger's privilege..."

Around her, people swapped commentary, surprise, and admiration, but Mile heard none of it.

Instead, she gave a little Mile gasp. “Oh!”

“What is it now?” Reina sighed, weary.

“Oh, it’s just there are a ton of monster carcasses lying around here now, right?”

“There are. More than anyone could count...”

“Should we just leave them here? I’m sure that some of them could be eaten or harvested for parts, but that’s only a small fraction, right? We can’t carry them all back to town, but... What’s going to happen if we just leave them here? Will this become a feeding ground for monsters? Will it start teeming with maggots and then just rot? Is it going to start a plague?”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

All the color started draining from the faces of those who overheard their conversation.

“We’ll leave that for the bigwigs to figure out,” Reina finally said. “That is none of our business. You hear me? *None* of our business!”

The members of the Crimson Vow did feel bad about what would lie in store for the people of the Empire, but at the same time, they did not wish to involve themselves in the matter. So, they decided not to think about it. What they did not realize was that it was also going to cause trouble for *them* down the road...

* * *

In the end, the only aberrant monsters that ended up surviving the invasion, finding footholds here and there, were the jackalopes. Jackalopes weren’t the sort of monsters that attacked your average traveler walking down the highway, nor the kind that could easily kill someone in a one-on-one fight if their guard was up—even if that someone was a woman or child. Their meat and pelts were useful, and they were the perfect opponents for village children and rookie hunters hoping to earn a bit of pocket change, so an increase in their numbers was actually a welcome turn of events. Being

weak monsters to begin with, it didn't hurt for them to become a little bit stronger. As such, they had been largely ignored during the invasion, exempt from the extermination list.

When all was said and done, the Crimson Vow joined the other magical forces focused on healing the wounded. Now that she had already been outed as a "messenger," there was no reason for Mile to hold back on repairing even lost body parts. In the cases where it was just a matter of sticking them back on (as it were), Mile didn't even have to be present for the whole healing process—all she had to do was order the nanomachines to work their magic and tell the patient to take it easy for a few weeks.

Truly, that level-7 authorization of hers was not just for show.

Losing a limb could have ramifications for someone's entire life. They could lose their job or be unable to perform daily tasks. Mile would never allow these brave men and women's lives to be ruined for as silly a reason as trying to conceal her own abilities. So, along with the Wonder Trio, Pauline, Mariette, and others, she took up the task of healing most of the seriously wounded.

While she was at it, she could not permit any scars to remain upon a lady's face—though she did her best to comply with the wishes of the men who wanted some trophies of their valor in battle, simply dealing with the painful parts and leaving a few artistic cuts and scratches.

All of those who neither needed nor possessed healing magic had already been sent on their way back home. Because so very many people had come, the surrounding area simply couldn't support them all. Water would have had to be shuttled there from the nearest riverhead. There were limits to how much water a mage could produce in a day, and if a large concentration of mages kept on using water spells, it would suck up all of the moisture in the atmosphere nearby. The air would grow arid, and the spells would either grow inefficient or completely ineffective. Plus, if the air grew that dry, it would start hurting people's throats and lungs, and wildfires would not be out of the question.

Then, there was the issue of food... and toilets.

No matter how much monster meat they might be surrounded by, they certainly couldn't just go around eating -uncooked and possibly parasite-ridden flesh. With this many people, there would not be enough cooking supplies or kindling to go around,

and the only way to deal with the issues of shelf-stability and portability would be to pass around portable meals for the travelers to eat as is, which would be utterly impossible to prepare for tens or hundreds of thousands of people three times every single day.

Even more importantly was what might happen *after* people ate—that was, *toilets*. More specifically defecating. If this many people were to void their bowels in the same area, within a single day there would be no room for anyone to walk. One might suggest using feces as fertilizer, spreading it across the area to make the former battlefield arable—but it was hardly that simple. They had neither the time nor the resources to work it into proper compost. If freshly produced fecal matter was scattered about without proper treatment, the land would be infested with germs and parasites.

The only choice was for everyone to pack it up and go back home as soon as possible.

For those who needed to remain, there were farmers and merchants providing food at cost. The people who'd joined the volunteer militia would have needed to eat even if they hadn't done so. It wasn't that there was a deficit of resources, *per se*, just that having so very many people concentrated in one place had caused the distribution of supplies to slow. Things were already getting rather dire.

People would just have to head back to their homes, limiting themselves to one meal a day. But that was fine. After all, it was said humans could live for two to three weeks on only water.

CHAPTER 120

AFTER THE BATTLE

“WE’RE FINALLY HOME...”

“Finally home...”

“We made it back...”

“.....”

At long last, the Crimson Vow had returned to their home in the capital of Tils.

“We’re beat...” the four agreed.

It was not the walking that had exhausted them—it was all of the attention! Every single person they had encountered on the way back from the battlefield had wanted to talk to them, or shake their hands, or ask for an autograph, or rip off a piece of their clothing, or yank out one of their hairs as a souvenir. By now, they were in tatters, both mentally and physically... and their clothing was in no better shape.

“Truly, humans are the most fearsome monster of all,” Mavis said gravely.

“I can’t believe you even have the brainpower to say something clever after all that...” Reina sighed. Mile and Pauline were similarly impressed. Neither of them had the energy to come up with a response of any kind.

Much as they tried to avoid meddling attention, the streets were packed with volunteer fighters, soldiers, mercenaries, and hunters returning home. Obviously, the Crimson Vow could not be rude to the brave men and women who had risked their lives to rush to their aid. And so, the four were forced to grin and bear it, keeping smiles plastered on their faces no matter how their cheek muscles cramped.

At night, they made camp in the forest, far away from the main roads, but even then—much to the hunters’ chagrin—many found their tracks and followed them. Of course, Mile erected a barrier and sound dampening setup around the tent, but regardless of

how tight their defenses were, it made them nervous to bathe or use the bathroom. By the end of the trip, things had grown rather dire.

"It's not going to go on like this forever, right?" Mavis finally asked a question that really shouldn't be asked.

"G..." the other three stammered.

"G...?"

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

"Don't ask that!" Reina screeched.

"Don't even think it!" Pauline yelled.

Mile had simply frozen in place, going pale.

"L-Let's go to the inn!"

It would be foolish to head to the guildhall. The moment they arrived, the place would explode with celebrations that they would be unable to escape. Right now, they were tired, and all they wanted to do was rest. Most people would be unaware of how quickly the Crimson Vow could move from place to place and so likely believed that it would be several more days before the party made it back to the capital. They were, after all, four young girls, and it was obvious that Pauline in particular was not especially physically fit. If they could just get back to the inn without anyone seeing them, they could at least get a rest in before showing their faces at the guild.

And when they did visit the guildhall, they would say nothing of themselves, explaining that their victory had all been thanks to the volunteers who showed up from every kingdom—the soldiers, hunters, mercenaries, elder dragons, and members of every other race. At least, that was their plan.

* * *

"Miss Satodele, you've returned! I've been waiting for you! We have to get everything in writing immediately! First, we need a record of the battle that just occurred. After that, we'll need to put out a more lighthearted *Diary of a Messenger* and *You've Got This, Little Messenger!* We'll want to do *A Primer to Magic of Mass Destruction and Light*

Magic for Dummies and *Speaking with Elder Dragons* and so on and so forth! We already have scribes at the ready. Everyone is bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and raring to publish your next manuscript!"

"Oh, Melsacus..."

There in front of the inn stood the young manager of Orpheus Publishing, the company in charge of putting out Mile's—or rather, Miami Satodele's—novels. He really was quite the go-getter. Melsacus was regularly in contact with Mile during her travels, as they exchanged letters and manuscripts, so he already had some grasp on the party's ability to move with abnormal speed. Mile always let him know the next place they would be staying and how long they would be there, for ease of contact. Besides, he was learned and insightful, which meant he had accurately predicted the state the Crimson Vow would be in on the way home. This allowed him to determine they would be headed back at full speed, with no stops or detours. Based on all that information, he was able to calculate their date of arrival.

He had been standing in front of the inn since early that morning, which made it clear to Mile that the publishing house was desperate for the "messenger's" manuscript—even if it meant turning down all other work.

I guess I'll have to turn the sections in as I write them, instead of when I've finished a whole book's worth, she thought. If she were to make Melsacus wait until the whole volume was done, and the publishers took on no other work while they waited, that would mean no profits for the company. This would, of course, be particularly difficult on those who had families. In fairness, the publishers' earnings were really none of Mile's business, as *they* were the ones who had seemingly made the decision to turn down all other work while waiting for hers—but she was also not the sort of person who could flippantly disregard a group of people whose livelihood depended on her.

"Um... Well, I'll figure out something with the first book, anyway..."

Unfortunately, she had little other choice.

When the members of the Crimson Vow entered the inn, Lenny was there to greet them with a smile.

"Big sisters! What troubles you must have faced!"

"Why does it sound like you're welcoming us home from prison?!" Mile complained.

"You all have really been through a lot lately, haven't you? Especially that part where you received divine powers from the Goddess above and fought your way to the enemy stronghold. And there was that ultimate secret technique! What was it called...? Oh right, the Death Raptor!"

"Huh?"

The four were bewildered. How could Lenny possibly know about all of that? The Crimson Vow was the only party who could have made it back to the capital already. The troops would be slow to march, and the civilians were not accustomed to traveling such long distances. The mercenaries and hunters would be busy drinking themselves into a stupor in the towns along the way, which meant they would be moving at a snail's pace... Plus, anyone who had been part of the battle would find themselves treated to all the food and drink they liked at the pubs in those towns. Quite a few women would probably be throwing themselves at the feet of these supposed heroes... There was not a man in the world who would let a chance like that pass them by.

So, how could Lenny possibly have known so much about what had transpired at the scene of the battle? And why was she talking as though she had witnessed it with her own eyes and ears?

"It was amazing! I don't think I'll ever forget your acts of courage..."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

"Huhhhhh???"

"L-Lenny, wh-what in the world are you talking about?" Mile asked timorously.

"I mean, obviously I was on the edge of my seat the entire time! How could I miss a once-in-a-lifetime spectacular like you all just showed us?! Seeing that giant picture up in the air, hearing all the sounds—I'll never forget a moment of it, not as long as I live! I'm sure everyone else in the world feels the same way!"

"G..."

"G...?"

"Gaaaaaaah!!!"

Wait a second... Mile thought. When I said to show the images to as many people as possible... That wasn't what I meant! Nanos, I know you know what I meant! And wait, actually, it was your idea to begin with! You persuaded me to make that call, which means... This was your plan from the start!

For once, there was no reply from the nanos.

Say something, you little jerks!

* * *

The Wonder Trio had been in the middle of taking a breather, having reached a good stopping point in the process of healing the injured, when they were assailed by Princess Morena and dragged forcibly back to Brandel.

At present, they were getting quite a few dirty looks from the all-female imperial guard and others of similar stature. Of course, the Trio were the reason that these guard members (who were comprised primarily of women of noble birth and were hired mainly to play at being knights while they were around the palace) had been dragged all the way out to the battlefield, where some of them had quite literally almost died. It was little surprise that they might harbor such resentment...

* * *

Mile and the rest of the Crimson Vow lived the days that followed in peace—though they knew, of course, that such an idyll could not last forever.

Mile—or rather, *Adele*—had now revealed her true identity to the entire continent, along with her true power, and the fact that she was under the Goddess's divine protection. Any day now, Brandel would be issuing an official request to the kingdom of Tils to return the head of one of their noble households. Various ecclesiastical authorities would be making moves to detain her, and she would be receiving overtures and appointments of peerage from other countries. The more intellectually minded governments were sure to extend invitations to the young scholarly prodigy Miami Satodele, known not only for her fictional works but her academic texts as well, including *Doctrines on Divine Rule; Being A Noble; Thought Experiments: The Elements*

of Capitalism, and so forth.

All in all, it had the makings of a perfect storm, and there was not a single member of the Crimson Vow who was not well aware of this. The scale of what had just transpired was far too great, and the casualties to the troops that had been dispatched to the east of Aubram too massive to overlook. For the powers in question, there would be the matter of restoring the armies, compensating nobles... and the invaluable trophy that was the so-called “Messenger.”

Brandel was adamant about demanding Mile’s repatriation, as not only her mother country but also as the kingdom where she already held a title. Tils insisted that the C-rank hunter known as Mile was unmistakably a citizen of their country, as that was where she had registered as a hunter and graduated from their country’s school under official scholarship, without anyone ever being aware that she was a runaway noble. The ecclesiastical authorities, meanwhile, claimed that the divine messenger was naturally under *their* protection, no matter what the various royal governments had to say about it. The Albarn Empire naturally insisted that it was they to whom the divine messenger belonged, as the battle for the fate of the world had taken place on *their* soil.

Before long, international conferences had reached a stalemate. The competing claims were clearly unreconcilable, leaving no country able to lay hands on Mile. But the peace that she currently enjoyed was only temporary—the eye of the hurricane, as it were.

* * *

“W-wait! We’ve all been offered titles?!”

A messenger had appeared from the royal palace of Tils, informing the Crimson Vow of their newly aristocratic status.

“Yes. Lady Mile, Lady Mavis, Lady Reina, and Lady Pauline: For your achievements in defending the world from danger, you have all been conferred the rank of countess. Sincerest congratulations! Frankly, with all that the four of you have achieved, I would not be shocked if you were even promoted to marquises, but I’m sure certain parties would crawl out of the woodwork to complain if things went that far. I hope you do not take offense.”

“I-I see...”

The messenger was surprisingly frank in the way he discussed the matter, but he did not seem to be a bad person.

The four members of the Crimson Vow could only look at one another in silence.

* * *

Even after the messenger departed, the four of them could still barely speak.

“Wh-wh-wh-what do we do?” stammered Reina.

“I-I-I-I don’t know what we should...” Mile stuttered.

“Wh-wh-wh-what the heck are we supposed to do...?” Mavis fretted.

“I-I-I-It’s just totally unprecedented...!” Pauline muttered.

After pausing to drink some tea, they seemed to finally pull themselves together.

“So...” asked Reina. “What *do* we do?”

“If we refuse an appointment from the king himself, they’ll think we’re harboring treasonous intent and hang us for sedition!” Mavis cried. “Or lock us away for the rest of our lives...”

The four were silent again. Already being a noble, Mavis knew how these things worked.

“I guess we’d better accept, then...”

“.....”

* * *

“Wait, a promotion?”

“Yes. As of this very moment—upon receipt of this missive!—you, Adele von Ascham, have been conferred the rank of marquis.”

Once more, silence overtook the Crimson Vow. A messenger had just arrived from the kingdom of Brandel with a special notice for Mile—or rather, Adele. As Adele had been a viscountess and not a commoner to begin with, this was merely a promotion of two ranks. Since such promotions were primarily given for the purpose of allowing a noble to marry to a higher-ranking noble or even a royal sometime in the future, no one objected to Adele receiving such a lofty title. The palace had likely received word of her promotion to countess in Tils and decided to award her an even higher honor.

Of course, even this elevated rank came with no mention of land. Estates befitting a marquis weren't simply lying around, free for the taking. It wasn't so strange that she had been given a title alone, with her estate remaining that of a viscount. After all, offering her vaster lands might cause more problems. Perhaps they had even purposely left her estate as it was, so that it could be managed by a clerk. That way Mile herself could remain at the palace, all dolled up in noble garb... ready to become the bride of the child of someone with a lofty title...

This errand boy (though he seemed to, in fact, be a viscount), was nothing more than a messenger—a homing pigeon delivering news of a decision that had already been made. There was no point in Mile protesting. His job was only to deliver the message; he held no authority beyond that.

* * *

“Lady Mile, you have been conferred the rank of countess in the Albarn Empire.”

“Lady Mile, you have been conferred the rank of marquis in the kingdom of Aubram.”

“Lady Mile, you have been conferred the rank of countess in the kingdom of Marlane.”

“Lady Mile, you have been conferred the rank of countess in the kingdom of Trist, and appointed as advisor to the mage division of the imperial guard.”

“Lady Mile, you have been conferred the rank of countess in the kingdom of Vanolark, and appointed honorary head of the royal family's personal guard.”

“Lady Mile, the papacy has officially recognized you as a ‘divine messenger’ and ‘great holy maiden,’ and appointed you a cardinal.”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

* * *

"Whatcha gonna do...?" asked Reina.

"H-how should I know?!" Mile sighed.

"How are you gonna handle this?" asked Mavis.

"Please don't ask..." Mile whined.

"How do you intend to keep up with your duties as my personal warehouse and carthorse?!" Pauline demanded.

"Pauline! *That's* what you're worried about?!" shouted the other three.

"Anyway, you three are countesses now, too!" Mile rebutted.

"Oh, right..."

All four let out a collective sigh.

"What the heck are we supposed to do?!?!?!?"

* * *

The peerage battle that had begun with the kingdom of Tils was now in a seven-way deadlock. The other six countries all rebuked Tils for causing trouble by trying to get a head start on the contest, saying that it would only cause trouble for Mile. Instead, they proposed that all seven powers come together to discuss this as a group.

The other three members of the Crimson Vow were, of course, incredibly skilled hunters, but they were nothing more than normal humans—albeit ones with the strength of an A- or S-ranker. Mile was a different story: a divine messenger, who held influence with elder dragons and wielded attack magic on par with the hammer of the Goddess. Besides, no other nations could hope to nab Mavis or Pauline, who were both natural-born citizens of Tils with family and ties to established entities there. After all, one was a merchant's daughter, and the other that of a count.

This was another way that Mile was unique. She had fled her home country, calling herself a wandering C-rank hunter of uncertain origin. Therefore, each kingdom

hoped to claim her as their own by appointing her a noble. The six countries competing with Brandel to make Mile their own seemed determined to ignore that Mile had named herself as the once-viscountess Adele von Ascham during her continent-wide broadcast. “She didn’t say where she was from,” some convinced themselves, “so she must hail from some other distant land with a noble household whose name just resembles *that* ‘Ascham.’” Others even claimed that, since she had fled her motherland, to drag her back there would be a crime against humanity.

At any rate, the other six countries had no intention of handing Mile over to Brandel, no matter what falsities they had to believe in order to justify their claims to the divine messenger. And so, all seven of these nations showed up for an international conference, one that went on for *days*.

In the meantime, the notices pertaining to Mile’s peerages and other appointments had already been released and could not be retracted without besmirching the honor of the country in question. Which meant that, as of now, Mile had a valid claim to noble stature across the entire region.

* * *

Yet again, the Crimson Vow found itself in a period of relative calm.

Unable to accept any jobs from the guild, they had made camp out in the forest some distance from the capital and taken to hunting and gathering there, lest the inn be troubled by the throngs of people beating down their door.

“This is actually pretty relaxing,” Reina sighed happily.

“It reminds me of the daily routine we had back during our prep school days, when we still needed to earn enough to cover our living expenses,” said Mile.

“Yeah, it helps to go back to your roots sometimes,” said Mavis.

“Ah ha ha...”

* * *

Sadly, they could not hide themselves away in the forest forever. They had yet to stop in at the guild even once since their return, and they couldn’t afford to delay the inevitable much longer. There was also a chance they might have been contacted by

the Crown, something which they couldn't truly ignore.

But no one could fault a hunter for going out to do some hunting. They had not made any promises to anyone before they departed, which meant that no one could reasonably complain about their absence, at least for a short time. Hunters were -frequently absent from home while on a job—such was the life of a hunter!

Several days later, they finally made their return to the inn, only to find...

“Hm? There's something posted up in front of the inn. It says...”

Preferred Inn of the Divine Messenger and the Crimson Vow

Visit the “Miracle Baths” hand-crafted by the Divine Messenger! Female guests only.

Experience first-hand water supplied and heated by the magic of the Divine Messenger!

See the marks left on a post from the time the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio crossed swords!

This is the inn where they found their way!

The four stared in silence.

“Lenny...”

“That Lenny...”

“Oh, Lenny...”

“Ah ha ha...”

“Looks like we're really back home.”

* * *

"Oh, big sisters! A messenger came by from the palace. Here, they left this letter. I'm going to go tell them that you're back and that I delivered the letter!" Lenny said, handing Mile a letter before running outside. She probably had a deferred tip to collect.

"How would someone from the palace know exactly how to handle her?" Pauline wondered.

"I'm sure they have experience with children," Reina sighed.

Having grown up in a fairly affluent household, it had not occurred to Pauline that quite a few children might behave like Lenny when faced with the promise of a tip... Odd, considering how motivated Pauline herself was by money.

* * *

"It's so wonderful to have you! Please, find a seat!"

A few days later, the members of the Crimson Vow found themselves escorted into the palace. They were led not to the audience chamber but to a space that seemed more like a conference room. There were about twenty elderly gentlemen assembled, none of whom they knew. This was no surprise—they all gave off the air of being someone very important, perhaps higher-ranking nobles, or cabinet ministers, if they were unlucky, Mile thought.

"Please, please, have a seat. We can't begin until you do." The man who seemed to be the chairman urged them again to their seats. The members of the Crimson Vow bowed their heads and did as they were told.

"Wonderful to have you. I am the king of this kingdom. The other gentlemen you see before you are diplomats from ours and the six nearest countries."

He's the KING?! the four girls all shrieked internally. He's the most unassuming one of them all!

This was suddenly feeling very much like one of Mile's stories.

* * *

"Now then, you're telling me that you don't know precisely why it is that this so-called

'dimensional rift' closed?"

"Correct," said Mile. "There are a number of possible explanations but no way of determining the truth. It could be that our attack destroyed whatever apparatus—er, magical formation—was on the other side, or that the operators were disabled—um, the mages were killed. Or it could have been that whatever stars were in alignment fell out of place, and the rift would have closed at that time regardless. Or there could be any number of other reasons. Which means..."

The king picked up where she trailed off. "The invasion has stopped for now, but there's no telling when it might happen again. And by then, the four of you may have already reached the end of your lives, yes?"

The others in attendance fell silent. The king of this country seemed to have an accurate grasp on the situation. He *was* their ruler, after all.

The invasion might come again at some point in the future when no one involved in the current goings-on was still alive. What might become of the world then?

"Actually," Mile piped up, "there's no need to worry about that. We were able to expel the invaders this time—which means that whichever brave heroes are there to replace us next time will be able to do the same!"

There's no one in existence who could possibly replace you! the attendants screamed silently.

After that, the king explained that everyone in this room would be carefully considering how the members of the Crimson Vow were to be rewarded and celebrated, and their treatment going forward. With that, the palace conference drew to a close.

"How we are to be treated?" Mile spoke under her breath, but clearly her expression had given her away—she caught the diplomat from Brandel staring at her with a glint in his eyes.

* * *

"What are we gonna do?" asked Mavis.

"What *can* we do?" sighed Reina.

"There's nothing for us to do," said Mile.

"Ah ha ha..." Pauline laughed bitterly.

Sure enough, there truly was nothing that they could do while they awaited the results of this international conference.

"Well then... I guess we could go stop in at the guildhall?"

"Right."

Now that Mile mentioned it, the others realized they had yet to drop in. It was getting to be high time they did so. In fact, their visit was long overdue. Since they had not taken a job through the guild as of late, there was no mission completion report to give. However, that was no excuse for not at least making their presence known.

A look of dismay fell over all four of their faces. The longer they put things off, the worse it was going to get.

"Guess we should get going."

"Yeah..."

* * *

"It's the Crimson Vow!!! Huzzah!!!"

The moment the party crossed the threshold of the guildhall, they were met with cheers and applause. They had tried to time their arrival to a moment when there would be the fewest possible people present, but apparently, they hadn't had much success.

"Excellent work, Crimson Vow! The guild master is waiting for you! Please come right this way!" The clerk jumped out from behind the counter, a broad smile on her face. She grabbed Mile's hand (she was at the front of the group) and ushered her along, the other three following them up to the guild master's office on the second floor.

"Why didn't you come here as soon as you arrived?! Normally, people stop in before

they go to their inns! Do you *realize* how many days it's been?" The guild master lit into them the moment they stepped into the room, but it was clear he was not truly angry. Rather, his face split into a smile. "You really did a bang-up job! I can't imagine that being thanked by the likes of me would mean anything to you, now that you've saved everything and everyone in the entire world, but allow me to thank you anyway! Thank you. Thank you truly," he said, and then bowed his head deeply.

Normally the Crimson Vow might be humble and tell him "Please, there's no need for that!" But clearly, this was not the time for modesty. It was more appropriate to quietly receive his thanks.

Then, they all sat.

"I hope you'll forgive me for getting right down to brass tacks. It's going to start causing a lot of conflicts if we can't reconcile your statuses," he said plainly. The members of the Crimson Vow nodded in reply. "To start, you are all now S-rank."

"...What? **Huh?!?!**"

"Th-there must be a mistake," Mile sputtered. "Rank promotion isn't just about contribution points—there's a set amount of time you have to serve as each rank as well... That's a rule that not even nobles can bypass!" The other members of the Crimson Vow nodded vehemently, but the guild master shook his head.

"There's another clause that people often forget about: 'Unless they are a national hero who saves the kingdom.'"

"Ah." They all sighed. Now that they thought about it, they *had* heard something like that. And if that was the requirement, it was one that they had most certainly fulfilled.

"Ha... ha ha ha..." A dry laugh crept out of Mile's throat.

"If you four *aren't* promoted to S-rank, it's going to be embarrassing for all the other S-rankers! They might even retire in protest. Besides, no one else could ever be promoted to S-rank. Please, think about the other hunters... I cannot allow you to refuse."

The members of the Crimson Vow were silent. What he was saying made sense—far too much sense. If they did not deserve S-ranks for saving the entire world, then it would take saving the entire star system, or even the galaxy, for anyone else to rise to

such stature.

"To be frank, out of consideration for the current S-rankers, we discussed whether we should create a new, higher rank. But S-rank already encompasses everything above an A-rank, with no upper limits, and it's not as though anyone after you would ever achieve that rank again, so we've put that conversation aside. S-rank is an appropriate recognition of superhuman feats such as yours."

Again, the members of the Crimson Vow were silent. Everything he said was so logical that there was no protest they could possibly raise.

"Also, though this isn't directly related to your situation, we've abolished the requirement for a minimum term of service. A lot of folks have been advocating for this change for a while, and it was pretty firmly requested by the upper brass of Tils, so it had already been provisionally decided at the last Guild conference. We're just waiting for official ratification. We're going to be making a preliminary announcement along with your rank promotion. That should shut up any of the remaining dissenters."

The silence continued. All of them—especially Mavis—had been striving for an A-rank. And now, they had flown straight past both B-rank and A, straight to S. To be an S-rank, a living legend... This was something that every hunter yearned for—the stuff of dreams.

"W-we're going to be S-rank hunters, living legends..." Reina stammered, thoughts running a mile a minute.

"Listen, even if we didn't give you S-ranks, you four are *already* legendary!" the guild master interjected.

"*That's true...*" sighed the four. He was right.

"In all seriousness," he continued, "why would you all spill the beans like that? This is gonna cause big problems in the future. Or rather, I suppose it already has..."

The girls' shoulders slumped.

"At the time," Mile explained, "we thought it would be just the four of us heading into battle. We didn't expect to make it home alive... So, we decided to reveal everything, sparing no detail that might convince as many people as possible to have as much *faith* in us as possible, no matter how little it might help. We weren't thinking about what

would come after..." She laughed dryly.

"It's true," said Reina. "You gave up not only the fact that you were a noble but that you were Miami Satodele, which we were never going to tell anyone."

"Huh?" There was almost an audible sound as Mile's neck craned slowly in Reina's direction, shock upon her face. "R-R-R-R-Reina, wh-when did you...?"

"I mean I figured it out a long time ago. Mavis and Pauline did, too."

"H-h-h-how?!"

"Wait, no—seriously, did *you* think that we didn't know?" asked Mavis.

"Hold on," said Pauline. "I thought we were all operating under the premise that you knew that we all knew but that we were just pretending not to know. Did you actually not realize that... we... knew...?"

"Whaaa?!"

It was a shot straight to Mile's heart.

"I mean, the plots of the books were pretty much just rearranged versions of your folktales, and the turns of phrase and standard tropes were all the same," Reina elaborated. "I'm pretty sure everyone from the prep school knew, too, and I'll bet the folks from that academy you went to forever ago figured it out as well. You're always blabbing about that sort of stuff..."

Mile slumped in dismay.

"Anyway, it's not your concern, but a lot of other people are going to be promoted as well. Obviously, we couldn't recognize everyone who participated in the battle. That would be way too many people, especially since there are some hunters who were promoted not long ago, and some who still don't have the qualifications. Giving someone a rank that doesn't match their abilities is basically a death sentence," the guild master explained. The Crimson Vow nodded gravely. "Also, unlike the soldiers, who participated as a unit, most of the hunters participated of their own volition, not as part of any job. Unfortunately, we aren't a charity, and we can't reward them for voluntary service. If we were to pay every hunter a reward commensurate to their participation, we'd go bankrupt. The civilians all participated without pay; it wouldn't

do for the hunters to get special treatment.”

The Crimson Vow simply nodded. It was what it was.

“However,” the guild master continued, “the Crown will be providing some manner of reward. They will also be paying a sum to the families of those who passed away and offering provisions for the education and employment of their children. And not just in Tils—from what I hear, other kingdoms will be doing the same. The royal family would never risk damaging their reputation simply to save a little money. Their citizens would lose faith in them, and all their hunters would relocate to other lands. Hunters aren’t like farmers, tied to the land, or members of the Merchants’ Guild, tied to their clients. They won’t risk their lives for a town or country that no longer suits their fancy, and they can up and leave at any time. Having one or two depart in this way wouldn’t have much of an impact, but if every hunter in the country was to abandon us...”

There was no need for him to complete that sentence.

Bodyguards for merchants. Monster culling. Procurement and supply of meat and medicinal herbs. Profits for the inns and weapon shops and eateries and pubs. Not only would they lose the workforce for necessary jobs, but also, the departure of the hunters’ disposable income would be a blow to urban economies. The result was that no country would dare mistreat their hunters.

Additionally, though she’d had no notion of things to come, Mile’s activities had ensured that the orphanages of the surrounding countries were now in a solid financial position, expanding their facilities and able to accommodate far more children. There would be orphaned children of the heroes who died fighting for the country—nay, the world. No one would dare treat them cruelly.

Though this whole matter had nothing to do with them, the Crimson Vow could only nod in agreement.

Then, the guild master’s tone shifted, and he addressed Mile with a serious look in his eye. “Is it going to happen again?” It was no surprise that the guild master had more or less the same question as the king had. It was naturally a question that would concern anyone in a position of responsibility. Unfortunately, Mile still was not prepared to provide an answer.

"I don't know," she said sadly. "Nor do I know what the intention was of the ones who created the dimensional rift—or if they even had a reason to begin with. I don't even know if it was a natural phenomenon or something that someone created intentionally. I'm also not certain if our final attack permanently disabled whatever means by which the rift was created or if it was only a temporary fix."

"I see..." The guild master hung his head in the face of so many unanswered questions.

But even while the threat from this other dimension may not have been fully neutralized, it was not as though they did not have some things to be happy about. The monsters might attack once more, or it might never happen again. There would always be anxieties about the future, but for now, facing down a common threat had brought the world together, quelling some of the fighting between races, and even between humans themselves.

Any future problems would be problems for those alive at that time to deal with. It was not as though they could look after the planet forever, thought Mile.

"Anyway, that's all the depressing stuff out of the way. There were a lot of people hurt in that fight, but thanks to you all, damages were still kept to a minimum. Playing the role of heroes who stood on the front lines of the battle to save the world, risking their lives with no reward, has really bolstered the reputations of hunters all around. The people who participated in that battle will no longer be vilified as the dregs of humanity... Not to mention the fact that you shouted the name of our guild branch across the continent, so we're now known as the guild that produced not only the divine messenger and the rest of the Crimson Vow but also the A-rank party the Roaring Mithrils and countless other heroes of the front lines. Thanks to you, I'll almost certainly be bumped up two ranks in the guild master rankings, with bonus pay to match—er, ahem!"

The Vow pretended not to hear that last part. The guild master was always working so hard—it wouldn't hurt for him to get something out of this as well.

"And, of course, we've got a party planned! Well, it's probably just gonna end up being another drunken throw down, but we have a feast arranged. We won't be able to fit everyone inside a place of business, so we're going to have part of a main street blocked off to traffic instead. It would be hard to get all of the food and drink into the main city square, and we'd end up with a lot of non-hunters slipping in for the free food and drink... I know you all don't drink much, but this will also double as a

memorial for the fallen. We've gotta really live it up if we want the joy and gratitude of the living to reach the ears of the fallen... So, you all had better come, too."

"Understood," Mavis nodded, accepting the guild master's instruction in her capacity as the group's representative. There was no way they could possibly refuse.

They chatted with the guild master until the proceedings for their rank amendment were complete, after which they exited down the back stairs, so as not to be accosted by anyone down in the lobby...

* * *

"Marcela, you have been promoted to viscountess. Monika and Aureana, citizens of the kingdom of Brandel and fellow members of the C-rank hunting party the Wonder Trio, you have both received the title of baroness."

The three girls stood frozen, unable to speak. The man who had been waiting patiently behind Marcela to assist poked her gently in the back, prompting her to quickly start speaking again. Monika and Aureana followed suit. "Th-this is most pleasing to hear..."

"Y-yes! Most pleasing indeed,"

How did it come to this...?

Marcela was already a noble's daughter to begin with, so she became a viscountess. Monika and Aureana, both originally commoners, rose to the level of baroness. A baroness still was not a noble, strictly speaking. It was, at best, a symbolic honor bestowed upon commoners, but it was still an honor that could be passed down to their children.

Because the nanomachines had intentionally broadcast scenes featuring the three girls, they had become extremely popular with nobles and commoners alike. The world had watched as Marcela had prioritized carrying the battle forward over healing herself, even in spite of her serious injuries; meanwhile, Monika and Aureana had supported her with expert teamwork and magic abilities equal to that of an A-rank mage.

No matter how great their achievements, elevating a commoner to a true noble was unthinkable in a conservative kingdom like Brandel. The kingdom's top brass were far more set in their ways than the leadership of Tils, who had been happy to elevate the

status of the Crimson Vow—who had fought side-by-side with Mile, the messenger, and were world-saving heroes in their own right—to help shine a light upon their kingdom. That said, the Crimson Vow included Mavis, a noble, so they must have sensed that their citizenry would not look favorably upon them clearly showing preferential treatment to nobles over commoners.

By contrast, Brandel must have felt it sufficient to concentrate on Marcela, the noble's daughter, who had led the other two in battle. They had given her two comrades the highest reward a commoner could receive.

Certainly, Aureana and Monika had made great efforts by Marcela's side, letting off spell after spell during the battle, but the authorities of Brandel would say that it would not do to grant commoners excessive rewards. The girls were still nothing more than a pair of powerful commoners who were especially good at combat magic. It was different for Marcela. She was a beauty, trusted even by the common folk, who was overflowing with magical talent, brilliant and bright, refined and poised, the pride and joy of nobles, already the darling of many, including the royal family themselves.

And, of course, Marcela would need a higher rank if she were to be a worthy consort to the prince...

Monika and Aureana were likely to be in high demand as well, given their talent for combat magic, their status as close friends of the messenger, and their association with Marcela, who was at the top of the list of marriage candidates for the princes—not to mention their close working relationship with Morena, the stratagem princess. Plus, the pair of them were sure to be adopted by some noble household or other, after which they could marry into other noble families without any limitation.

Marcela's own father would also be elevated from baron to viscount, it seemed. Perhaps the king thought it awkward for a father to be of lower status than his own daughter, or worried it would become a liability for Marcela if other nobles tried to use her family's lower rank to manipulate her. Perhaps it was merely a reward for having fathered the outstanding human being known as "Marcela."

Either way, all three members of the Trio shared a single thought:

How did it come to this?

* * *

Princess Morena's status amongst the nobility of Brandel had skyrocketed overnight. First, there was the excellent performance of her all-female imperial guard; then, the success of her special operatives, the Wonder Trio, operating behind the scenes in their plot to locate Viscountess Ascham. Finally, there was her performance in battle, when Morena had taken to the front lines alongside the Wonder Trio, with only a handful of fighters by her side.

Of all the countries that had taken part in the Final Battle of Albarn, only Brandel could boast of a royal so high in the line of succession appearing on the front lines. This was inevitable, as the other royals had been preoccupied with leading the main armies to fight in the Final Battle of Aubram to the east.

That said, Morena painted a very pretty picture: a young, tender, and beautiful young lady who, despite being a noble high in the line of succession and bearing the royal coat of arms, chose to take her place down in the trenches rather than sit pretty on a hill giving orders from afar. Princess Morena, toughened by her experiences fighting monsters during her time as a rookie hunter, fearlessly faced down orcs and ogres with her powerful magical attacks. Yes, it turned out, she had a talent for magic—though this should come as little surprise. Like most noble families, -royals carried generations' worth of the most magically gifted blood in the land, thanks to selective breeding.

Then there were the other noble girls who had fought desperately to protect Morena, all too aware what it would look like if they let the princess die while they lived to come home...

The nanomachines would never pass up a chance to relay so moving a scene.

Plus, even if they had actually met only once, Princess Morena was an acquaintance of Mile's. As such, it was natural that the nanomachines would choose her to be one of the stars of their continent-wide highlight reel up in the sky.

The whole country—nay, the whole continent—had witnessed the bravery of Princess Morena and her personal guard, which had been conceived of and established by Morena herself, and included the Wonder Trio. The beautiful princess had not backed down an inch as the monsters approached her, though she trembled with fear, tears streaming down her cheeks. She had stood proudly, blasting them with spells.

Every noble and royal who witnessed her heroism but were not present on the

battlefield themselves swallowed their shame and swore they would never let that girl cry again—that they would protect her with their lives. The commoners likewise wept, seeing a young royal fighting on the front lines for their sake. In that moment, Princess Morena seized the hearts of the masses and became the idol of people all over the country—nay, the world!

Already there was fervent talk among both the nobles and the common folk that perhaps Morena ought to be their next monarch—that their kingdom's security would be assured if she were to lead them. Furthermore, the neighboring kingdoms had all begun scheming about having Morena marry their own crown princes.

Her fifteen minutes of fame had arrived.

The noble women of the princess's guard had similarly been inundated with marriage proposals from the heirs of higher-ranking noble families. Which meant that Morena's all-female imperial guard, which had only just been established, was about to crumble in a rush of resignations.

* * *

"Well, this is a pickle. What to do...?"

There were two academies in the capital of the kingdom of Tils. One of these was August Academy, and like Eckland, the school Mile had attended in Brandel, it was considered the lesser of the two.

This was where Mariette found herself, sitting in the girls' dormitory and fretting. Like Aureana of the Wonder Trio, Mariette was a commoner and a scholarship student. Unlike Aureana, who had achieved her position on her own strengths, Mariette's status was thanks to Mile's tutoring bootcamp and an elevated magical level courtesy of her dedicated nanomachines. Furthermore, while Aureana came from a poor, backwater town, Mariette was the daughter of a middle-class merchant.

However, she had always been a kind girl with a strong sense of justice, who would never sully her hands with foul deeds. She would never fear being abandoned by the servants of the Goddess who had lent her strength. If anyone could be called a "saint," it was Mariette.

So why was a girl like her in such turmoil?

"We've already gotten over a hundred requests for my hand in marriage and overtures for adoption..." she muttered, restating what was written in the letter she had received from her father.

Mariette—a commoner whose father managed a mid-sized business. She had previously achieved a modicum of fame among religious types and healing mages and hunters. Thanks to Mile, she had been a spectacle since the day of her entrance exam, called the "Goddess," the "H-Bomb Princess," the "Holy Bombshell," and "Defender of the School," among a variety of other nicknames. Add to that her friendship with the divine messenger and the fact that she was exceptional not only at healing but also at combat magic... She was a bit of a celebrity, and it should have been no surprise that the marriage proposals from nobles and the heirs of wealthy merchants were coming tumbling down on her like an avalanche.

(Incidentally, the "H" in "H-Bomb" here referred to a type of magic where water came rushing forward with the force of a bomb. It had nothing to do with hydrogen or nuclear fusion.)

Mariette's family couldn't hold back the tidal wave of nobles, moguls, and temples bearing down on them. No matter which of the many, many overtures they might choose to accept on behalf of their daughter, they'd then have the rejected petitioners to deal with. Most importantly, however, Mariette herself was too young for all of it. She was not yet of age, and there was no way she wanted to be handed over to some much older man whom she had never even met.

"What do I do?" she continued to moan. She suddenly sprung up, a light bulb practically popping on above her head. "I know! I'll become a priestess!"

Apparently, she had just stumbled upon a way out of this mess.

"I'm an easy target for all of these people because I'm on my own with no real support. But if I attach myself to an entity of such power, then no one will pay any attention to me. It's an untouchable position, one that no noble family or religious organization could complain about. They'll have to leave me alone!"

"That's it!" she declared. "I'll be a priestess of the divine messenger and work as her personal assistant! If I'm a priestess, then there will be nothing to stop me from working for her and no one to complain about it. No one could force any betrothals or marriages upon a priestess! I'm sure that Miss Mile will protect me!"

It seemed she had found her escape route...

* * *

“What?!”

This time Mile had been called into the palace alone, without her fellow members of the Crimson Vow. Expecting something to do with Brandel, or concerning her position as the messenger, she obediently went where she was told, listening politely to what the king had to say. Until—

“Th-they’re building me a shrine?!?!”

Surprise! It was yet another absurd turn of events.

“Is it not only natural that we should provide a dwelling for the divine messenger?” the king asked. “It shall be built at the nexus point of Tils, Brandel, and the Albarn Empire, so that no one will have any reason for complaint.”

Though he was cordial toward Mile, he did not speak as humbly as one might expect a human addressing a goddess, a lower life-form groveling before the supreme. Mile was thankful for this.

Incidentally, what sat at the nexus point of the three countries was... the lands governed by Kelvin von Bellium—formerly the lands of Baron Allemain.

“We will establish a site with a thousand-meter radius, centered at the place where the three lands meet. It will be holy ground which no kingdom may infringe upon, with the shrine at its center,” he continued. “Surrounding the shrine will be a residential area for various priests and acolytes, inns for the believers who make their way there on pilgrimage, as well as shops for essentials. The outermost area will be greens, parks, and fields. A narrow river flows through the area, so between that and the wells, there shall be no want for water. And, of course, we will dedicate a piece of our kingdom’s adjoining lands to establish an estate for Tils’s Countess Mile von Ascham.”

In fact, there would also be an estate made available for Countess Ascham in the Albarn Empire just adjacent to the planned shrine. It seemed both kingdoms had been rather forceful in relocating the various lords who originally governed those lands to other areas—on favorable terms, of course. These relocated nobles were not only being given better estates than Mile but now also had a powerful political card up their

sleeves, leaving them little reason to complain. And, naturally, the citizens of those lands were riotously overjoyed to learn that they would now be in the charge of their very own savior...

It seemed that the palace would be dispatching a trust-worthy magistrate as well, so at the very least there would be no fief-related matters to deal with—not that there was anyone who would ever try to deceive or betray the divine messenger. If anyone tried, the first co-conspirator they attempted to recruit would detain them and turn them in to the authorities.

Brandel, meanwhile, had simply upgraded the estate of the former Viscountess Ascham to a marquisate, though it was quite distant from the holy land and scarcely large enough to be considered worthy of Mile's new status. There were likely a few reasons for this:

- 1) The majority of the population believed that Mile would soon marry into royalty or a greater noble title and thus have no need for more ample lands.
- 2) A family estate that had been passed down through the generations carried more weight than a new grant of land.
- 3) Mile would likely be moving about the country with some frequency, not holed up in her shrine all the time.

“Wh-wh-wh-wha...?”

It seemed everything had been settled...

Without Mile's involvement.

* * *

“What!?” The other members of the Crimson Vow were stunned when Mile returned from the palace with her news.

“D-d-d-does that mean...?” babbled Reina.

“Are you g-g-going to—” Pauline stammered.

“—retire from being a hunter to live at a temple?” Mavis concluded.

"You've gotta be kidding uuuussss!!!" the three screamed.

Mile, anticipating their reaction, had thankfully already set up a preemptive sound barrier to protect her eardrums.

"M-M-M-Mile," Reina sputtered. "A-a-a-are y-you planning on becoming a goddess?!"

"The 'god of a new world'?!" Pauline gasped.

"Are you starting a new religion?" Mavis wondered.

Mile had known they would be surprised, but...

"Without you, that's the end of the Crimson Vow!" said Reina.

"My earnings are going to plummet!" said Pauline.

"Yeah, if we don't have Mile, how are we supposed to carry all of our luggage and spoils and food?" said Mavis, far more calmly than the other two.

"Huh?" Mile was dumbfounded. "I mean, I don't want to leave you all behind, but you've all achieved what you set out to do as hunters, right? Reina and Mavis, you wanted to reach A-rank, and Pauline, you wanted to earn enough money to start your own business..."

"What?" The three hunters went slack-jawed.

"N-now that you mention it," said Mavis, "not only did I get the A-rank that I was hoping for, but better yet, an S-rank. My goal after that was to serve as a knight, which already happened when you appointed me your holy knight and protector. I couldn't hope for any higher title than being the holy knight of the divine messenger, which is worth way more than serving a crusty old king I've never met. My name is known throughout the land as a legendary hero, victorious in a battle to protect the world, fighting for justice by a holy decree... I've done everything a knight could ever hope to do. All of my wishes have come true!"

"I also got my wish to become an A-rank," agreed Reina. "I'm more famous than I ever could have dreamed of, and I'm sure someone would love to publish my memoir..." Her dearest wish had always been to become famous enough to put out a memoir, in which she could memorialize the contributions of the Crimson Lightning for generations to

come. Now that she had an S-rank, all she had to do was sit down and write her life story, and a publishing house would handle the rest.

"If you want to publish a book, I can introduce you to some good people," said Mile. "You don't have to pay anything up front if they think the book will sell, though you will have to shell out for the necessary expenses if it doesn't have as much potential. But, I mean, based on the manuscripts you've shown me before, and with the notoriety you have now, I'm sure any publisher would leap at the chance!"

While the three of them talked excitedly, a dark look came over Pauline's face. "I suppose all of *your* dreams have come true, but what about *mine*!?" she screamed.

"Well, I mean, you're a countess now," Reina responded. "Can't you just start a business from your estate? A noble managing her own business could take advantage of all sorts of perks, and it'd be way easier to do business with other fiefs and countries—not to mention the crazy amount of name recognition your reputation would bring. As for capital, you can't tell me that the reward money we've just gotten and the income from your estate wouldn't be enough. I can't see anyone complaining about you running a business for the sake of investing in your own land. I'm pretty sure the temple would even approve of you using your title of 'holy maiden' as a business trademark, if you asked Mile. No one could possibly compete with that that."

"Ah."

Between recent happenings and the previous tale of the -miraculous retreat from Ascham, which was already known across the land, Pauline was famous throughout the Empire. Given how many soldiers they'd saved, her reputation was as good as it could possibly be.

"And anyway, won't all of you have estates now?" put in Mile. "You'll have to start governing them."

"Oh..."

While Mile had been given a higher rank in her home country of Brandel, her lands had not changed. They were already being governed by a seneschal, and while she had received titles in other lands, those were all honorary and did not come with any real responsibilities. In those cases, the only other people who had anything to do with her current promotion were the Trio. She was not a real vested noble and would not be

receiving any lands, only status and a stipend. Even a royal power could not unilaterally give someone an appointment in their own country and force them to work or immigrate there.

Here in Tils, however, all four of them, regardless of their prior status, had been granted the title of countess—not an honorary title but a real one—with an estate, to boot. Counties were not given out lightly. This was a bold statement from Tils that the members of the Crimson Vow were theirs and theirs alone. That said, the recent battle *had* caused enough turmoil to create some openings in the peerage, between the nobles who had been stripped of their power for refusing to send troops to the front line and those who had died during the battle itself.

The fact that Mile had been named a countess and not a marquis was probably because officials had felt the four fellow party members should all receive the same treatment. This would look far better to the average citizens of the kingdom—evidence of the way Tils differed from the snobbier Brandel.

Conveniently enough, Pauline had been granted the lands where her family home was located. Once a barony, this area had been annexed to another adjacent barony, forming a smallish county. However, said barony had then been seized due to corruption and spent several years under the watchful eye of a palace magistrate. The matter had been since settled, and as it so happened, the neighboring baron had been stripped of his title, too, thereby leaving a large estate available to be granted to Pauline.

Mavis, meanwhile, had been given lands near her own family's, the thinking being that her father and brothers would be able to help her keep an eye on things. Reina was given lands roughly halfway in between the two, a somewhat smallish county that was desirable by virtue of its location and the fertility of its soil. It was widely agreed that it was far better to receive a smaller, more viable tract than a vaster land where nothing grew, and with the dignity of the kingdom on the line, they certainly couldn't grant one of the saviors of the world a sad little territory full of rocks and sandy soil.

The estates were all slightly removed from one another, one in each cardinal direction with the capital in the middle. If all four were to have been situated in the same part of the country, it might have looked like favoritism toward a certain region. Plus, keeping the capital in the middle meant the members of the Crimson Vow were more likely to use the city as a common meeting point, and they would have to pass through when visiting one another.

The leadership of Tils really had put a lot of thought into this.

This was all a very long-winded way of saying that the Crimson Vow's days as hunters were indeed over... assuming they didn't run off to another country and leave their lands behind, as Mile once had. Yet unlike Mile at the time, everyone in the continent knew their faces. No matter where they went, they would be known not as a hunting party but as the divine messenger and her disciples, or the saviors of the world. Never again would they be able to take a job—normal, dangerous, or otherwise—with people flocking to them.

Operating as the Crimson Vow was no longer possible, which meant they would have to disband.

As they realized this, the four fell silent.



CHAPTER 121

HALF A YEAR LATER...

“AND MAY THE WINDS of fortune be with everyone...”

Cheers roared from down below as a silver-haired girl waved at the crowd before stepping back from the veranda of the temporary structure.

“I’m so... bored,” she sighed.

HANG IN THERE, LADY MILE.

The nanomachines often tried to offer Mile comfort, realizing that they were one of the reasons that she had ended up in her current position. Not that the circumstances would have been much different *without* their mass broadcast...

Six months had passed since their epic battle. Presently, Mile was living—or rather, had been made to live—in her own personal residence, a hastily constructed temporary building where she would remain until construction was completed on the inner sanctuary of the temple dedicated to her at the nexus of Tils, Brandel, and Albarn. Every day, she was pressed to perform her duties as a divine messenger to help heal the hearts of the people after the battle that had devastated the land and left so many dead. Naturally, there was no way she could govern either her own land of Ascham in Brandel or the county that had been granted to her in Tils under these circumstances, so the duties were left to the various deputies appointed by those countries’ kings.

Incidentally, as a noble in Brandel, Mile was still known as Marquis Adele von Ascham, while in other kingdoms she was Countess Mile von Ascham or Marquis Mile von Ascham. In this way, Brandel continued to insist on the fact that Mile—or rather, Adele—was a noble of their kingdom, while the other nations blatantly ignored her origins. That said, it was rare that Mile was referred to by any of these titles; typically, she was simply known as the divine messenger, or Lady Mile, or “our savior,” or the guardian, or various other such appellations.

But whatever you called her...

"I'm so bored!"

And she was.

Life in the temple was an exercise in futility. She was constantly ordered about by the various "priests" and "acolytes" who had popped up out of the woodwork to lecture her on manners and miracles. She was always being forced to meet with this or that king or noble or bishop or important merchant and listen to all manner of boring conversations. Now and then she was forced to heal the inconsequential ailments of whatever overdressed -official or wealthy person came passing through—not a single one of them young, cute, or fluffy.

(...Well, obviously not, Mile!)

* * *

"What a drag..."

By now, Countess Reina von Reddlightning had finished writing her memoir, *The Crimson Lightning and I: The Early Years of Crimson Reina*, which was published by Orpheus Publishing, to whom Mile had referred her.

Naturally, it was a bestseller. There was no way it wouldn't be, having been penned by one of the great heroes who saved the world. No one could keep the books on shelves. There wasn't a library on the continent that didn't have a copy, and it was the talk of every town.

Yes, Reina had already accomplished her life's work, achieved a previously unachievable dream.

And yet...

"I don't know anything about managing an estate, so I've had to leave it all to the person the king dispatched. I'm so bored..."

* * *

"I'm so bored... I wanted to live a happy life with all my friends, full of high-stakes

adventure, celebrated by the people—not be chained to a desk day after day, swamped with the minutiae of running an estate! Besides—”

“Mavis, it’s time to eat. Marquis Callios and his family are visiting today, so please be sure to attend to them.”

Mavis’s second brother, who had been trained in the ways of lordship in case anything should ever happen to their elder brother, was now charged with coaching Mavis in estate management and how to attend to nobles. Of course, every last one of these nobles Mavis had had to “attend to” was vying desperately for her hand in marriage. Such was the fate of Countess Mavis von Mireirine. (As head of a newly minted noble household, she had taken the name of her friends as her new family name...)

“Gah! Aaaaaah! Mile, save me!”

* * *

“How dreary...” grumbled Countess Pauline von Beckett as she sank into an office chair in her room at the main manor of her new estate.

Most of the estate management was handled by a representative from the capital, so she was focused on studying, along with operating her shop, the House of the Holy Maiden. This shop was a joint investment between the lord of this estate and Pauline, funded by both the fief’s operating budget and her own personal assets. The distribution of profits would be proportional to the investments, with part of it going back into the estate’s budget and part to Pauline’s personal coffers.

Of course, since she was both the lord of this estate *and* the business’s other owner, she could do whatever she liked. Still, Pauline ran a clean business, keeping everything fair and aboveboard. The business had been as profitable as she had hoped, and she had run into hardly any problems. Naturally, there was not a soul who would dare swindle a business operated by a lord, let alone one of the friends of the divine messenger and savior of the world.

However.

“This is *no fun!* This doesn’t have any of the thrill—any of the joy of business!”

Yes, for a merchant, there was nothing in the least bit exciting about any of this. She was quite unhappy. And she had far too much time on her hands...

* * *

"Lady Mile, a letter has arrived for you." One of Mile's shrine maidens appeared before Mile as she lounged in her chambers, politely offering her a letter set atop a silver tray. The letter was, of course, from an approved sender. Mile was typically inundated by letters from merchants and nobles and others hoping to cozy up to her, but most of them were disposed of by the temple staff before they got to her. Even if a piece of correspondence was from a friend from her school days, a fellow hunter, or Lenny, there was a good chance the letter might not make it to her. Even though she had instructed them to forward such missives her way...

Yet one more reason that Mile had grown to despise living here.

This letter, however, was from someone that the staff could not ignore—one of the world's four greatest heroes. Yes, it was from one of her fellow members of the Crimson Vow.

"Oh, it's from Reina! What could it be?"

Mile accepted the letter and gleefully tore open the envelope, hopping onto her bed to read the contents. The shrine maiden quietly took her leave, glad to see Mile brighten up—she hadn't seemed especially cheerful lately.

"Last time, the letter started and ended the same way: 'I'm so bored!' Mavis and Pauline's letters have been the same..." Mile muttered. In fairness, her own letters to the others had not been much different. Lying back on her bed, she continued reading. "Hmm, I see... That's a fair point. And... Oh! Aha. Ah ha ha ha!"

Nanos!

YES, MA'AM!

Is that thing ready to use?

BY "THAT THING," YOU MEAN...?

The one I had you make before, that I only used once and that's been in storage since... I think I called it the "living robot" Mile-001, the one that was made overnight. I think it's time for her to take the stage!

OH! OHOHOOO!!!

The nanomachines were thrilled. Finally, it was time for their creation's second debut. This was their big chance!

* * *

"Over here!"

"Oh! Reina, Mavis, and Pauline! It's been *too* long!"

The four girls had met in a forest near the capital of Tils—the same forest where the beastfolk village was located. Obviously, there was no way for the four of them to assemble unaccosted within city limits, not after their faces had been broadcast across the entire continent. Of course, Mile could use optical camouflaging or alter her face, but the other three were not capable of this and would, furthermore, be unable to locate her if she was in disguise. And so, they had decided to assemble in the forest instead. Besides, a more discreet location was also more conducive to what they planned to discuss next. Even though only Mile, thus far, was aware of this...

"Obviously, we can't write candidly in our letters, since they're being inspected, but I assume we're all thinking the same thing, yes?" Reina said, jumping right into the matter at hand. The other three nodded.

"Life as a noble is so boring," Mavis muttered.

"Acting as a divine messenger is even more boring!" Mile exclaimed.

"Capitalizing on pity to turn a profit with no real challenge is no fun at all! Every day is just more aggravating than the last!"

"*Right?!*"

"So I guess there's really no point in my asking, given that you all recognized the cipher I was using in the letter and came straight here, but..." Reina continued, teeth bared in a grin. "What say we leave our estates to the deputies and go back to hunting for a little while?"

"Yeah!!!"

The four were unanimous in their agreement. However...

"That sounds like a great idea, but everyone on the continent knows our faces, don't they? We could take up disguises, but even then, if we try to re-register as hunters under false names, someone's sure to draw some conclusions about a group of four young women operating together. Especially if there were four particular young women who had run away, their whereabouts unknown..." sighed Pauline.

"It's true. Plus, I'm pretty sure someone would figure it out the moment we tried to register as fresh F-rank hunters and form a party together. The guild clerks aren't that stupid," said Mavis.

"That's another problem. There's no way we could possibly register as F-ranks and sit around gathering herbs at this point. And if we tried to apply for a rank skip, they'd clock us in an instant," Reina agreed, sighing.

"Well, no one's going to know that I've run away, at least," Mile smiled.

"How?!" asked the other three.

"I left a replacement. A duplicate of myself, made with magic: Mile-001!"

The other three remained quiet. They had no idea what this "Mile-001" was, but they knew from experience that there was no point in protesting or even thinking too hard about it. For their own part, they had left letters behind, indicating that the management of their estates be left to their deputies or father and brothers, as relevant. If they perished, or did not return within five years, Pauline's estate and title should be left to her younger brother, Mavis's to her second elder brother. As Reina had not a single relative, she indicated that she would merely relinquish her title in case of such an event.

"Anyway," said Mile, "I don't think we'll have to worry about anyone recognizing us. Everyone on this continent knows our faces, sure, but that's only on *this* continent..."

"Huh?"

"Well, I mean, our warning message and the live broadcast of the battle was only shown on this continent. If we went to -another continent, we could be completely anonymous background characters!"

"What?!"

"Think about it! Though we like to say 'everyone in the world' knows who we are, the nanos have only ever said 'on this continent.' So, I asked them for clarification, and it turns out that I was right—the images and sounds from the battle only went to the people on this continent. Honestly, it wouldn't have been of much use to broadcast those images to people on other continents, who don't know us and would have had nothing to do with the recent situation. They wouldn't have understood what was going on anyway. In other words, if we went to another continent, we could be nobodies! Just some anonymous rookies!"

"You say rookies, but rookies at what?" Reina asked. "They wouldn't have a Hunters' Guild on other continents. And would they even speak the same language?"

Mile seemed unconcerned.

"Tsk, tsk! Long ago, this world was all one big civilization. It was left in shambles by the previous extradimensional invasion, after which society gradually regressed and intercontinental exchange became impossible. But I bet the language stayed the same or similar, and that similar organizations existed overseas, too, based on the ones that were already in place before intercontinental communication and travel became impossible!" Mile said confidently.

In truth, she had already asked the nanomachines a fair bit about the other continents. As their languages had once been the same, though pronunciation would differ by now, along with the names for technologies once lost and then rediscovered, they could probably communicate without too much confusion. The difference in vocabulary would come down to things like "compass" versus "directional needle," "north-finding disc," or some such. Because people using the same language tended to name things with similar concepts, there wouldn't be vast differences even after a gap of many years. It would be equivalent to two dialects of the same tongue.

Additionally, Mile had confirmed with the nanos that there were also monsters and something like a Hunters' Guild on other continents. The recent monster incursion had happened only on this continent, but monsters had always existed on other continents as well. On this occasion, they had quashed the rift right from the start, but had they left things as they were, perhaps rifts would have eventually begun to open up all over the world. That, or maybe the monsters that had spread across this land during the previous invasion had crossed the sea to proliferate on other lands as well.

They could have made their way onto the ships and other transports still active at the time or else been transported by that machine intelligence in some way.

At any rate, the societies of other continents seemed to be fairly similar in form.

"Well, how are we going to get there?" asked Reina. "To a faraway continent that none of us have ever been to?"

"Kragon is going to take us there!"

With her wartime appointment of a level-7 authorization having been sustained even when the battle was through, Mile was able to utilize the nanomachines to transmit pictures and sounds to far-off locations. In other words, she now had a method with which to summon Kragon. Her parabolic gravity-based method of transport was so out of the ordinary that she was only comfortable using it when she was on her own.

The other three were quiet.

Another continent.

Adventures in a brave, new land.

Everyone was practically vibrating, body and soul.

Yes, they're all on board! Mile thought, seeing this.

Reina then began to speak again. "By the way, Mile, weren't you supposed to stop by the guidance office back at Eckland?"

"Like I will!! Why are you bringing up something from six months ago?! I'd rather not have to submit a fifty-page essay reflecting on my actions, thank you!" Mile was none too happy about this but swiftly recovered. "Anyway, I presume we are all in agreement?"

"Yeah!!!" the other three chorused, pumping their right arms into the sky.

"Okay then! I'll go ahead and call Kragon!"

"Aren't we moving a little too quickly? We need to plan," Mavis wondered, surprised at Mile's haste.

"I've already packed all of the necessary food and clothing into my storage space, so no need to worry about that. As for money, I still have all of my share from when we divided up our funds, and there's some stuff that we hunted and gathered in there, too, so we should be able to exchange it for some starting capital as soon as we arrive."

The others had stuffed their purses with as many gold and orichalcum pieces as they could upon their departure but left most of their personal funds back at their manors. It would have panged their hearts to bring it all with them, not to mention the physical impossibility of carrying that much coin. *They* did not have storage magic or an inventory space, after all...

"I'm sorry, I only brought some of mine with me," said Reina.

"Same here," said Pauline.

"Me too..." Mavis sighed.

"Well, I mean, that's fine. You all don't have storage magic like I do. There's no guarantee they'd even use the same currency on another continent, so the coins won't have much value beyond the metal they're minted from—and we don't even know how much *that* will be worth. It's safer for us to leave our money here. It's not like we're never coming back again. Plus, isn't it more fun for us to start over from scratch, without a single copper to our—oh!" Mile started to assure the others that it was normal for them to be carrying only a small portion of their funds (not their estate's money but what they had earned themselves as hunters), then suddenly cut herself off.

"What's wrong?" Reina asked.

Mile suddenly looked less than confident. "Um, well, thanks to the contract you made with the nanos before the battle, you all leveled up, right? That means you might be able to use storage magic, too..."

"What!?" the others shouted.

Yes, yes indeed. Reina and Pauline's previous attempts to use storage magic had ended in failure. But what about now that they had been promoted to a level-2 authorization? At level-2, they could neither speak directly to the nanomachines, nor could they use an extradimensional pocket as an inventory, the way Mile could—not without her giving explicit instructions to the nanomachines as she had with Marcela and the

others. But *normal* storage magic...

Creak.

Creeeeeeeeeak.

You could almost hear the sound of Reina and Pauline's heads turning slowly Mile's way.

"M-Mile..."

"Mile..."

"G-guys, please! You're scaring me!"

* * *

Somehow or other, Mile managed to talk down the frantic pair, assuring them that it would be best to take their time and start practicing their storage magic tomorrow, as there were a number of things to attend to. Then, she quickly called Kragon.

The method for this was simple—as previously mentioned, her level-7 authorization meant she could utilize the nanomachine network to send pictures and sound to distant locations. What this actually looked like was a little screen that would appear in front of Kragon's face, which she could use to speak to him. Unlike the screens used for the continent-wide broadcast, this one allowed for two-way communication. And unlike the audio ducts used to transmit voice during the battle, this method transmitted the sound as data, much as Mile had done during her warning broadcast. This was more practical, given the distance involved.

A short while after Mile made contact, Kragon arrived.

"Lady Mile, savior of the world! I am so utterly privileged to receive word from you!"

He was becoming increasingly humble in the way he addressed her—deservedly so, of course. Before, Kragon had merely been expressing his gratitude to someone he owed a personal debt. Now, Mile was a literal savior of the world, a patron who had

aided the elder dragons in accomplishing their creators' decree—their very raison d'être.

"Here—this jewel is proof that you are an honorary councilor for our clan. It is our privilege to say that you may henceforth refer to yourself as an honorary elder dragon. Both the council of our village and the greater assembly were unanimous in this decision!" said Kragon, handing Mile some kind of dragon ball. It was a pretty thing, completely different from what she had received after carving the clan leaders' horns and nails.

"What the heck?!?!" the other members of the Crimson Vow shouted as one.

Could it really be that Mile had become an honorary *elder dragon*?

It did make sense that even an elder dragon would hope to stay on the divine messenger's good side as much as possible.

"Anyway," said Mile, "as I mentioned, would you be able to carry us to another continent?"

"Of course! I already consulted with the elders, who traveled to other continents long ago, to confirm that it might be feasible to make such a journey. So, which continent would you like to travel to?"

Mile had already considered this. The north was too cold, the south too hot. That didn't leave very many possible options...

"The west! The continent to the west!"

* * *

Kragon took them high up into the sky, higher still than when he had transported them to the demon settlement. From that altitude it was easier to see, and there was less air resistance, which made for higher speeds. The riders were safe within a two-layer protective barrier made by Kragon and Mile, along with Mile's warming and air-compression magic.

Thankfully, Reina had already overcome her fear of heights (earned during the "thunderbird incident") on their previous dragon flight. In fact, it was far less scary to fly at a higher altitude than it would be at a more middling height.

With nothing to look at during their flight beyond the sky and the sea, Mile's mind began to wander.

I'm kind of worried that evildoers might try to meddle with the ruins, now that everyone knows that the Scavengers and golems are our friends. They might think they can just sneak in there and not be killed on the spot... They might try to steal valuables or precious metals... Actually, even the iron the Scavengers smelt would be much purer than anything humans or dwarves could make. There are definitely going to be some tomb raiders or treasure hunters who pop up and start targeting the ruins. I probably should have founded some organization to protect them. I could call it... the Ascham Foundation!

She was overjoyed at having come up with this, as happy as she had been when she came up with "A Certain Magical Reina-gun."

The ones on the ground could be known as "Sprayguns"...

* * *

Around the time when everyone was starting to get tired of flying...

"Hm? Mile, what do you think *that* is?" Mavis, who was always the first to spot their quarry, pointed to something in the ocean ahead of them. Between the two of them, Mile had the better eyesight, but for some reason Mavis was always the first person to notice things—except when Mile was using her search magic, of course.

"Huh? Um, that looks like... Hey, Kragon, take us slightly to the left! Full speed, lower altitude! That boat is under attack!"

"Roger that!"

"Everyone, prepare for aerial descent!"

"All right!!!"

Mile could make out more details as they approached. It appeared to be a small ship, the sort that hugged the coastline, a vessel of twenty tons or so. Or at least, it was a small ship by Mile's standards, but quite a large one for this world. It was currently under assault from several sea serpents.

The name “sea serpent” did not refer to any specific variety of monster. Instead, it was more of a generic term for any type of unidentified creature with a massive, narrow body that dwelled in the ocean. A swarm of them was currently fixated on this vessel.

“Mavis, sword at the ready! Reina, Pauline, prepare your -attack spells! As I explained previously, I’m going to be controlling our descent speed using gravity and wind magic, so please don’t hesitate to jump! We’re almost on top of them now, standing by... Three, two, one... Launch!!!”

“*Hyaaaaaaah!!!!*” the four members of the Crimson Vow yelled, leaping fearlessly from Kragon’s back as he reached an altitude of about fifty meters above the sea. Naturally, Mile had already dissolved the various protective fields around them.

Even Reina appeared calm as they plummeted. Her faith in Mile was unshakable. Plus, Mile had a proven track record of being able to support a falling body, as established during their fight against Lobreth.

The sailors on the boat had been focused on furiously combating the sea serpents and had not even noticed Kragon’s silent approach. Now, they looked up as they noticed the four girls falling from the sky with a cry... and froze at the sight of an elder dragon’s massive frame above them.

The sea serpents took advantage of this opening to redouble their attack. However...

“Dragon Killer Blade!”

“Dragon Destroyer Blade!”

“Ice Cutter!”

“Water Cutter!”

The four figures falling from the sky were not kind and peaceful angels...

CHAPTER 122

A NEW LAND

KER-SLASH!

Ka-shunk!

Slush!

Ka-splash!!!

The four girls sent the four sea serpents' heads flying. The heads landed neatly on the deck of the ship.

“Pauline, tend to the injured! Everyone else, take care of the serpents!”

“All right!!!”

Reina had decided to strike with water this time, instead of her preferred fire magic; there was already water all around them, after all, and it would have been a shame to set the ship ablaze. Of course, just because fire was her specialty did not mean that she was not skilled at other varieties of magic, so this posed no problem in terms of the power of her attack.

Mile and Mavis, meanwhile, relied on their swords.

Slash, shunk, smash!

“That’s all of them,” the three fighters sighed.

“Hey! Slow down a minute! I haven’t even gotten started!” Pauline wailed impotently, turning to the injured crew.

“U-u-u-umm...”

One of the sailors who had been fighting against the sea serpents turned to the members of the Crimson Vow. He had been frozen in place, but now, he began to speak, voice trembling. "Wh-who are you all?"

"Oh!"

The four of them had traveled all the way to this new continent so that they could start over again as normal, unremarkable hunters, and yet here they were, showing up on the back of an elder dragon and cutting down sea serpents...

"Hmmm..."

The four thought deeply, lowering their voices to discuss the matter.

"We haven't given them our names yet, and there's no way for them to accurately convey what we look like. Let's just not tell them our... Wait! Let's just tell them something cryptic and then take our leave! We aren't heading to wherever these people are from, so it should be fine!" said Mile.

"I see!"

Mile, apparently forgetting that she had just shouted Pauline's name a few minutes earlier, proceeded to offer a false name.

"We are the apostles of truth and justice, the Four Dragon Priestess Sisters! All who are brave and righteous of heart may -offer their devotion. Now then, fare thee well!" she decreed, before hoisting herself and the others up into the air with gravity magic. They landed easily on the back of a waiting Kragon. Then it was shields up and roll out!

The passengers of the ship gazed up at them from the deck, awestruck.

"Did they just... save us?"

"The Dragon Priestesses..."

"The Four... Dragon Priestess Sisters?"

"H-hooray! Hooray for the Dragon Priestesses!"

"Hooray!!!"

"The Dragon Priestesses! Hip! Hip! Hooray!!!"

The sailors began fishing up the sea serpent corpses that now floated in the water around them. Not only would they sell for a monumental price, but they were also proof of their vessel's miraculous rescue by an elder dragon and his priestesses. The profits they would gain from this haul and the money they could earn from going place to place telling this story would be enough to feed them for the rest of their lives. Which was a good thing, since such good fortune rarely visited twice.

Of course, the passengers who had been hiding down in the hold had not borne witness to this, nor would they be receiving a share of the profits. It all belonged to the crew, who had risked their lives to protect their passengers.

The Dragon Priestesses... they all thought in awe.

On that day, a new religion was founded.

* * *

"That didn't look like a proper seafaring vessel, so we must be close to the shore," said Mile.

"Wouldn't they be keeping within sight of the coast if that were the case, though? There's no reason for them to travel out so far and risk losing track of where land is," Reina commented. "There are a lot of larger monsters farther out at sea. It's dangerous!"

"Maybe the better fishing spots are farther from the shore—or it's a transport vessel headed for some kind of strait..." mused Mavis.

"Well, it didn't look much like a fishing boat," said Pauline. "I wonder if they had some special reason for heading out this way, and this wasn't just business as usual. Maybe a trip to some outlying island..."

"All we can really do is speculate, so there's no point in dwelling on it," said Mile. "Anyway, we should be seeing the shoreline pretty soon. Kragon, please ascend again, so we don't cause any commotion down below. When we reach the coast, we should observe from above for a little bit and figure out where all the nearest towns and

villages are. That way we can pick out a proper landing spot and decide where our ‘starting village’ is going to be!”

“As you wish, Lady Mile!”

Apparently, the expanse of sea between their former continent and this one, to the west, was not as vast as the waters between Japan and North America. By that comparison, the distance was actually relatively short—at least when you had the benefit of an elder dragon’s flying speed. It was still not the sort of distance that a smaller vessel on its maiden voyage could be expected to cross, not with the many sea-dwelling and flying monsters in and around the ocean.

How long might it have been since intercontinental travel had ceased? Would the shift have been due to the loss of more high-performance vessels and navigational technology? Or had the monster incursion come first? Either way, it seemed that many years had passed since methods of travel and communication had been sophisticated enough to make such a voyage.

* * *

“There it is... another continent!”

With the coastline finally in sight, everyone surveyed the continent before them. Not long after, they were flying over land, at which point they began a wide-radius aerial survey of the area.

“It doesn’t look much different,” Pauline mused.

“Well, we all agreed that we didn’t like the hot or the cold that much, so I tried to find somewhere around the same latitude. Plus, this world used to be populated by a single civilization, so as long as the climate isn’t too different, we should expect to find the same kinds of plants and animals all over. The flora here shouldn’t be that strange to us. If we want to see different sights, we’ll have to go toward the equator, where it’s hot, or to the polar regions, where it’s cold. Would you like to?”

“Uh, no, I, uh...” Pauline stammered, silenced by the incontrovertible logic of Mile’s explanation.

“I’m not interested in dripping with sweat or shivering with cold every day! I’ll take the normal weather, thanks!” Reina crowed.

"Agreed!" The others were all on the same page.

* * *

"That looks like a good place over there," said Mile, pointing down at a town below them from her position on Kragon's back, still high up in the sky.

"Hmm," said Reina, her tone mildly disapproving. "That might work, but wouldn't it be better to come in somewhere closer to the middle of the country, or near the capital or something?" There would be far more jobs in the capital than out in more remote towns, which meant more difficult (read: more interesting) options for them.

Mile had pointed toward a seaside town. It wasn't some little fishing village, by any means. It looked to have a harbor that would be considered sizable in this world, with space for not just tiny fishing vessels but also larger freighters to anchor.

The reason that Mile had chosen this particular location was only natural for an ex-Japanese citizen: She wanted to eat fresh fish. In fact, she wanted to dine on all sorts of sea life. A large -harbor meant a variety of rare ingredients pouring in from all over and multiple culinary traditions being shared. Plus, vessels from distant ports would be carrying intel from all over the continent with them.

To Reina, however, this place was nothing more than some regional city, not even a major royal or imperial capital, and so, it simply did not interest her. True, there were countries where the capital and the largest or most prosperous city in the country were two separate places, as well as countries where there were numerous capitals (or at least where the centers of government were distributed between several different locales). There were even countries that did not have any large cities at all, but this did not seem to be the case in this instance.

No matter how you sliced it, though, this port city was no metropolis. It was hard to be certain when they were viewing it from so far above, but it did not seem to have any of the architecture that would indicate a capital. As much as Mile appreciated the strategic benefits of a maritime center, in this world, where there was still not much in the way of long-distance trade by boat, it made more sense in terms of politics and trade for the capital of the country to be located near its center, not at the edge.

Obviously, capitals were much more useful to hunters, both in terms of opportunities for pay and for building their reputation.

"We're not in a hurry to build up our savings or get our names out there right now, so shouldn't we just kick back, relax, and try to have some fun?" said Mavis.

"I'd object to that assertion about our savings," said Pauline, "but being out in a backwater instead of near the capital will at least make it easier to contain the situation if Mile slips up—far fewer nobles and merchants to come flocking around. And if anything *does* happen, news will spread much slower than it would from the capital, which might help if we have to flee and change home bases."

"Wha..." Mile seemed to want to protest, but thankfully, the two of them had no real objections to picking this city.

Pauline continued, "Plus, if we stay here, Mile can cook us all sorts of delicious seafood dishes!"

"And also," said Mavis, "starting from a distant town and working our way to the capital, earning a reputation one city at a time, makes for a much more fun adventure than going straight to the capital. By the time we get there, the people will already know our names and cry out, 'Oh, it's you! I've heard all about you!'"

On their former continent, they'd been so well known that it was a hindrance to their daily lives. Still, it did feel good to be known as a skilled hunter. Every single member of the guild thought the same—and the members of the Crimson Vow were no exception.

"Anyway! We should check out this town. If we don't like it, we'll just up and leave!" Reina really was a softie.

At any rate, the Crimson Vow was a hunting party. While they might like to settle in one place for short periods, they'd be on the move most of the time, taking advantage of their youth to relocate from one place to another. There was no need to overthink their selection of starting town.

"Well then," said Mile, "let's get going. Kragon, please find somewhere in the forest nearby to land, somewhere without any people!"

"As you wish!"

And so, the Crimson Vow had decided on their new base of operations.

* * *

"Well then, shall we get going?"

The Crimson Vow, having touched down in a forest near the port town, bid farewell to Kragon, who informed them that he was going to introduce himself to the elder dragons on this continent before heading back home.

They decided to walk not toward the town but to a village a short distance away. It was far too risky to head straight into a large city in a country whose language, customs, and etiquette were foreign to you. Even if this continent had once shared the same language as their homeland, the meanings of words might have changed over the many years. What they considered a friendly wave of the hand might be interpreted as an insult, much like how a white flag raised in surrender might be taken as a declaration of war or a threat to decimate one's forces...

Besides, walking uninformed into a big city was a good way to get mixed up with idiots and swindlers. The Crimson Vow were not known and feared here as they were back home—to the casual observer, they were nothing more than four little girls. Plus, they intended to turn some of the goods from Mile's inventory into coin for their living expenses, which increased the likelihood of them being targeted by petty crooks. They would be easy marks, since they didn't even know what kinds of goods were considered most valuable in this area.

For all these reasons, it was best they do a trial run at a small village. That way, even if they messed up somehow, it was unlikely that word of their exploits would get any farther than the bounds of that village.

"Not that I think we'll mess up *that* badly," Mile chirped -optimistically. "We all used to be one big, happy society in the past, with the same language, practices, and customs... Boat travel and communication would have kept up until civilization declined, and most technology and knowledge would have been lost as well by that time, leaving things much the way they are now—so it should be pretty similar to our home continent!"

"Well, I sure do hope so..." Mavis said dubiously. Thankfully, this was not merely baseless conjecture—Mile had confirmed most of her assumptions with the nanomachines before their departure. Much as she liked to refrain from relying on the nanomachines for every little thing, she would prefer not to invite disaster with a

bungled first contact. She had made sure to do her research this time.

* * *

"Well, that was pretty easy," Mile noted once they were inside the village. In fact, there had been no gates to pass through nor gatekeepers to answer to. This really was just a small hamlet, so it was no surprise that anyone might be able to walk in or out.

Located about a two or three hours' walk from the larger port city, the village clearly specialized in fishing. There appeared to be some small patches of vegetables the residents cultivated for their own consumption, but there were no signs of any large-scale grain production or ranching. They likely sold the sea life that they harvested here at the larger port city and other places farther inland and then used the profits to purchase their grains. It was no doubt rare for them to eat red meat, with everyone subsisting mostly on grains and seafood. All exactly as would be expected for a village of this type.

"Doesn't look like there's an inn..." Just as Reina said, there was no sign of any such establishment. This was no surprise, -either—what would be the point with a much larger town so close at hand? Anyone who would come to this village for any sort of business would head right back home that same day. Being this near to town, they could never hope to command enough visitors to support an inn.

"Well, that's not a problem," said Mavis. "That just means we make camp somewhere a bit outside of the village. Much more pleasant than staying at some tiny village inn or at the chief's house." She was right, of course. It was a different story for most hunters, but the Crimson Vow preferred somewhere with beds and baths and toilets. So, they planned to chat with the villagers for a little while, gather some intel, and then head toward the port city, making camp somewhere along the way.

On that note...

"Okay, ladies, *allons-y!* Time to make first contact!" cried Mile.

"Sure, sure," Reina sighed.

Having been trained by Mile's tales, the other members of the Crimson Vow understood perfectly what *allons-y* meant, along with "Let's-a go!" "Liberty or Death!" "Pegas, let's fly!" and other such similar phrases.

* * *

After finding an elder who seemed to have a bit of time on his hands, Mile produced some liquor and snacks from her inventory, and they all sat down to chat. The old-timer was more than happy to talk. He was well past the age where he could keep up the hard labor of a fisherman's life, so the choice between staring dazedly at the horizon or socializing with some young ladies who offered him not only conversation but food and drink was an easy one. Being approached by strangers would put some on their guard, but a man of his age would much rather have the company of young ladies than worry about his own safety. He had already lived out most of his years, and perhaps even made peace with the reality that the end might come at any time.

...Not to mention the booze and snacks.

The man was none too bothered by the fact that these girls' accents were a bit strange, that they sometimes used words he was unfamiliar with, or that they seemed oddly uninformed about common matters. It was not unusual for visitors from other countries or from domestic-but-remote mountain regions to have different dialects or be ignorant of local matters. It might be different near the capital, but folks around here weren't usually bothered by such things. Though the village was relatively close to a large port town, it was still quite far from the capital, on the country's outskirts, in the sort of region that folks in the capital might call "backwater."

In other words, the man took them for fellow country bumpkins.

As the members of the Crimson Vow gathered their information from this man, something else began to gather as well: other elders. The younger men were all out fishing on their skiffs, and though there had been no sign of any other elders previously, -apparently they had sensed that one of their brethren was drinking booze with some young women. As such, they had abandoned their tasks of repairing nets, gathering shellfish and kelp, or processing seafood. And soon...

"Drink! Drink! Let's drink! Up with the cups! Down with thuh meat!"

There was plenty of food and drink in Mile's inventory. Perhaps there were more storage magic users on this continent than where the Crimson Vow had come from, because while the elders seemed mildly surprised by Mile producing more and more provisions from her "storage," it didn't cause much of a fuss. All they had to say was "Hear, hear!" and "That's amazin'!" and "I'm so jealous."

Mile was always sweet on young girls and elders.

"These snacks are all-organically processed ogre meat—they're *all-ogrenic!*"

Of course, Mile had made this claim only for the sake of the wordplay.

Naturally, the old-timers were the only ones drinking liquor. The members of the Crimson Vow stuck to fruit juice. There didn't appear to be any minimum drinking age in this country, but the Crimson Vow were not ones to imbibe in such situations, nor were they of the age to actively enjoy the taste of alcohol. They only sampled a sip or two by way of an aperitif.

"Oh, so you're saying that all of the young men who can't stand fishing have gone off to the nearby port city or the capital to try and make names for themselves?"

"Yes sirree, young lady. 'Course, if some thick-skulled bumpkin from nowhere could ever make a name for himself in the big city with no money and no connections, there'd be no thugs or crooks or slum dwellers or other poor folks in those places..."

"Right?!"

It wasn't exactly unusual for rural youngsters to hang all their hopes and dreams on the idea of urban life.

"Most those fellas can ever hope for is to have those dreams busted 'fore they come crawlin' back here, same as me..."

"You went to the city, too, Gramps?!"

Clearly, this man had had his own youthful indiscretions as well...



As the members of the Crimson Vow chatted with the old men, they gradually began to notice something odd.

"Huh. They've got to be exaggerating a bit, right?" Reina said under her breath.

"I'm sure they're mostly telling the truth, but either the monsters around here are really strong or the hunters and mercenaries and soldiers are super weak," Mavis whispered back.

Indeed, many of the anecdotes that the old man had regaled them with so far involved the humans struggling against monsters they should have been more than a match for. They'd expected his tales to feature the sort of boasting that hunters were so known for—triumphant stories told upon their return to town, bragging about their own prowess and the many monsters they had bested. Instead, they were oddly gloomy. Enough to make one wonder how many in these losing fights against the monsters had even made it home alive...

* * *

"So, what do we think?" asked Reina. The other three thought hard.

They had spent about three hours with the old men at the shore, talking and drinking, before making their exit. If they'd kept going much longer, the younger men would have returned from work and wanted to join in, at which point the whole thing might get out of hand.

The old-timers made no moves to keep the party going themselves. It was obvious what would happen if the young men of a fishing village laid eyes on a gathering where they could eat and drink as much as they liked in the company of young ladies. Based on what the Crimson Vow had observed, it seemed most of the young ladies from the village had already made their way to the port city, their parents apparently unable to stop them from relocating to somewhere that was only a scant few hours away. The village was neither far enough away to keep the young woman at home, nor close enough for them to reasonably commute back and forth. Sadly, this was a typical plight for a village of this description.

The Crimson Vow left all of the food and drink that had already been set out as a gift for the old men, then walked about halfway to the port city before setting up camp for the night. They had already eaten more than enough during the afternoon's socializing,

so they decided to pass on dinner.

Neither Mavis nor Pauline had anything to say, but Mile -finally replied to Reina's question. "First off," she started, "it seems like there are fewer linguistic differences than we anticipated. There are some slight variations in intonation and names for things, but not enough to put anyone on their guard if we just explained that we came from a remote area or some far-off country. We shouldn't have any problems getting our meaning across. There are no changes in mannerisms or gestures, and any missteps can just be explained away with a 'This is how we do things back home, apologies.'

"Besides that, the varieties of monsters and the structures of aristocracy and government in the surrounding countries seem pretty similar, and even the Hunters' Guild is more or less the same. We will have to watch out for any smaller differences in the regulations, though. They must have been part of the same -organization before trade between the continents halted—and it's possible a boat arrived from one side or the other even afterward, bringing various customs and institutions with it..."

In truth, Mile had already consulted the nanomachines on these matters, but there was no reason to go blabbing about that to the others when they could draw the same conclusions on their own. In terms of communication, their situation was far better than it would be even in modern-day Japan, where one might travel from the city to the country and find the dialects of the older population utterly incomprehensible. Here, there were scarcely any barriers to communication.

"What bothers me the most about what they said, though, was..."

"The monsters are really strong!!!" the other three cried.

"Exactly! Or else the humans here are very weak. Though there is also the possibility that they're overestimating the strength of the monsters based on what others have told them. They're just fishermen, after all. They aren't out fighting monsters for a living."

Hunters tended to exaggerate the strength of the monsters they had faced in order to make themselves seem more powerful. This was the norm back on the Crimson Vow's home continent, too, but compared to the sort of stories the Vow were used to hearing, the monsters in the tales the old men had told them sounded way too powerful.

"Well, even if they're a little stronger than usual, a goblin is still a goblin, and a kobold is still a kobold. A goblin is never going to be stronger than an ogre, or an ogre stronger than an elder dragon, so this really isn't that big of a worry," Reina said optimistically.

"I suppose that's true..." Mavis replied, though she sounded uncertain. As a party leader, she could not afford to ignore even the slightest possibility of danger.

"Well, it's not like we're jumping immediately into slaying monsters, so we can put that question on hold for now," said Mile. "I'm sure they'll explain it to us when we make it into town and register with the guild. If we ply some of the veteran hunters with a bit of ale, they'll be happy to give us the eyewitness -accounts we want."

"That's true," said Reina. "There's no point in speculating wildly. We'll just start off by questioning the local hunters."

Reina was not typically fond of socializing with their fellow hunters, who too often belittled her on account of her age and appearance. To defend against this, she maintained an aggressive, haughty attitude and tended to keep her distance at the guild. That said, she was neither stupid nor needlessly reckless, and therefore happy to agree with Mile's plan. Besides, it wasn't as though the Crimson Vow weren't already accustomed to "stronger than usual" monsters.

After that, they discussed their plans and general goals going forward—followed by a round of folktales, as was their custom.

* * *

"We're here..."

The next morning, the Crimson Vow arrived at the port city.

"Well, it's certainly no metropolis," said Mile. As previously mentioned, it would have been quite unusual to find a citadel positioned on the shore of a city like this one. That might change in the future, should maritime technology and warfare advance such that the nation in question saw an increase in ocean-based attacks. However, at present, most attacks would be coming from the land side, which meant that port cities were relatively unimportant from a military standpoint. Thus, at present, there was no point in this town making the vast expenditures that would be required to fortify it against attacks—not when it was at the farthest possible point from enemy countries. Even the capital would have to fall before any invaders reached its borders.

For the same reasons, there was no reason for an enemy to send spies out to a town like this, so anyone was free to enter or leave the town as they pleased. It was a dead end, with nowhere to go but the sea, so no merchant caravans passed through, either. The only merchants who came here did so to offload their goods before picking up goods from the town to take back to the capital or other fiefs, or to countries farther inland. As such, the taxes were enticingly low, and there were no inspections, with no smugglers daring the risks.

“Everything here is so laid-back and serene. It really feels like a seaside town...”

“Yeah, and besides, it seems pretty eclectic—like a stranger would have no problem living here.”

“Even someone a little odd would fit in fairly well.”

“Not a bad choice for our ‘starting village.’”

Currently, it was only around the second morning bell. The four were standing brazenly in the middle of what constituted the sidewalk, their arms crossed, interrupting the paths of people on their way to work, but everyone only gave them pleasant smiles and walked around them. No one seemed to have the heart to be unkind to these cute little girls, who had clearly just arrived in town.

“I know it’s only morning, but should we go ahead and secure an inn? I don’t want to wait until evening to start looking and find out that all the rooms everywhere are booked up so that we have to room at some shady place,” said Mavis.

“Good idea. It would suck for our first inn on this continent to be a miss,” Reina agreed. The other two nodded, very much of the same mind. Mile in particular was very picky when it came to inns—or rather, the receptionists at said inns—and so intended to do a thorough survey. The other three, of course, knew this all too well...

* * *

“This is it! This is the one!” Mile shouted excitedly.

“Yes, all right...” Reina sighed.

There was no way to know the quality of an inn without actually staying there. One could attempt some judgment calls based on the cleanliness of the front entrance and

the sort of characters coming in and out of the door, but there was no way for a first-time guest to know the quality of the food, the service, the decor, the bedding, et cetera before they had actually spent the night. And so, naturally, Mile focused her decision on the only criterion she could assess accurately: whether or not the receptionist was, as she put it, “a young girl, or at least a girl younger than myself.”

Her idea of a jackpot would have been a fluffy young beastgirl, but there were incredibly few inns that could provide this particular perk—and certainly none within a reasonable radius of the Hunters’ Guild.

In what was surely not the best display of manners, Mile repeatedly opened front doors, peeked inside, and then summarily turned on her heel and slammed the doors shut behind her once she’d seen who was at the counter. As far as she was concerned, there was no point in examining any establishment any further than that. The inn she had finally deigned to accept was a fairly smallish one, with a human girl of seven or eight poking her head up from behind the front counter. It was neither the sort of high-class establishment that nobles and other wealthy folk might stay at, nor the sort of unsavory locale where only those in the basest professions might lodge. It was, in a word, “normal.” It was the kind of place that might be used not by business owners but by their clerks and assistants who were traveling for work, or by fairly well-off hunters—perhaps higher-rankings Cs or lower-ranking Bs. Any higher than that, and they would stay elsewhere.

All of which was to say that it was about the same level of quality as Lenny’s inn, where the Crimson Vow had stayed on their original continent—the perfect base of operations for them to embark on a new adventure.

* * *

As it was still before noon, the members of the Crimson Vow headed right back out as soon as they had booked their room, making their way directly toward the Hunters’ Guild. Obviously, the first thing they needed to do was register as new hunters—but even more importantly, they needed to turn some of the materials from Mile’s inventory into provisional funds, since, as of yet, they lacked any of the local coinage.

The inn had not taken any payment on reservation, but they would have to pay before they returned to their room for the night. So time was of the essence. When they made their booking, Mile had, of course, also taken the opportunity to offer some of her homemade sweets to the little girl at reception (the innkeeper’s daughter, clearly). It

was an act reminiscent of offering food to a wild animal, but at this point, the other members of the Crimson Vow could only shrug.

“Okay! Let’s go in!”

“All right!”

The party joined together in a little cheer in front of the guildhall. To any onlookers, the Crimson Vow would be a party of fresh newcomers, ready to make their registration. So, they decided not to fling open the door and shout a hello. That was what a traveling hunter did when stopping in—but it was not the action of a newbie. Instead, they gently opened the door and headed quietly for the reception counter.

However.

Staaare...

All eyes focused immediately on them. Really, it should have come as no surprise. They were on the outskirts of the country, and while this may have been a big town relative to others in the region, it wasn’t a place a hunter would go out of their way to visit. Most hunters in remote areas headed for the capital, not the same sort of rural town they had just come from. The local hunters and guild staff were already familiar with all the local children who were hunter hopefuls, popping in at the guildhall before they were even ten years old to try and pick up odd jobs.

Here, however, stood four unforgettable young girls in gear that was clearly well worn—not equipment that had just been purchased. No one could help but be curious. The members of the Crimson Vow, however, thought nothing of this. They were by now very much accustomed to drawing attention when they first visited a guild branch.

“We’d like to register, please,” Mavis said to the clerk. The room was silent, but all gazes focused even more fixedly on the four.

It was mainly their equipment, which seemed neither brand new nor like something a newbie might have purchased secondhand. Rather, it looked like something they’d already worn for years, well fitted to their bodies. And yet they were here as *new* registrants.

Of course all eyes would be on them.

"Register, you said?" the clerk asked, dubious.

"Yes, that's correct," Mavis cheerfully replied.

"Here you go, then."

The clerk slowly handed over a stack of forms: four individual registration forms and one party registration form. Given the circumstances, the four of them *had* to be registering as a party. Of course, the clerk was just as dubious as everyone else about four people who were obviously *not* greenhorns registering as *new* hunters, but that was hardly reason enough to refuse them, leaving her no choice but to follow standard procedure.

At the very least, there was no reason to worry that such young and upstanding-looking girls might be registering illicitly. Given their ages, they probably still harbored naive hopes of a bright and successful future and would be unlikely to risk that future by doing anything illegal for coin and making an enemy of the Hunters' Guild. Besides, with their youth and their looks, there would be far simpler ways for them to make a bit of money, if they so desired. The fact that they were choosing the path of a hunter rather than one of those other, safer avenues only spoke to the great merit of their character.

"Here you are," said Mavis, gathering up the four completed individual forms along with their party form and handing them over to the clerk.

"Ah yes, thank you." She accepted the forms and looked them over. "Um... Yes, these all look just fine. Now then, you may take the opportunity to look over the notice boards and job slips while we process your registration."

Thankfully, it seemed there were no language barriers with this country's written language, either. Granted, they had already confirmed this back at the fishing village, but they still had been slightly concerned that the spellings there might just have been a little bit off...

"Um, so as far as an aptitude test or skipping registration..." Mile started, hoping to avoid repeating her past mistakes.

"What? Aptitude test? Skipping registration?" the clerk asked, clearly confused.

"Er, well, I mean like a test to make sure that you have enough combat ability to be a

hunter, or some way for promising newcomers to skip a rank or something..."

"Huh? Well, no. New registrants are all starting fresh, so of course they wouldn't have much combat skill yet. We wouldn't bar someone from registering just for that. It's the experiences you accumulate after registering that make you stronger... Every veteran was a beginner once, you know? If we stopped people from registering just because they were weak, or on the basis of some arbitrary test, then only those who were already strong in the first place would ever become hunters..."

"Plus, no matter how strong you already are, you'll never be able to fulfill your job requirements as a hunter if you don't know the basics of gathering herbs or how to hunt and process a jackalope. Do you really think we could let battle-hungry idiots who don't even know how to forage or hunt small game register at a high rank?! You never know when one of your companions might be injured out in the forest or when you might end up unable to move and have to wait for help to arrive. There are, in fact, some idiots around who still don't know this stuff!"

Several hunters shrank back at her words. Clearly, they had some black marks on their records, whether because they had made such a mistake in the past or because they had tried to convince her to promote them simply because they were strong. The fact that the clerk had raised her voice meant her rant was intended at least partly as a scolding or a warning to the other hunters, lest they get any funny ideas. Instructing rookies gave her the perfect pretense to do so without getting odd looks, and she'd taken full advantage of the opportunity.

"Uh..." The members of the Crimson Vow had no idea how to react.

There was no skip system, which meant they would be starting from the lowest rank. The shock of this revelation was almost too much to bear.

"But that's so *boring!*" cried Mile.

"We have to start with herb gathering and jackalope hunting? I mean, I guess it would be nice just to take it easy and go back to the basics for a bit..." mused Mavis.

"It's not like we can't still hunt high-ranking monsters without taking normal jobs. We can hunt whatever we like for daily requests, and we'll still profit from selling the parts," said Reina.

"Grr. I resent the idea of working without a job fee, but I -suppose it would make us

more money to hunt and sell orcs as dailies than it would to take on the lowest-ranking jobs and do children's work... We might even get a pretty good extermination fee, too, depending."

Overhearing this, it was obvious to the clerk that these girls did have some experience hunting monsters, even if they had not registered before. They might appear to be tender young things, but from the sound of it, she could trust that they would not be sending these girls to an early death.

"Anyway, should we check out the info board and the job slips while we wait for our badges to be ready?" Pauline suggested.

"Oh, we better go sell some goods before that," Mile pointed out.

"Almost forgot," said Reina, suddenly remembering that they were lacking in local currency. "Mile, if you would."

"On it!"

As indicated, Mile headed over to the purchasing counter. In this guildhall, this was not separate from the main building but merely a section of the same space separated slightly from the reception windows. Transactions were taken care of here, after which the goods would be carried out back. The purchasing counter consisted of a large surface that butchered and foraged goods could be heaped upon, though they could also be placed directly on the floor, as monster blood staining the ground -apparently wasn't a problem. All in all, the space looked perfectly suited to its function.

"Excuse me!" called Mile. "I'd like to sell some things!"

"Sure thing, missy, put 'er right there!"

Though it was doubtful a rookie would have much of value, the old man in charge of the counter didn't seem unhappy to be doing business with a lovely little girl.

Ba-bam!

As directed, Mile placed her quarry upon the floor... since, had she placed it upon the counter, it might have broken it.

An orc carcass had appeared out of nowhere.

A deep silence spread throughout the room.

CHAPTER 123

THE PORT CITY

“WHAT IN THE blazes?!?!?”

Based on their ages, appearance, and the fact that they were applying as new hunters, at least half of those assembled had assumed that the girls were total rookies, utter greenhorns. Of course, these were the onlookers who had not taken stock of the wear and tear on the girls’ weapons and armor, or how well their gear was fitted to their bodies, not to mention the way the girls carried themselves and how they surveyed their environment—in other words, those who were *below average*. Sadly, this accounted for half of the hunters as well.

I knew it, thought the clerk sourly. She had been well aware that the four girls she had just attended to were anything but amateurs. Registering as a new hunter didn’t mean someone was lacking in battle experience. Hunters could be former mercenaries, soldiers, or pupils of sword masters; fallen nobles and those

from knightly families; as well as frontiersmen from the farthest, most desolate reaches of the land, who had battled every day to survive in places where monsters ran rampant.

And so, while most of the hunters and staff were oblivious, the clerk, who had spoken directly to the girls, observed them up close, and processed their application forms, knew for certain that they must have had some prior experience. The fact that they were only registering now must have meant that they had previously been operating in an area where there was no guild branch, or that they had come from some distant land which had no association with the regional Hunters’ Guild, or else that they had worked in some other profession, like as mercenaries or personal bodyguards for merchants.

Yet even though the clerk could tell these girls must have experience battling monsters, it was still a revelation to discover they had storage magic powerful enough to store a several-hundred-kilogram orc whole. Only one in every however many people could even use storage magic, and among those, only an incalculably small proportion could carry more than a hundred kilograms. Why in the world would an

attractive young girl with such a rare ability aspire to be a *hunter*, of all things?

She could be making bank at a large mercantile firm. She could be adopted by a noble—or better *yet*, secure a favorable appointment at the palace. If she played her cards right, she might even be given the title of baroness. And this was by no means an exaggeration.

She could carry a whole wagon's worth of cargo on a single horse, at high speed. She could smuggle as many goods as she liked. Even in the event of a surprise tax inspection, she could hide any materials or funds in the blink of an eye. That was not even to consider the extraordinary number of potential military applications of a talent like hers. She would have to be out of her right mind to want to be a rookie hunter!

That said, everyone had their own story. Here at the Hunters' Guild, prying into such matters was highly taboo.

Surely, she has some reason to pursue this route, thought the clerk. It was impossible that she simply didn't know her own worth. Of this the clerk was certain.

Then, she heard the girl chirp, “Okay! Time to *finally* begin my life as an average, everyday, normal rookie hunter!”

Gah! The clerk reflexively stood, screaming internally. There was still time before the girls' badges would be complete. A number of letters had to be engraved on metal plates, so this wasn't the sort of task that could be completed in mere minutes. Plus, there were four badges to make.

“Cover me for a minute!” the clerk called to a coworker who had been doing some paperwork behind her. She dashed away, the other staffer taking over her position without thinking too much of it. It wasn't uncommon for the counter clerk to need coverage for a few minutes. The only thing that was unusual about this circumstance was that the clerk was running not to the restroom but to the guild master's office...

* * *

“So... why are we here?” Mavis asked suspiciously once they were led to the guild master's office, before even being urged to sit. Her confusion was, of course, warranted. They'd merely tried to register as hunters and been suddenly dragged to see the guild master for their trouble. It was like being called to the principal's office

on your first day of school.

“.....”

The man before them had a rugged physique. Across his left eye stretched a scar so massive it was almost cliché—a gash that made one wonder how his whole eyeball hadn’t been torn out. If healing magic had been applied in order to save his eye, surely the mage in question could have healed the wound cleanly enough to avoid such a blemish.

Did he leave that scar on purpose? the girls wondered. That said...

It's super cool!!! Apparently, even Pauline and Reina were starting to be infected by Mavis and Mile's way of thinking.

At any rate, the guild master was a burly, tough-looking character, most certainly a vanguard fighter—not a rider or shortsword user but someone whose strength was brute force. He would clearly be a heavy fighter, perhaps even someone who wielded an axe. His presence spoke to his obviously lengthy battle experience—to put it another way, he had a face that would make babies cry and send women running away shrieking if they -encountered him alone at night. Any weak-willed newbie would be quaking in their boots right about now.

Thankfully, the members of the Crimson Vow were made of stern stuff. Not to mention the fact that they had dealt with similar situations approximately a million times before.

Ignoring Mavis's question, the guild master looked the young hunters up and down. He neither greeted them nor invited them to sit.

The members of the Crimson Vow only stared back fixedly, equally silent. There was no need for them to say anything. The guild staff were the ones who had called *them* here, so it was up to them to start the conversation. Mavis had already gone out of her way to offer him an opening. She may have been slightly brusque in her tone, but under the circumstances, her attitude felt justified. Guild master or no, the girls were not going to simply bow their heads and tolerate such unfounded rudeness.

Plus, they had yet to receive both their badges and the payment for the orc, which was still under inspection. This meant the Vow were technically not “hunters” at the moment, and therefore not under the guild master’s jurisdiction. If he met them with

blame or some wild demands, they'd just leave without their badges and make their way to another town to register there. If the guild found fault with them before they had even finished their registration, that was reason enough to call their applications null and void.

Surely, if a party of four innocent young girls were to register at another branch and tell the staff there that something strange had happened when they attempted to register in this town, people would be inclined to sympathize with them. Any conclusions people might draw would look quite bad for this guild master, and much better for the Crimson Vow.

More time passed, and the guild master still did not speak. Finally, Reina broke the silence. "Okay, never mind. We're going home. Apparently, this guild master likes to bully and toy with rookies for his own amusement, so this is no place for us to settle down. Let's cancel our room reservation and head on to the next town. We'll register there."

"All right," the other three agreed, swiftly moving to leave behind the office and the slack-jawed guild master and clerk.

"W-wait! Wait just a minute!" the guild master called frantically, apparently having finally returned to his senses. His panic was natural. Misunderstandings were sure to abound if these four went to another town and explained that he had coerced a group of rookie girls into coming up to his office. Plus, there was an even greater issue at hand...

If word gets out that I let someone who can use such a crazy amount of storage magic slip through my fingers, I'll be the laughing-stock of the other guild masters! Or worse—since our lord will certainly be very unhappy if I scare off someone who might bring immense profit to our city. Not to mention what it would do to my standing within the guild if these girls were to abandon any notion of becoming hunters in favor of some other profession...

"Wait!" he called again. "I'm sorry! Please, *please* just wait!!!"

The guild master pelted after them double time.

* * *

"I am sorry. I'm very, truly sorry!"

The guild master caught up with the girls partway down the stairs, bowing his head and imploring them to return to his office. He then called for a subordinate, directing them to bring up some of the guild's finest tea and a tray of sweets. Finally, he ordered others to make it their highest priority to finish up the party's registration badges.

Of course, finishing the badges didn't prevent the girls from resigning from the guild at any time. Even if someone were to try to prevent them from leaving by arguing that they had already registered or telling them that they could not up and leave so soon after joining the guild, no one could force them to operate as hunters. If they did not take on any jobs, their registrations would expire in just a few months and they would be automatically expelled from the guild. Plus, no one could say a word if they fulfilled only the minimum requirement to stay on as hunters, simply turning in a few jackalopes once every few months—a -token affiliation at best.

Meanwhile, it was in the guild's best interest that the girls reach C-rank as quickly as humanly possible. Then, they could be conscripted in the event of a sudden monster stampede or other emergency. The fact that they could carry supplies and medicine with the utmost speed to places where wagons could not go meant that they quite literally held the lives of not only many hunters but also many townspeople in their hands.

The girls didn't need to continue working in this town because they'd registered here. Once the registration process was done, they could leave as quickly as they desired. And yet, the guild master had acted as he had, either because he doubted the clerk's report or because he was wary of whoever might have sent these girls into his jurisdiction. Or perhaps he had simply hoped to put them in their place, overwhelming them with his presence from the outset so that they knew who was boss.

If they were as skilled as the clerk said that they were, this was a seller's market for them. They could relocate whenever and wherever they wanted. The guild master might have thought that, if he could establish his authority before they realized how much they were worth, he might be able to exert his influence in order to keep them local.

According to the clerk, their speech patterns and intonation were a little bit odd, which meant it was almost certain that they were a group of country bumpkins, having just made their way to civilization from some remote locale. Manipulating impressionable

young ladies such as these should have been easier than -taking candy from a baby. Particularly if you were a battle-hardened veteran...

Of course, the guild master had no idea who he was up against. The members of the Crimson Vow were well aware of their own abilities and value. They were giving this town no more than cursory consideration as a potential place to dwell. If the townsfolk or the guild here got carried away and tried to take advantage of them, they would have no qualms about moving on without a backward glance—the only reasonable course of action for someone who knew their own worth.

“Well,” Reina finally said, “since you’ve apologized, I suppose we can at least have a conversation.”

“O-oh good! Wonderful! You see, we don’t get many people coming here to register as new hunters. Factor in all the folks who retire, or get injured or die, and our situation is getting pretty dire. So, when we get new hopefuls coming in, it really hurts to let them go... I was sort of hoping to figure out whether or not you really did have potential. I mean, think about it from my perspective. A party of four beauties, all with experience fighting monsters, and with a high-capacity storage magic user, to boot? Are you kidding me? How could I possibly believe that a party like that was trying to register as rookies way out *here*? ”

When the girls did not immediately respond, the guild master was certain that the members of the Crimson Vow must understand where he was coming from. In fact, they were feeling a bit bashful. They were accustomed to being treated as oddities, not to receiving straightforward compliments—particularly someone calling them “beauties.” That said, this did considerably improve their opinion of him, so the guild master had been quite fortunate in his choice of wording. He was even luckier that all four girls realized this was a sincere assessment rather than an attempt at flattery with manipulation in mind.

“W-well,” said Reina, “I suppose that does put things into perspective...” As ever, she was the easy mark.

“Yes,” said Pauline. “I suppose we can keep this to ourselves, as a *favor*.” She would never promise to outright “forget” about such an incident, nor assure him that it was water under the bridge.

“While I do understand all that,” added Mavis, “what I can’t wrap my mind around is

why you would go out of your way to pick a fight with four people you had just met. Why would you purposely make a bad first impression and then keep digging yourself deeper into that hole?"

Unlike the other two, Mavis adopted a polite tone that acknowledged the man's status as guild master, even as she questioned his tactics. That was a party leader for you—or maybe, more accurately, the combined result of her personality and her noble upbringing.

"Uh..." The guild master found himself at a loss, at which point the clerk interjected helpfully.

"It's because our guild master is an idiot with brawn for brains!"

"Oh!"

This suddenly made a great deal of sense—particularly when the clerk explained further.

The position of guild master wasn't one a fool should hold, which was why a member of the clerical staff was typically appointed to the role. But in this case, the clerk told them, there had been no suitable candidate from that pool. This man, who had worked to earn a reputation as a top-ranking hunter and was loved and respected by everyone, had gotten the promotion instead. He was not especially smart, but he looked out for his juniors, and he was skilled. He didn't have much interest in the administrative side of things, but he allowed himself to be pushed into the role, certain that others would help with the more intellectual parts of the job. And indeed, he listened dutifully and without complaint even to scathing feedback from his subordinates, who didn't hesitate to point out his mistakes in harsh language.

It was all part of the arrangement the guild had settled on. When there was an external party to apologize to, as in this -situation, someone from the guild master's side of the issue was well within their rights to speak frankly to him, even if he was technically their boss.

* * *

"Anyway, the point is that our hunter numbers have been steadily decreasing..."

Once things had calmed down a bit, the guild master -explained a bit more about the

current situation with the hunters in the area. Talking directly to the guild master got them more reliable intel than they would from other hunters they might treat to a drink—hunters who would say anything to make themselves sound good. Realizing this, the girls made sure to exploit this moment of weakness, knowing that they had stumbled on a golden opportunity.

According to what the guild master told them, the local hunters were taking far greater losses from monsters than the members of the Crimson Vow would expect. The environment sounded more or less typical when it came to fighting against bandits. The results of such human-on-human conflict formed the expected scatter plot, decided by individual differences in strength and ability.

When it came to monsters, however, the local hunters were clearly sustaining far more damage than was normal, no matter what type of job was involved. Hunters were taking injuries severe enough to jeopardize not just their ability to make a living but even to survive as a party at all. They were regularly losing their armor or weapons, being forced to consume expensive medicine, and even losing party members to injury or death.

Risk management was a necessary skill set for all hunters. This was even truer for the lowest-ranked hunters, who were weak and unable to bring in much cash. Stronger hunters made more coin. Their gear broke less often and they took fewer injuries, requiring them to use fewer medical supplies in turn. The weak, however...

If they left the profession early, they'd never have a chance to get stronger. Hunters who should have been building endurance over time, building up the experience that would someday make them veterans, were retiring or even perishing while they were still in their salad days.

This was a serious threat to the longevity of the Hunters' Guild. It meant there were fewer able fighters available to keep monster populations under control, and when the plants and animals they fed on vanished as the monsters' numbers rose, stampedes could occur... It was a grave situation.

"Is it because the hunters are weak? Or because the monsters are strong?" Reina didn't hesitate to get down to brass tacks. What she wanted to know, but did not say, was how the hunters and monsters here compared to those on the continent where the Crimson Vow had started. Of course, the guild master was unaware of this, and, thus, was not sure what to make of her question.

"Reina, you can't answer a relative question without some kind of baseline," said Mile. "When a battle is won or lost, you can only tell if it's because of the strength of the winners or the weakness of the losers if you know what a *typical* level of strength is."

"I suppose that's true." Reina politely withdrew. "Anyway..."

"Time for a trial!"

A trial, in this case, meant that the Crimson Vow would try their hand against an enemy, thereby assessing their mettle in battle. They would not fight with their full strength so much as test the waters—though that did not mean they might not change their minds midway and rain down their full fury if the occasion required it. They couldn't know what their enemy was capable of until they fought them.

"So," Reina asked, "which are we fighting? Monsters or people?"

"W-wait a minute now—" the guild master started.

"Oh, no," Mavis assured him. "She just means that we'll either take on some daily tasks and fight the monsters in the area, or we'll ask around for someone who's free to spar with us on the guild's training grounds. We aren't going to attack or kill anyone. Though I wonder if anyone will be up to the challenge..."

They knew very well there would be. There were those who would love to smack down a rookie and show them just how tough this profession could be. That wasn't to mention those who might hope to cozy up to a party of all girls or the childish hunters who would want to show off their own strength by wiping the floor with a group of newbies. At any rate, the Crimson Vow certainly would not hurt for sparring partners... to start. Chances were high that by the second round, there'd be few who wished to go up against them. So, given that this experiment might end after a single battle, they had to be certain to pick someone as close to the baseline strength as possible for their first match. To that end...

"Do you think you could pick someone suitable for us?" Reina asked flippantly.

The guild master hesitated. The fact that these girls had storage magic was proof of their value but not of their combat -prowess. One of their two frontliners was clearly underage, slightly built and lightweight. Any heavy attacks would blow her away in an instant. The two mages, skilled or not, could only offer paper-thin defenses against any enemy attack. Though they wore the thick fabrics most mages did, they lacked

other armor.

It made sense, when you thought about it. Here were four young and beautiful girls, a couple of them still underage, with phenomenal storage magic at their disposal. That was more than enough. If they were skilled at offense or defense on top of all that, they'd already be B-rank or darlings of the guild branch in the capital—perhaps even employed by the palace or a lord or wealthy merchant.

In other words, they would never have come to such a backwater—much less be trying to register here—by mistake. The storage magic alone was enough to settle it. Even if they were total bumpkins who had somehow avoided registering at the guild until now, there was no way every last adult in their village was an ignorant fool. Every village, no matter how small, had to pay their taxes. This meant correspondence with either a tax collector or some other functionary in the capital of their fief, where their taxes—or rather, wheat—would be sent. There would have been *someone* with at least a little knowledge of how the world worked in the girls' lives.

Of course, there was no real value in such speculation. Still, it did make it exceedingly unlikely that these girls were particularly skilled in either offense or defense. The guild master may have been an idiot, but this was one logical conclusion he could arrive at.

And so, he was worried. All they wanted to do was gauge the strength of the average local monster or hunter, relative to where they had come from. Perhaps an average individual would be the best choice—a middle-of-the-road C-ranker, your quintessential hunter. Or perhaps he should pit them against someone of their own level, so they could understand what sort of position they would be occupying around here?

“Hrmm...” The guild master was still pondering over this when the receptionist chimed in.

“We'll choose a mid-grade C-rank hunter!” she declared, her tone clipped.

“Uh...” The guild master was puzzled.

“A beginner is not a good basis for comparison, as they all start out with different levels of skill, depending on their background. Plus, these four clearly have some experience with combat. There's no point in pitting them against beginners. The stronger C-

rankers can vary widely in skill, so they might be strong enough to make the comparison worthless as well. Our only choice is to pair them with a mid-tier C-ranker, whose skill levels tend to be more consistent. That way, they can gauge their abilities against that of a more or less typical run-of-the-mill hunter from this area. Plus, individuals of that level know how to hold back, so there's no risk of someone getting gravely injured."

This clerk truly was the ideal backup for the muscle-brained guild master. Even the members of Crimson Vow found themselves gazing at her in admiration. Though, of course, *they* were the ones who were going to have to hold themselves back.

"I see..." said the guild master. "Let's do it, then." He was well aware of his own mental shortcomings and happy to follow along with any logical suggestion that his subordinates put forward. All in all, he was a good and reasonable boss.

* * *

The Crimson Vow now found themselves in the guildhall courtyard, awaiting a signal from the guild master to mark the beginning of the mock battle. The assembled group comprised the Crimson Vow, the guild master, the clerk and other guild employees, and the four-man C-rank party who had been -selected as their opponents for the bout, as well as a crowd of deeply curious hunters who had opted to observe the fight.

The guild staffers were there for compulsory observation. They would be dealing with the Crimson Vow a great deal from here on out, so it was important to learn their faces, as well as gauge each member's skill so as to avoid foisting any impossible quests on them. With this in mind, the majority of them had abandoned their usual posts to gather in the yard.

The hunters, meanwhile, had a variety of reasons for being present. Some were simply bored, while others were information-gathering to help them get closer to these attractive young ladies. Still others were scheming to use the girls' storage magic to earn more coin on joint assignments.

Today was merely a trial, not a serious battle, so no one had come here with the intent of making wagers. Of course, even if they had, no one would have bet on the Crimson Vow—which would have been a mistake, financially speaking.

The guild master had repeatedly cautioned the Crimson Vow's opponents that they

were by no means to harm these little girls. He even went so far as to say that, should it look as though any of the girls were to be injured, one of the C-rankers should step in to take the blow for them—however, given the difference in strength everyone anticipated, it should not come to that. They would be fighting with unsharpened practice swords, so as long as they didn't swing particularly hard, any blows they landed shouldn't do real harm. The girls were wearing armor, after all.

Plus, the C-rankers would be sure to hold back. Though they would not ease up on their speed, they would not be putting much force into their swings. While the battle might cause some light bruising, that was nothing that a little healing magic could not fix. The hunters could be measured and composed. This was the goal for them, and the reason they had been selected.

"Okay, to your positions... Ready?" asked the guild master.

The members of the Crimson Vow and their opponents all nodded firmly. The guild master was quite skilled as a referee—indeed, he'd grown more alert and efficient the moment he was able to escape his office for more physical work. He'd be able to shut the battle down the moment he judged that the situation had turned dangerous, and he wielded a sturdy dulled blade for this precise purpose.

"Ready! Set! *Fight!*"

This was only a mock battle, so it was not the end of the world if the match was not decided in a single round. Still, the men who had been selected as the Crimson Vow's opponents believed it their duty to teach these young upstarts the strength of a real C-rank hunter, lest they mislead these sweet and lovely young rookies. This was one hundred percent a matter of honor. They had no ulterior motives at all.

And so, they made their first decisive moves, ready to go all out from the start.

Whoosh!

The frontliners moved abruptly into action. The midline fighter, a lancer, readied his spear. The mage in the rear began a high-speed incantation.

The two swordsmen aimed straight for the Vow's vanguard. They planned to take out the two frontliners in a single go, after which they could finish off the rearguard mages with their two swords, an attack spell with its output lowered to almost zero, and the spear.

At least, that was the plan.

Instead, the two members of the vanguard sunk to the ground, having caught tempered blows to the flank. Then, the other two members of the party were caught by the dampened magical -attack. Their opponents' strength was soon abundantly clear—at least to the hunters fighting them.

"WHAT IN THE BLAZES WAS THAT?!?!?"

For the umpteenth time, a familiar scene played out yet again.

The guild clerk's voice was hollow as she whispered from her place on the sidelines.
"I knew it..."

The faces of the men they had just bested were frozen in a -silent, stunned rictus. As mid-range C-rank hunters, they were fairly confident in their abilities. And yet, they had just been essentially slaughtered by a group of young, female rookies in front of all the guild staff and many other hunters. It wouldn't be surprising if their spirits had been broken beyond hope of recovery.

"So, what do we think?" asked Mavis.

"They're normal," said Pauline.

"Super normal," Reina agreed.

"I'm still not convinced," said Mile. "Should we go again?"

After a hushed discussion, the Crimson Vow took their positions, ready to begin another round. Naturally, the men were not going to reject the opportunity to redeem themselves in a rematch.

"I guess we got sloppy," said their leader. "These girls are a bit better than we figured. This time, let's do this seriously. No holding back. Attack pattern six, boys—no letting your guards down. Got it?"

"All right!!!"

With that, the C-rankers readied themselves once more.

Again, the guild master gave the signal. “Ready! Set! *Fight!*”

Shing! Shing! Crack! Bwoosh!

Shunk! Shing! Crack!

Boom!

Ka-boosh! Pyoom!

Blades clashed and were deflected. Though the sparring swords they used had dulled edges, they were still made of metal—and yet, they cracked under the force of the Crimson Vow’s blows. At the same time, the girls effortlessly intercepted the attacks of their opponents’ mage, allowing just a few spells to get through—only to also deflect those just before they struck, rendering them powerless.

The men were still and speechless once more, and the spectators were equally dumbstruck.

“WHAT IN THE HELL WAS THAAAAAAT?!?!?!”

Again came the usual shouts. These capable C-rank hunters had just been annihilated. Anyone who could do that should have been an upper C-rank, close enough to scrape the edge of a B-rank. This should never have been possible for four rookie girls in their teens—even more so considering that half of them were underage (for most assumed that Reina was young enough to be in this number).

The gears in the guild staff and hunters’ minds were turning so swiftly one could almost see smoke coming out of their ears.

Were these girls spies from an enemy nation? Impossible—they stood out way too much to be undercover!

Had they been trained from a young age, having come from a line of knights or famous mages? Four young girls, all of them beautiful? What were the odds of *that*?

Or perhaps, did they come from some absurd, improbable backwater, or some wild and magical land? No, they were dressed properly, in gear well fitted to their bodies, their looks and their movements refined, almost like nobles...

They were young, lovely, well groomed, and their battle prowess was as notable as their appearances. And yet, they somehow knew nothing of the world.

Those assembled could draw only one conclusion.

Everyone patted their fists into their palms. Yes, there could be but one explanation:

"They're elves!"

"We are not!!!"

A typical human would have been flattered—honored even—to be mistaken for an elf. After all, they were all beautiful, eternally young, and far stronger than they appeared to be. Not so for Mile, who had been told too many times how much she “smelled” of other races...

* * *

After that, the Crimson Vow fought against several other -parties who wished to try their luck, kindly preserving the honor of the first party from total annihilation. Not that the members of the Crimson Vow were concerned about anyone’s reputation—they merely continued battling anyone who would face them for the sake of gathering information. A larger dataset made for more accurate inferences. Still, they did vindicate the first party in the process.

“So, what did you think?” asked the guild master, once the Crimson Vow had returned with him to his office.

“They were normal,” said Mile.

“Pretty normal,” said Mavis.

“Normal,” said Pauline.

“Very normal,” agreed Reina.

The guild master was lost for words. The same was true for the clerk, who had once again joined them, perhaps worried what might occur if the guild master were to

handle this alone.

They were silent because the events of the day had confirmed some things for them. These girls were fully aware of their own strength. They were incredibly strong, even for wherever they came from. And as they had already insisted, they were not elves. They probably weren't even dwarves or some other race but -actually normal humans.

"S-so you're saying that the hunters here are about as skilled as the hunters wherever you came from?" asked the guild master, collecting himself.

"That's correct. I don't think the average level of strength is any different. The hunter ranks here do keep going up from C, right? To B, A, and then S?" Mile asked, just to be sure.

"Y-yeah, S-rank just means *higher than A-rank*. And there's nothing higher than that," the guild master confirmed. Apparently, there was no SS, SSS, or EX rank on this continent, but it seemed the logic behind the rankings was more or less the same as what the Crimson Vow were used to. Was it simply the case that -humans were more or less the same wherever they lived? Or maybe it was just that this place had been settled when there was still communication between both continents...

"Which means..."

"It *isn't* that the hunters are weak..."

"...but that the monsters are strong."

The guild master looked relieved to hear this. It reflected well on his own people, who were fighting hard against monsters far more powerful than those where these girls had come from. It wasn't a matter of the local hunters being weak. Instead, they were putting up a valiant effort against monsters stronger than those in other regions. For any hunters, and for a guild master in particular, this would most certainly be a point of pride.

"Well then, I suppose we should test the monsters next," Reina suggested.

"We can take on some dailies and work our way up, from jackalopes through orcs and ogres," said Mavis.

"Sounds good. We'll need to do some testing, so best to just stick to dailies, where we

don't have to worry about quotas," Pauline chimed in.

"Agreed!" said Mile.

If they took on a standard job—as in a job posting with an individual client—there would be limits to what they could do. They'd have to hunt down specific prey to fulfill the job requirements, after all. But if they focused on daily requests, where the guild would purchase any herbs and meat from them at a fixed market price, quotas were irrelevant. They could do as they pleased, with no risk of breaching contract by failing a job.

The guild master made no move to interject here. Having seen for himself that the Crimson Vow's skills were at least on par with high-tier C-ranks, he knew they wouldn't be caught flat-footed by a stray ogre.

"I guess we'll call it a day for now," Reina concluded. "Anything else you need from us?"

"N-not really. Your badges should be done soon. I assume y'all won't be making any plans until you find out how strong the monsters here are, so you can do what you like in the meantime. But don't overdo it! The monsters around here might be way stronger than y'all are anticipating. Find out what you need to find out, but err on the side of caution until you're used to fighting the monsters we've got in this area. Do *not* push yourselves and do *not* underestimate these beasts! Got it?"

The man was obstinate in his reminders, but the members of the Crimson Vow did not take offense. This was merely a sign of how much he worried for their safety as newcomers. In fact, they were even a little touched that he would bother to give them this warning. He might be dismissed as just a crotchety old man, but the girls gave him a proper thanks, bowing their heads respectfully as they departed.

The guild master, who had taken them for a headstrong, brusque, unmannered bunch, was surprised by their reaction. However, when he expressed this to the clerk, she made it clear she'd expected no less from the young hunters.

"Surprised?" she started. "Those four are incredibly well mannered. You can tell from their posture, their actions, their demeanor, the speed with which they respond to questions, their knowledge, their social graces... If they were harsh with you, it's because of how you acted toward them at the start. They've almost certainly had to adopt a rough attitude because of all the times their ages and appearances have

caused people to underestimate them. They're all fundamentally educated, polite, and skilled in conversation. Frankly, they are so well put together that I doubt they would even pose a risk of embarrassing themselves if they were invited to a noble's manor..."

"What?!" The guild master was flummoxed, but, of course, the guild clerk was right. Mavis and Mile were the daughters of nobles, and Pauline, coming from a merchant household, had received a fair bit of education in her upbringing—not to mention the six months all four of them had spent as countesses. Some of that time had been a living hell of governesses and lecturers who had been dispatched from the palace breathing down their necks, instilling in them the etiquette necessary to not embarrass themselves as nobles. A hell that seemed to stretch on forever...

It had been less painful for Mavis, who had received similar instruction already. Mile hadn't suffered too much, either. Although she had only received such training until the age of eight, she was just as gifted in her powers of comprehension and recollection as she was in her physical might and sense of balance. Yet Reina, though she had much self-taught knowledge, had never received a formal education, and Pauline had limited physical strength and shoddy reflexes to work with. For those two, it was a nightmare—particularly when it came to dancing and other refined movements. Ensuring that the four of them could dance was an urgent matter indeed, considering how many parties they were sure to be invited to with dance floors onto which they might be beckoned by princes and other members of the upper crust.

At any rate, etiquette was not an area in which the four of them were lacking—though the clerk was just as impressive for being able to guess all of this at a glance.

* * *

"Oh, so *this* is what a hunter's badge looks like," said Mile, watching the badge she had just collected from the reception desk glitter in the light. The other hunters watched over her fondly. Most rookies reacted the exact same way when first receiving their badges.

The Crimson Vow might have just made it clear how strong they were, but to the other hunters, Mile was still a precocious junior—a child, really.

As was the custom on their original continent, the badge hung from a chain, to be worn about one's neck. But unlike on their original continent, these badges were made of thin metal and were round in shape, like a disc or a coin. They had probably been

designed with feedback from hunters—a circle was a logical choice, as unlike a rectangle, it had no sharp corners upon which to hurt oneself.

After that, it was time for the Crimson Vow to collect their fee for the orc.

“All righty, we should be able to give ya about this much. We gave it a pretty high grade, based on how fresh it was and how cleanly the head was removed, which meant there wasn’t anything unusable. Took a few points off since we’ll have to drain and butcher it ourselves, but since this is your first payment after registration, we threw in a little extra. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect!!!”

There was no way for them to really judge whether the amount was fair, as they had no idea what market values were here, and they hadn’t had much time to assess the value of the money itself. Still, they could tell from the price breakdown that it was unlikely there was any funny business going on here. The old man who was in charge of the purchasing had been watching their mock battle earlier, and no one would try to put something over on a party who was getting special treatment from the guild master.

Even putting that aside, there was no purchasing manager who would dare make enemies of a hunter who possessed such immense storage magic. It was a specialized profession that required a wealth of knowledge, a discerning eye for materials, and an understanding of the current market rates of everything they purchased, as well as the ability to explain said prices to any hunters who complained. A purchasing manager also had to have the willpower to resist being bullied into raising prices, as well as a slew of other abilities. It was the sort of position a B-rank hunter who had to retire early due to injury might be promoted into after working in the processing shed for a decade or so—a position for the kind of hunter who caught the eye of the guild master or head of processing.

Mile put the coins they received directly into storage, lingering after to ask the man another question. “Um, there wasn’t anything weird about that orc, was there?”

“Huh? Well, we haven’t butchered it yet, but the guys over at the shed didn’t say anything when they were checking the severed portion of the neck, the size, and the musculature. I agreed with them when I was assessing the price.”

That satisfied Mile. Clearly, there was no visible difference between the orcs the members of the Crimson Vow were used to and the ones in the area.

The girls were quiet. They had assumed that, as was the case with the monsters that had come from the other dimension, the orcs in this area would be different from those on their original continent. And so, they had speculated—or rather, fully expected—that the fellows at the processing shed, being professionals in their field, would have taken one look at their orc and said, “What the heck? Never seen one this scrawny and flabby,” or “Is this some kind of mutant runt? Don’t think we can buy this for more than half the normal price...”

“Mysteries abound, huh?” Mavis muttered openly, repeating a phrase Mile often used in her stories.

They now knew two things: The monsters here were not physically different from those they were accustomed to, and the hunters here also did not differ much in strength. So, why were hunters in this area ending up with so many more injuries? It couldn’t be their weapons. The Crimson Vow had already confirmed the strength and performance of the local hunters’ equipment by talking to several parties and asking to inspect their gear.

“Well, now that we have some funds on hand, let’s take the rest of the day to rest up at the inn. Tomorrow, we’ll do some more thorough investigation!”

“All right!!!”

To ensure they could head straight out the next day without having to stop back in at the guildhall, they went ahead and browsed the price list for daily requests, copying a map of the area and some monster distribution data, and treating senior hunters to a few drinks in exchange for a bit more conversation. With that, their preparations were complete. No matter how confident they were in their abilities, they were still newcomers to these parts, knowing nothing about the lay of the land. Gathering as much information as possible and preparing ahead of time was critical. Their strength was one thing, but this level of prudence only deepened the positive impressions the other hunters had formed of the four newcomers.

CHAPTER 124

THE INSPECTION

“SO, ACCORDING TO the information we got at the guild, this is the forest where newbie hunters usually go to work...”

In the past, Reina would have dutifully rebutted, “Who the hell are you explaining this to!?” But now, no one bothered to even comment on Mile’s unnecessary exposition.

“It won’t be a useful test if we get too serious right off the bat, so we need to conduct ourselves the way that normal rookie hunters in this area would,” she continued. “Since we’re in a forest, fire magic is obviously a no-go, Reina. And make sure you keep your other spells to the level of a D- or E-rank mage also. I know your fire magic was already on par with a C-rank when we started at the Prep School, but try and limit your other spells to the level they were back then. Mavis, your skills were also already around that level when you started, since you were trained from childhood by your father and brothers, so

maybe shoot for something a bit weaker than you were at that point... And Pauline, absolutely no hot magic. Not the spicy kind *or* the thermal kind.”

The thermal kind referred to attacks made with boiling water, or spells that raised the target’s body temperature, such as the ones she had used to fell the hired hunters when taking back her family’s shop.

“These limits will apply until we declare that the test is over, unless someone is about to be hurt—or something else unexpected pops up.”

“What limits will there be on *you*?” Reina asked.

“Oh, I won’t be participating in the hunt,” Mile replied calmly. “I’ll be focused on watching you all fight and evaluating the results.”

The others made no move to argue this. It was probably for the best. If Mile were to participate, she would likely overdo it somehow, and with her scientific mind, she was most suited for the role of observer.

“Now then, let the battles begin!” With that signal, their test had started.

* * *

“Hm, we aren’t really finding much...” Mile sighed. In truth, it was no surprise. This forest was barely different from any other forest near town that rookie hunters would commute to. No dangerous, high-ranking monsters were likely to dwell in these environs, as the populations of prey would be too small to support their breeding. This close to town, smaller creatures were killed by low-level hunters at a rate that didn’t leave much for larger monsters to snack on.

Typically, the Crimson Vow were only able to find quarries in such areas thanks to Mile’s search magic. She didn’t like for the others to be overly reliant on her special talents, but she liked going home empty-handed even less, so she did utilize this skill on their hunts, at least to a certain degree.

In this case, however, she was avoiding it entirely. It wasn’t something a typical newbie hunter would be able to use, after all...

* * *

“One jackalope at one o’clock, fifteen meters ahead...”

Finally, Mavis spotted one. Catching sight of a small horned rabbit, fifteen meters ahead in the forest undergrowth, was a tall order. Typically, the jackalopes would sense the humans’ presence first and either run away or burrow down into loose earth or grass to hide themselves. Mavis must have been blessed with impeccable vision to be able to spot their prey.

“Mavis and Reina, if you would!” Mile directed. The pair nodded.

Having four humans chase down one jackalope would be overkill, even with Mile focused on observation. Pauline, meanwhile, was not particularly blessed when it came to reflexes, which meant she could never keep up with one of the critters.

“Let’s do it, Reina!”

“Let’s go!”

The pair then softly approached, so that the jackalope would not hear them. Reina had

already mentally incanted a spell that would release tiny hailstones, and was holding the trigger, while Mavis drew her sword, moving into her usual stance. However...

“Crap! It’s running!”

Reina immediately unleashed her hailstones, but they missed. There was no way of chasing a swiftly moving jackalope through the undergrowth like this. It would have been better for her to unleash the spell while the rabbit was still sitting still, but hindsight was 20/20.

"It's no use! It's getting a... huh?"

The creature was slow. Indeed, all four could clearly see that the jackalope was running much more slowly than usual.

"Is it injured? Good, that means we've got a chance! Let's go, Reina!"

"I've got this!" said Reina, and soon the pair were in hot pursuit. Now that the creature was already aware of them, there was no point in keeping their voices down.

"There they go..." said Pauline.

"How am I supposed to observe them if I can't see them?" Mile sighed. The moment she spoke, however, Reina and Mavis came thundering back wordlessly, their faces grim.

“What’s the matt... O-oh myyyyy God!”

At Mile's scream, Pauline turned to look in the direction that the pair had come from. Before them, they saw:

Jackalope.

Jackalone, jackalone.

Jackalope, jackalope, jackalope.

jackalope, jackalope...

Jackalopes, by the thousands, as far as the eye could see. All running at full pelt, their pointed horns aimed directly at the Crimson Vow.

If Mile got serious, she could blow all of them away in an instant, but it would feel as though she had somehow “lost” if she were to fight with her full strength. After she had said all those things to the others about holding back, she didn’t want to jump in with skills so far beyond what a rookie hunter could manage. Plus, they were just jackalopes...

Pauline seemed to be thinking the same thing: What would a normal rookie hunter do in this situation? A jackalope’s horn could easily pierce through leather armor. Even a C-rank hunter could be caught off guard and seriously injured if they let their defenses down. And so, at the moment, there was only one -option available to the two...

“RUUUUUUUUN!!!”



Mile and Pauline followed after the other two, running as fast as they could.

Yes—as Mavis and Reina had decided, their only valid choice in the moment was escape.

* * *

“Wh-what the hell was th-that...?” Reina huffed once the four of them had finally escaped the swarm.

“A j-jackalope stampede, obviously,” Mavis replied. They were all panting heavily.

“More importantly, why didn’t you say anything to me and Mile?!” Pauline groused.

“Our bad...” The pair dutifully apologized. They had more or less drawn aggro from a whole troop of monsters and dragged them along to where the rest of their party was waiting—not exactly an admirable course of action. To then simply run off without warning the others would be enough to fracture the trust of any normal party. You couldn’t write this off with excuses like “Well, it was only a few jackalopes” or “We all could have managed, if it really came down to it.” What if it had been a swarm of ogres instead? What if Mile were a normal C-rank hunter?

On Earth, one *never* pointed the barrel of a gun at someone else outside of battle, regardless of whether or not it was loaded. Accidents happened all the time. Even if you removed the magazine, there could still be a bullet in the chamber. Who knew when it could blow?

Likewise, no matter how weak one’s enemy or how strong one’s allies, there were things that one simply did not do. This was especially true when one considered the fact that Pauline was slow, physically weak, lacking in melee combat skills, and lightly armored. Were she to be attacked by dozens of jackalopes at once, she could fight back with magic, but even if she decimated all but a handful, that wouldn’t stop the remaining creatures from inflicting life-threatening injuries. Of course she would be angry about this.

“Forgive me,” said Mavis. “As a knight, that was unacceptable behavior.”

“I’m sorry,” said Reina.

Seeing how truly remorseful the pair were, Pauline stopped criticizing them. She did,

however, remain silent, not offering any words of forgiveness to ease their consciences.

“O-okay... But what the heck *was* that?!”

In an unusual turn, Mile was the one to change the subject. Mavis looked relieved. Reina, however, was not as quick to recover. Having worked as a hunter for the longest out of the four of them, she prided herself on being the party’s leader. Still, she attempted an explanation.

“Well, so, we ran after the jackalope because we thought it was moving slow because of an injury or something... and it led us straight into an ambush,” she said.

“A counterassault...?”

Silence spread across the group. There was no point in overthinking it. They had an investigation to continue.

* * *

“*Why* did those goblins have swords and spears?!”

“They must be using weapons that they lifted from fallen hunters...”

“Well *that* much is obvious!”

* * *

“Can you believe the orcs operating in three-man formations?!”

* * *

“How are the ogres fighting in pairs?! What’s with these Rotte tactics?!”

* * *

In the end, the Crimson Vow marched home, disheartened and weary—not only physically but also spiritually. They silently sold their goods at the turn-in counter and silently continued back to their inn. Seeing the state they were in, neither the other hunters nor the staff had the heart to speak to the new hunters.

* * *

Back at the inn, they ate their dinner and then moved to their room to discuss all that they had witnessed.

“What was all that?”

“That couldn’t have happened...”

“But it did happen. We have to accept that...”

“It’s bizarre!”

“The monsters here are way too smart!!!”

It was true. The monsters on this continent were horrendously, inexplicably clever. There were jackalopes that prepared ambushes, pretending to be injured to lure hunters in. There were goblins equipped with weapons stolen from humans, rather than branches or twigs. There were orcs and ogres that fought in Rotte formations, in cells of two or three.

Normally, humans could win against monsters, who were superior both in offense and defense, because monsters were reliant on their strength. They were stupid and uncoordinated, with no sense of tactics. If you endowed those same monsters with knowledge, making them suddenly able to coordinate and strategize... If they stole weapons from humans and wielded them themselves...

“Even if they aren’t physically different from the monsters on our old continent—”

“They’d be pretty hard for a normal hunter to fight!”

“I mean, as long as we don’t let our guards down, we should be fine.”

“But, for the C-rank and lower hunters here...”

The words of the guild master echoed in their brains: *Factor in all the folks who retire, or get injured or die, and our situation is getting pretty dire.*

A decline in the number of hunters meant there would not be enough humans to keep the monsters in check. The result of which would be...

A stampede.

The problem was a complex one. If this was an issue for the immediate area alone, the Crimson Vow could simply station themselves here a while and clear out all of the high-level -monsters, after which the problem would resolve itself. The monsters would repopulate sooner or later, but in the meantime, the guild would be able to train up newbies and request a dispatch of troops to control the speed of population growth.

However, what if this was not the only place that these intelligent monsters inhabited? What if *all* the monsters on this continent were just as smart? What if they were to propagate and spread all across the world?

"How scary..." all four said with a shudder.

They had come to this new land in search of fun and relaxation, but the forecast suddenly seemed rather gloomy. The four members of the Crimson Vow fell into a deep silence...

CHAPTER 125

THE CHASE

“WHAT?! You’re telling me that Countess Mavis von Mireirine, Countess Reina von Reddlightning, and Countess Pauline von Beckett have all absconded?! Wh-what of Countess Mile von Ascham?! Where is the Countess Ascham?!” the prime minister bellowed, his face twisting at his subordinate’s report.

“Countess Ascham has been addressing the people twice a day from the balcony of the temporary shrine, as well as continuing her noble—or rather, queenly—education. In her free time, she lazes about eating sweets that she makes herself... I do worry she’s going to get fat if we don’t do something about that.”

“Hrm... Perhaps we ought to place a limit on her sweets eating... No! Never mind that! She hasn’t made any attempts to abscond, has she?”

“None!”

“Hmm... Well, although it’s true that the other three are indeed great heroes, they are essentially nothing more than regular humans, perhaps as strong as A-rank hunters, who followed in the footsteps of the Messenger. As long as we have Countess Ascham, with her blessings from the divine, I suppose we should have little to worry about... Still, we need the three of them to keep Countess Ascham anchored in this country. Should they relocate elsewhere, there’s a chance Countess Ascham may follow. We must locate them at once! And, just in case, we should establish another such anchor... Dispatch a courier at once to August Academy! I have a letter to send!”

* * *

“All right then, here we are. Being told to persuade the Marquis Ascham to return home is a bit of a bother, but at least being on an official errand for the king means that we have license to go straight in to see Miss Adele,” said Marcella. Monika and Aureana nodded in agreement.

Presently, the three of them stood before the temporary shrine where Mile resided. It would take time to erect a full stone shrine, so she was currently living in a wooden

building that had been set up beside the construction site. Of course, temporary or not, it had been built under the joint influence of all three of the adjacent countries and even some beyond, with oversight from the church. Though it had been constructed in a hurry, the wooden building was quite splendid—a point of pride for all involved.

“Now then, let’s go in!”

“All right!!”

The Wonder Trio had come from the kingdom of Brandel, which directly bordered the Messenger’s holy lands, so they hadn’t had to pass through any other countries to get here. Helpfully, roughly a third of the shrine guards, priests, and shrine maidens were citizens of Brandel as well, and because the girls utilized the entrances their people were in charge of, no one had gotten in their way. It was widely known that the Wonder Trio were close friends of Marquis Ascham. No one dared stop them.

And obviously, being her close friends, they weren’t about to use an official audience chamber. Instead, they went straight through to her personal reception room, where a shrine maiden brought tea and cookies and then exited, leaving the four of them to catch up alone.

“Miss Marcela, Miss Monika, Miss Aureana! It has been quite a while! Thank you so much for coming!” said Mile.

The Trio did not respond.

“Um, hello?”

Still, they kept their mouths shut.

“Wh-whatever is the matter?”

Silence.

“U-um...”

“Who in the world are YOU?!” they all finally cried.

“What?”

The nanomachine-piloted Mile-001 stared, slack-jawed. They had been utterly assured in their powers of mimicry, and so the Wonder Trio's reaction resulted in an unnaturally long pause.

"Where has Miss Adele gone?!"

"Give Adele back, you fake!"

"Is our Adele in danger?! If there's some heinous plot going on to manipulate the lands with this impostor, we three will crush every last one of you!"

"Wah! J-just calm down, everyone, please!"

"Still you persist in acting as though you are Miss Adele... Ladies, it's time to make this intruder wish they were dead!"

"All right!!"

"W-w-w-wait! Please wait! I can explain all of this!"

"Lady Mile," said a shrine maiden, suddenly entering the room. "You have received a visit from Lady Mariette, the... What in the *world* are you all doing?!"

It was a well-known fact that Saint Mariette was a -favorite of Mile's, and as she had come in through the entrance governed by the guards and maidens from Tils, clearly none of them thought anything of interrupting Mile's audience with her guests from Brandel, rivals in the battle for custody of Mile. In fact, interrupting them might even have been their goal. Making Mariette wait was never even on the table. So that the Brandel side would not interfere, Mariette had been led straight in to see Mile, unannounced—whereupon the attendant witnessed the visitors from Brandel ready to attack Lady Mile, the Messenger...

"Scoundrels! All of you, begone! Begone!!!"

"Aaah! Please, stop this! It's fine, I promise! Nothing's going on!!!"

Despite Mile-001's desperate pleas, the situation was deteriorating by the second...

* * *

"Huff, huff... I guess it's fine for now..." Mile-001 was out of breath but seemed to have calmed down for the moment. She had managed to defuse the situation, explaining to the guards who came rushing in that she and her old friends had merely gotten a bit rowdy reminiscing about their school days.

The Trio, aware that they were in danger of being arrested by their friend's attendants, went along with Mile-001's explanation. No one would ever question the legendary bonds between Mile and the Wonder Trio, so everyone was quick to believe that they had simply been doing a bit of roughhousing. It would have been more suspicious if they hadn't all been so insistent, but since everyone present was on the same page, there was no reason to suspect any funny business.

All four apologized for making such a ruckus, and after a while, the guards, priests, and other attendants politely took their leave. Mile, who had been seeming rather down lately, had gotten a bit too worked up upon seeing her friends. This could only be seen as a pleasant change—a welcome one, really.

Once all the extras had made their exit, all that remained in the room was Mile-001, the Wonder Trio, Mariette, and some extra tea and cookies.

"It's been too long, Mariette!" exclaimed Mile-001. "How have you been?"

Mariette said nothing, staring at Mile suspiciously.

"Um, Mariette...?"

Silence.

"Um..."

"Who *are* you?! What have you done with Miss Mile?!"

"What?! How did I get found out so easily?! It was so perfect! My act was so perfect!!!" screamed the nanomachines within Mile-001, scarcely able to believe what was happening.

* * *

"So, you're saying that you're not a person using magic to disguise yourself as someone else—you're not a person at all?"

"Yes. Please think of me as a type of golem that the Goddess crafted in Lady Mile's image. I am being controlled by what Lady Mile might call 'magical sprites from a magical land.' I am neither trying to usurp Lady Mile's place, nor am I hoping to manipulate anyone. In fact, I was expressly made to lack the ability to even consider such a course of action," Mile-001 explained, and again was met with silence from the four girls present.

None of it was a lie, really. It was the Creator who had crafted the nanomachines, not Mile, and while they had been directed and expertly instructed by Mile to craft Mile-001, it was the nanomachines, who had been crafted by the Creator, who had done the actual construction. Besides, it was not as though the nanomachines *couldn't* lie. To explain things in a way that lesser life-forms could understand, it was occasionally necessary for them to use metaphors, simplify things, or even bend the facts, if need be.

"So then," asked Marcela, "where *is* Miss Adele right now?" Therein lay the real issue. "Though I suppose if all of the members of Crimson Vow are currently missing, that would imply that they are together."

After but a few milliseconds of thought, Mile-001—and the nanomachines—resigned themselves. Those few moments had, of course, been the time that it took for them to confer with nanomachines across the entire world through their central command servers.

"As you have surmised, the members of the Crimson Vow are all together, presently on another continent. In a land where no one knows of Lady Mile and her exploits, they are going to live a leisurely life as normal girls and normal hunt... *Pfft!*" Suddenly a sputter of laughter passed Mile-001's lips.

"*Pfffft!!!*" The rest then burst out laughing as well.

"P-please, g-girls! It's r-r-rude to laugh at M-Miss Adele... Guh-huh-huh-huh..."

"L-Lady Marcela, you sh-shouldn't laugh at her like th-that... Wa ha ha ha..."

"*Aah ha ha ha ha!!!*"

The whole room, Mile-001 included, dissolved into uproarious laughter.

* * *

"So anyway, that's the gist of it," said Mile-001, wrapping up the explanation.

It left a sour taste in the four girls' mouths.

"So, you're telling me that Miss Adele has abandoned the three of us to abscond along with the Crimson Vow?" asked Marcela.

"Oh, no—that's not what she—"

"Miss Mile fled the continent, completely ignoring my plight?" asked Mariette.

"No, it's not as though she's in exile..."

"We'll never forgive her!!!" The four scowled.

"Gaaaaah!"

Unhappily, the four continued their inquisition, lobbing back and forth such pointed questions as "I wonder what would happen if the various governments and the church and the masses were to find out about this?"

The result was as follows.

"So we keep this whole matter to ourselves?" asked Marcela, who had taken the lead. The other three girls, along with Mile-001, all nodded. "In that case, the agreed-upon measures are to be put into place as swiftly as possible. First off, we, the Wonder Trio, will return to our country, gather Princess Morena, and prepare to enact our plan. 001, the moment we are ready, you will summon the elder dragon known as Kragon and order him to ferry us. Mariette, once you have graduated from school, you will take up work as head priestess. That should stave off any marriage proposals, as well as allow you to assist 001... Does that sound good to everyone?"

"Yes!!!" cried the other three girls enthusiastically.

"Yes..." said Mile-001 reluctantly. The nanomachines were, of course, a bit dejected. While usually unable to act of their own volition, they had been ordered by Mile, who had an authorization level of 7, to act as her double. In other words, they were to act as Mile would in any given situation and do everything possible to avoid being found out. Their present actions were within acceptable parameters. This was what Mile would have done, given the circumstances...

In theory, this was a dream come true. The nanomachines, who could typically do no more than shoulder the magical burdens of humans and other living things, could now fully participate in human society, even inhabiting a human body in the form of Mile-001. The result should have been a joy they had never known before. Even the life of a public figure, which Mile had found so dull and tedious, was usually a refreshing pastime for them.

Yet all four of the girls had immediately seen through their mimicry of Mile, which they had believed to be flawless. The result was an utter loss of face for the nanomachines who were in charge of piloting Mile-001. They suddenly felt very sorry for Mile, sharing the sense of defeat that came with lowly creatures who were not even level-2—or rather, humans of only level-1—harassing Mile into letting them use her inventory space.

It was no wonder they were so downtrodden.

* * *

“What?! You’re saying I’m to go to another continent and form a relationship with the royals there?” Princess Morena’s eyes opened wide at Marcela’s proposal. “H-how in the world did this come about?”

“It’s a divine revelation, from the speaker of the gods herself!”

“Tell me more!” she replied immediately. And, once she had heard the details, she said, “Finally. Finally, my shining future has arrived!”

* * *

Three days later, there sat atop Princess Morena’s desk a single sheet of paper. Upon it was written the following:

I’m going to pay a visit to another country to forge ties. I’ll be back in a few days.

And then, along with various formal dresses and accessories, Princess Morena vanished.

* * *

“Now then, if you would, Kragon.”

“Leave it to me! We are kin in serving the Messenger—you may call upon me any time, honorable 001!”

Kragon had been summoned, here on the original continent, by Mile—Mile, whom he had just shuttled to the new one. Mile-001 had been forced to offer some explanation for this somewhat confusing series of events. As it turned out, Kragon was absolutely delighted to be asked a favor by a creature crafted by the gods themselves, not to mention one which was the spitting image of Lady Mile. To be considered on equal footing with such a being—to be useful to her, and to know a secret that even his elders did not—was a great honor.

Thus, Kragon was quite thankful toward the Wonder Trio for suggesting to 001 that it could rely on him. In his gratitude, he told them to call on him whenever they were in danger or had to travel long distances.

Of course, all of this was only possible because it was Kragon they were dealing with. Another elder dragon might only verbally acknowledge a human who had been useful to them, perhaps gift them a single scale at best. It was only natural that the lesser life-forms should be of service to an elder dragon—there was no need to go out of one’s way to thank or reward them every single time. That would be on par with expecting a master to reward a slave’s every act of service.

Yet here, they were being treated as *friends*. This was proof of Kragon’s high regard for the human race. Perhaps this was the result of his interactions with Mile, who had, after all, reattached his tail when Mavis had severed it. Perhaps it was the result of seeing Mile save the world. Or perhaps, this was simply an idiosyncrasy that Kragon already bore. Whatever the reason, Kragon felt about humans the way you might feel at having a kitten or a songbird bring you a diamond ring in its mouth. It would hardly be surprising for someone to look at such a creature and say, “Let’s keep this one.”

“Now then, we’ll be counting on you, Sir Kragon.”

“Very well. I shall protect you to the utmost while we are in transit. The wind shall not strike you, and I shall not let you fall from my back. Be at ease. Lady Mile did warm herself with a type of magic. It is quite chilly in the higher elevations, which seems to be rather unpleasant for fragile humans. She said that the air was ‘thin’ as well.”

"Yes, we heard about all of that from 001, so don't worry. Now then, if you would..."

"Of course. You may climb atop my back."

Holding Mile-001 in the same esteem as himself, Kragon referred to the construct with extreme politeness—while Marcela, who ranked it lower than the actual Mile, treated it more casually than she might her real friend.

And with that, Kragon took flight.

* * *

"The coastline of the new continent will soon be within sight. Shall we proceed as planned after that?"

"Yes. Let us detour around the spot where Miss Ad—er, Lady *Mile*—landed. But we won't head straight for the capital, either. Let's take a route that will prevent us from being seen from below. It will be time to change soon, Your Highness," Marcela said, producing the princess's formal wear and accessories from her inventory.

"Of course. It's time for the greatest contest of my lifetime," said Morena. "You can count on me! I always aim true!" she declared confidently, as she began changing her clothing.

She would be the main character of the events to come.

* * *

"Your Majesty, dreadful news! What appears to be an elder dragon has been spotted flying in circles above the capital... and in fact, above this very palace!"

"What?! Fetch the soldier at o—no, wait! Don't do anything! We have no way to resist! If we anger this creature, it could destroy the capital—nay, the entire *kingdom*. Our only hope is to keep things peaceful. If something has occurred to cause its displeasure, we may have to try and appease it by having the perpetrators, maybe even the whole royal family, executed."

"Y-Your Majesty..."

Were a king to anger an elder dragon, the least he could do was offer his own life to

appease its wrath, lest the whole country be destroyed, its citizens along with it. There could be no other course of action.

"I will step out onto the balcony now. I do not wish for death and shall do everything in my power to make it out of this alive. Gather my wife and children. Should I need to order them to flee, or to stand and offer their lives, I must have them all in one place."

"Y... yes, Your Majesty..."

Unlike his soldier, who looked quite grim, the king was incredibly composed. It was not because he was courageous; it was simply because he knew there was nothing he could do in the face of an elder dragon. Well, nothing except negotiating to determine the smallest possible number of lives that it would take to quell the dragon's rage.

He had already given up on his own life.

Yes, knowing with certainty that he walked to face death, his heart was as placid as a waveless sea.

A moment later, the king stood on the palace balcony, commanding a soldier to wave the royal banner, at which signal the elder dragon slowly descended, landing in the courtyard before the veranda. It approached with thudding footsteps, its long neck extending nearer.

"Are you the king of this country?" asked the dragon.

"Y-yes, I am! I assume responsibility for all my people's failures. I beseech you—my life is yours if it shall appease your anger," the king shouted desperately.

"No. That is not why I have come. I am merely a ferry, serving on behalf of a friend. Until my friends conclude their business here... Yes, I think I shall rest in that square there in the meantime. Be at ease. I am not offended by any little thing that a lower life-form might do. In fact, as my friends might like to become better acquainted with this land, I shall humor any questions you might have of me. I may be all the more inclined to conversation if some delicious food could be provided? Why, if you gather some of those human larvae—er, children—and have them clean my scales, I may even grant you a reward. I require no polishing, simply someone to remove the grit from between them."

"Wha...?"

The king looked as though his jaw might hit the floor. The soldier holding the banner, and the cabinet ministers who had also been prepared to offer their lives, all froze. The elder dragon's booming voice, resonating throughout its massive body, had echoed all the way across the capital.

Finally, the people took notice of the four young girls atop the elder dragon's back.

"WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON?!?!?!"

* * *

"I apologize for the surprise visit. I am Morena, third princess of the kingdom of Tils."

"....."

The four girls who had been riding atop the elder dragon were shown immediately to one of the palace's conference rooms. Obviously, there was no way that the king could have a human who'd been introduced as an elder dragon's "friend" taken to the public audience chamber, where he might gaze down at them from his throne. The dragon had said he wouldn't be offended by any "little" thing a human might do—which led one to believe he might be quite cross indeed if the offense were *not* a small one. Having a human he considered a "friend" be treated as lower than any other human was potentially outside of the bounds of what would be acceptable to a prideful elder dragon.

Best to err on the side of caution. Especially when the fate of the kingdom depended on it.

And so, it was determined safer to bring the young women here, to the conference room, where they could conduct their discourse on equal footing, rather than having one looking down upon the other. Of course, in this case, "conference room" did not denote a long table with folding chairs and spartan decor. It was a place where the king might confer with influential foreign entities, and the table, chairs, and furnishings were all of the highest of quality. It was a place where great minds met, and thus all positions were equal—the optimal setting for such a meeting. Really, there was no other choice. Even if these were visitors who were to be treated with the highest respect, there was still no way that four young ladies whom they had never seen before would be seated in a higher position than the king.

"I have come here," Morena continued, "as a member of the royal family, to discuss the potential of establishing relations with *your* family." As no one else was speaking up, Morena was forced to take the lead, but here, the king finally raised his voice with a question.

"Establishing relations with the royal family?"

Yes, typically, one would speak of "an exchange between -nations," and so on and so forth. Yet here they were visited not by a diplomat but by a princess herself—with only three other girls as her guard.

Of course, what need would she have for a guard when she came here on the back of an elder dragon? thought the king. An elder dragon would never let a mere soldier ride atop it. This one perhaps only allows cute young girls to do so...

The king had not broached the topic so far, but it seemed possible to him. It wasn't surprising that his thoughts had turned in that direction—after all, even Earth had tales of mythical beasts that allowed no one but pure young maidens to ride them. This would also explain why the only guards might be other young girls, as it was a third princess and not some mere diplomat who had come to them. Young girls didn't usually serve as diplomats, but if there were, only a member of the royal family would be suitable to represent the kingdom. That said...

"Do you not mean an exchange between nations? Establishing a link between royal *families* seems a bit specific..."

Perhaps she was merely being circuitous. Or did she have some other intention?

"Ah, yes. The thing is, I am not here as a representative of my *country*. I traveled here as an individual, thinking I might like to make friends with any other girls of my age who may exist in the royal family... That's why I didn't tell my parents that I was coming here."

"*WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON?!?!?!*" everyone screamed.

* * *

"So, that's what's going on," Morena concluded, having finished her rather roundabout explanation.

The Trio remained behind her in a defensive stance, being here as her personal guard. Of course, there was an elder dragon in the square before the palace, so their presence was somewhat superfluous. No one would dare lay a finger on this girl.

"I see. You are not visiting our kingdom in an official capacity as a representative of your country but simply as the 'third princess'?"

"Correct. As a plain old human and friend of the elder dragon Kragon, I wish to make friends with others my age of similar standing... I've become a little too well known already in my own kingdom and those surrounding, so I can no longer make friends who I might consider equals, people my age who I can talk with naturally."

HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY BE NORMAL WHEN YOU'RE FRIENDS WITH AN ELDER DRAGON?!?!?! the king and all his cabinet screamed internally. Then—*A little? Are you really only a "little" too well known where you come from?*

"W-well," the king stammered, "I suppose that is reasonable. So then, you have come to our kingdom..."

"Yes! To make friends with this kingdom's princesses... Er, are there any? Princesses around my age, that is. If there are no princesses here who would care to be my friend, I suppose we could move on to the next country..."

"There are! There most certainly are! Four of them!!!" the king desperately shouted. It absolutely would not do to have this foreign princess with the power of an elder dragon on her side making friends with the princesses of neighboring nations, or worse yet, *enemy* nations. Shameful as his actions might be as a father, he had to put such feelings aside. His duty to his kingdom came first. Such was what it meant to be a member of the royal family—to be the *king*. There was duty and sacrifice that came along with that status. It was not such an easy life, being nobility or royalty.

Mind you, setting aside the issue of whether or not this king had any daughters, Morena's party still didn't even know this nation's *name*... But kings often kept a number of concubines in addition to their wives to avoid issues with the line of succession. In a civilization of this level, with the childhood mortality rate as high as it was, it was not unusual for royal parents to rack up at least three or four sons—more, if possible. This made it likely there would be a roughly equivalent number of princesses, and so Morena had decided the chances were quite good that she might find the girls she sought.

That said, there was also the chance that they might be too far off from Morena in age, or even already married. In that case, she would have been perfectly happy with a daughter of a duke or marquis... She would, of course, be avoiding any *princes* for fear of anyone getting ideas in their head.

"Well then, I simply must have tea with them later..." she said.

"Of course! We'll prepare it right away!" the king shouted, his eyes bloodshot.

After a short discussion, Morena's party was shown to a tearoom that had clearly been made ready with great haste. In attendance were Morena and her bodyguards (aka, the Wonder Trio) along with the king's four daughters. The only others present were the maids who were there to wait upon them.

Obviously, the palace could not have any guards of their own present—though Morena was accompanied by her entourage, they were all young girls, clearly there more for decoration and moral support than for defending the princess with their blades. Perhaps she had deemed it uncouth to travel around with grizzled men as her guards, or perhaps she thought it rude to bring such men into a palace, as though it were a sign that she did not have trust in the king.

Either way, Morena was accompanied only by the Wonder Trio, and the princesses only by their maids. (Though there was a chance that the maids might have some kind of combat ability. Could they be maids-slash-guards?)

It was determined that the Wonder Trio would also be served tea, so that the two parties might have matching numbers. With that, the eight girls' afternoon tea began.

* * *

The tea party concluded without incident, about an hour and a half later. The four girls were guided to a room at the palace, where they would be staying the night.

"The third one, perhaps?"

"I think so..."

"The first one was a little too old, and she seems a bit over-ambitious..."

"The second one was a little unnerving."

"The fourth one was sweet and friendly, but a bit too juvenile."

"By process of elimination, that leaves number three."

The four were unanimous in their decision.

* * *

After a bit of resting in their room, it was time for dinner.

For some reason, though they were posing as her bodyguards, the Wonder Trio had been given places beside Morena, rather than standing a few paces behind ready to draw their swords at any moment, as a bodyguard should. Between this and the tea party, it was clear that no one really thought of them as bodyguards, assuming they were merely other noblewomen serving as the princess's entourage. Perhaps the palace thought they would be cross if they were separated from her.

The local royals' retinue totaled seventeen, between the king, his main wife, five princes, four princesses, and six others who appeared to be ministers. The only ones who spoke to the Trio and Morena directly were the king, queen, and princesses. The ministers chimed in when others addressed them, and the princes mostly talked among themselves. This was unsurprising, as the princes would wish only to speak to Morena, the guest of honor. Marcela and the others were separated from them by a wide gulf in their standing.

The dinner conversation was safe and inoffensive. The king and others seemed uncertain how best to handle Morena, but the princesses had no trouble chitchatting. Either they felt they had grown close to her during their tea party, or they were simply lively conversationalists to begin with. The princes, who had probably been directed to try and charm her, were spinning their wheels in vain. Morena had no time for anyone who would look down upon her companions, after all.

Once they had returned to their room, Morena handed a note to one of the maids, asking her to deliver it to the third princess...

* * *

A short time later, the third princess arrived at Morena's room, having received a note that read, *Please come to my room.*

The note had, of course, been shown to the king before it made it to the third princess, but he had found nothing to object to.

The four visitors then explained the reason that they had summoned the third princess here.

"W-wait, you're saying that if I pray to the Goddess, I can get storage magic?!"

"Shhhh!!!"

Naturally, on either side of the room there were spies with their ears pressed to the walls and doors, their full attention focused on what was happening inside. They would most certainly have heard the princess's exclamation. In truth, it didn't really matter if this conversation was overheard; even though they were keeping up the pretense of discretion, Morena and the Wonder Trio knew that everything they discussed was certain to be pried out of the third princess later. The reason they had called only the third princess here was out of consideration, as they could not later declare in front of everyone else, "We have selected only the third princess. No others need apply."

"Yes," said Marcela. "The space may be up to two meters on each side and two meters high. It can only be used for special purposes, however; it isn't for everyday use. Its primary purpose is..."

She went on to explain the details.

This storage space was to be used as a gate that would let the three of them travel between this country and their own. Morena would be in charge of the gate on the other side. The contents of the storage had to be checked once a day, without fail, to see if anything new had been placed inside. If they wanted to go from one place to another, they would leave a piece of paper with a message, instructing her to check the box again at the appointed time in order to pull the three of them out... in a place where no one else could see her, of course. After reading the message, she could place her own note inside stating whether or not the requested time would be an issue. If the timing was inconvenient, they would change it.

The storage space could also, Marcela explained, be used as an emergency shelter. If she were ever to be attacked, or abducted, or drowning, or falling from a cliff, she could take refuge inside in an instant, after which point she would be rescued in what would

feel like no time at all to her. Afterward, an elder dragon would carry her back home, at the Wonder Trio or Mile-001's request.

It was a lot to take in.

It was unlikely that any assassins would be making attempts on a third princess's life in the first place, as she was not very high up in the line of succession. Even if she were a target, abduction was more likely, in which case she could escape without issue. But still, this was big. Actually, this was *huge*. As long as she was not killed instantly, the princess could be extracted from any situation, along with anyone else who was with her at the time.

"Should the palace ever be attacked in a war or a coup, you can help the king and queen and other high-ranking nobles escape as well. A tremendous safety measure, wouldn't you say? In exchange for just a little bit of a chore every so often, we can offer you safety and the chance at national acclaim."

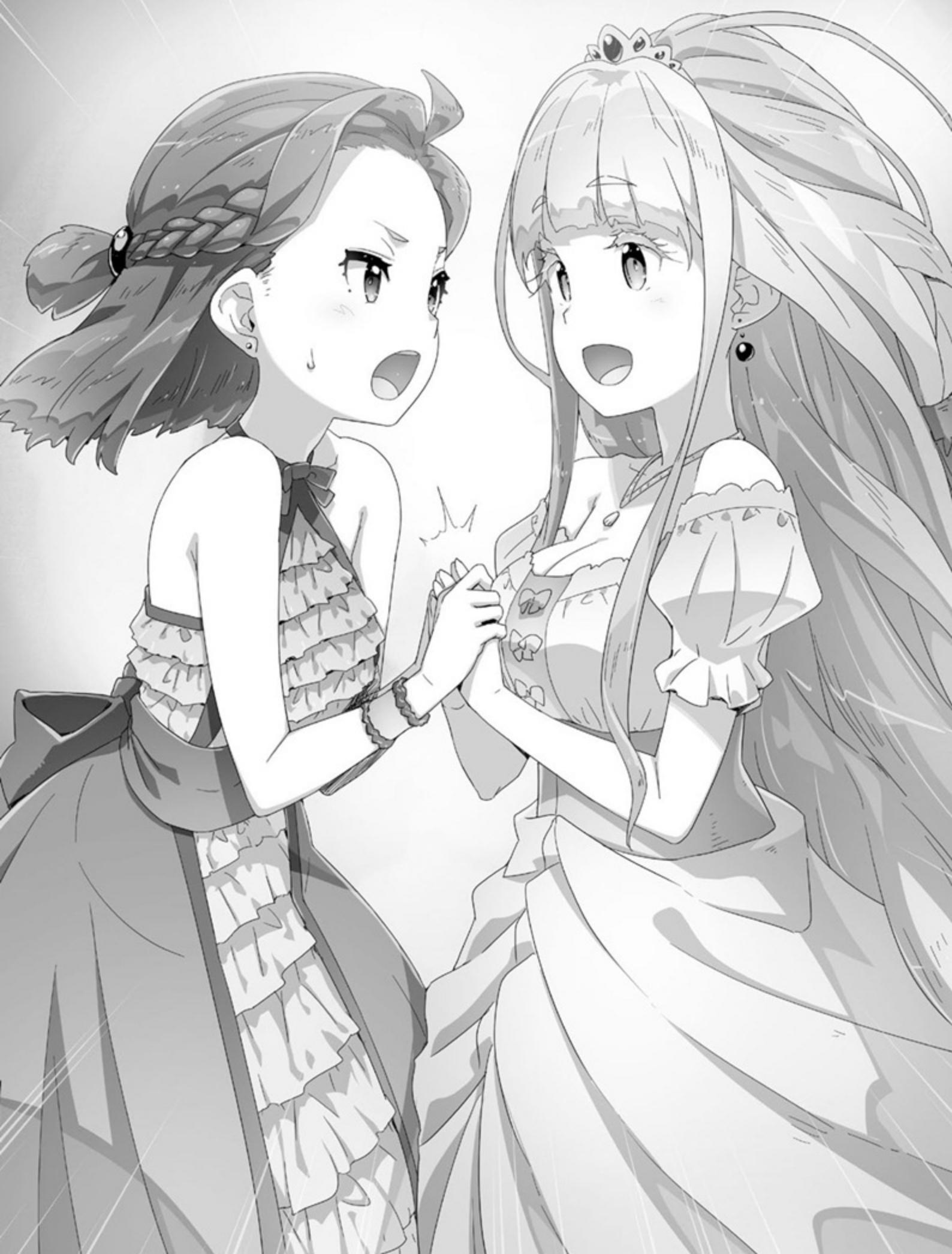
"Th-that's true..."

"So, do you accept?"

"I accept!" the princess replied at once.

There was no question of denying them. The princess had likely been told by the king to accept whatever they offered, unless it was truly perilous. And perhaps even then...

The immense honor that was receiving storage magic from the Goddess. The powerful bonds she could forge with a princess who had connections with not only elder dragons but the Goddess as well. And a means of assuring the safety of herself and all those around her?



There was no royal—nay, no living human—who would refuse such a thing.

The inventory style of storage magic utilized an extradimensional space, so in fact its capacity was limitless. Granting that as a boon to the princess of any one country could cause a lot of problems. Depending on how she used it, there could even be military applications. As such, the nanomachines had applied software-level limitations to restrict the third princess's storage to a two-meter cube. This was enough to hold no more than one or two wagons. Though there were very few around who wielded even that much storage space, it was not entirely unheard of.

Also, while these two linked inventories could be used to let others travel back and forth, the user themselves could not make use of it. Or rather, they could, but would then require Kragon to ferry them back home. This was no issue for the Trio, but out of the question for either princess. However, so long as they traveled with a member of the Wonder Trio, they could return via the Trio's shared inventory, so it did not entirely preclude occasional intercontinental travel.

...Not that either of the princesses knew about *that* secret yet.

"Now then, let us begin the ritual," said Marcela. "Princess Morena, please stand beside Princess Estorina." Morena did as directed. "In the name of the Goddess, I, Marcela, beseech you. Great Nanoma, please grant these two princesses the power of inventory!"

She had worked out the particulars with Mile-001 ahead of time, so this ceremony was only for show. In fact, the measures to bestow the two of them with inventory magic (limited version) were already in place. In reality, the two were actually only -being granted dedicated nanomachines, who were to specialize in enacting the inventory magic.

What Mile had done for the Trio, Mile-001 could do for the two princesses. With a remote command, from far, far away...

Again, the rite that Marcela was now performing was nothing more than smoke and mirrors. But Morena and Estorina trembled with genuine emotion nevertheless...

* * *

The next morning, just after breakfast, Morena and company took their leave before the king or any others could stop them. For now, the Wonder Trio would return home. They could not leave Morena to travel on Kragon all alone, and they had some loose ends to tie up back in Brandel before they could set out on another extended journey.

The king and his ministers had, by now, heard everything that had been discussed the night before. As such, it was not unreasonable that they should want to strengthen their ties with these girls, who not only were recognized as friends by an elder dragon but who were able to bestow the blessings of the Goddess on others. However, now that their objective was complete, the four had no reason to remain in the area.

“Sir Kragon, we are finished here. If you would...” said Marcela. The dragon nodded magnanimously, ordering away the scholarly sort he was chatting with, along with the children who had been cleaning his scales and other such bystanders.

“That was an arduous task, young larvae,” he said to the children. **“Take these as your reward.”**

He withdrew two scales from storage and tossed them at the children. As an elder dragon, with level-2 authorization, he could, naturally, use storage magic. Apparently, he kept some of his own shed scales expressly for the purpose of rewarding humans. He did not go so far as to peel off a fresh scale on the spot; that would probably hurt and might be tender after. The gaze with which Kragon regarded the children was akin to the gentle look a large Earth animal might give the little birds that pluck the parasites from its skin.

“*Sc-scales! Elder dragon scales! Just like new! Two of them!!!*” screamed the surrounding onlookers. There were probably some merchants amongst the bunch.

“Do not dare keep them for yourselves. Sell them for a ransom and distribute the coin amongst the children... I am entrusting you with this responsibility. Understood?”

“Y-yessir! I pledge it on my life!!” the scholarly fellow whom Kragon had just been chatting with declared earnestly, as though he was honored to receive such an assignment. In fact, he almost certainly *was* honored. He had been entrusted by an elder dragon to handle quite a large sum of money.

Most of the dozens of children who had been cleaning Kragon's scales were orphans from orphanages or urchins who squatted in rundown shacks and on riverbanks. How many tens of gold pieces were they about to get their hands on?

The adults who had foisted this task off on the orphans, thinking it too dangerous and degrading for their own children, were suddenly filled with a deep sense of regret, but they had only themselves to blame for their shortsightedness.

With Morena and the Wonder Trio on his back, Kragon rose slowly into the air, relying on his magic so as not to blow away all the bystanders with the beating of his wings. Once at a sufficient altitude, he took off at high velocity.

Later, the people extolled the praises of the four girls, who had been instrumental in persuading an elder dragon—a being akin to a god—to come to their country, share his wisdom, and save their orphans. The palace made a public proclamation of the new close bonds that had been formed with a beautiful princess who was a friend to the elder dragon, and naturally, they purchased the two scales at an exorbitant price. It was a price so high, in fact, that one might doubt the purchaser's sanity, but they had no choice but to be overgenerous, in case the dragon himself should later inquire whether they had done as he had asked. This was in addition to the fact that the scales were an important proof of their friendship with the elder dragon. They could not risk a merchant buying such important artifacts and selling them to another nation.

When they later heard the passengers of a foreign vessel tell about how they had been rescued by four Dragon Priestess Sisters who rode on the back of an elder dragon, Princess Morena's popularity skyrocketed even further...

* * *

Princess Estorina began checking the storage space about fifty times a day to see whether there was any contact from Princess Morena. Finally, she found a letter—or rather, a small card with a single-line message. She extracted the card with great haste and read:

The snacks I was keeping here in storage are gone! Est, how could you?!

“O-oh no! I’d better respond!”

I took them out when I was checking to see if there was anything new inside, and they just looked so delicious that I... I'm sorry! To make it up to you, I'll put some of my snacks inside tomorrow. Please enjoy them. Tomorrow's snacks will be made from pineapple, our local specialty. I'm sure they must be a rare find in your own country.

"Okay, that should take care of things," Princess Estorina told herself. "Wait. There's another letter? But I apologized! How obstinate of you, Lady Morena! Let's see..."

I just had a thought. What if I were to use my personal funds to purchase something that you could sell at a premium in your country, and then you were to sell it and use that money to purchase something that would sell for a lot here?

"...! Th-that's... wait. Does that mean that if we were to -exchange mercantile goods, rather than foreign coins that would be worth nothing more than the metal they were minted from, we could both make a killing without losing any money from the exchange?... No. No, no, no, no. No! U-unless...

"As I recall, Lady Morena said that spices are quite expensive in her country but that honey is rather cheap... No, no, that's thinking too small. If we look at gold and jewels and high-value luxury goods for which the prices differ between our two countries... Doing this on a national level would risk causing a scandal or a mass hemorrhaging of certain gemstones or such, but if we're just doing some small trades... She did say she'd use her own personal funds. That Morena had a good head on her shoulders. I believe we are very much of the same mind..."

Let's do it! she wrote back.

Very well. Let us investigate immediately what goods can be sold for high prices that will not take up too much space. Also, please procure the services of a reliable, tight-lipped merchant, someone with a moderate business, not too big or too small, as an intermediary. Choose carefully, don't rush... Our glorious future awaits!!!

Truly, this pair of princesses were up to no good...

* * *

“Stop in at the guild.”

“Done!”

“Close out the bill for our lodging.”

“Done!”

“Express our thanks to all those who have been aiding us.”

“Done!”

“Prepare the necessary clothing, food, and other supplies for travel.”

“Done!”

“Stock up on things we can sell for a good price on the other side.”

“Done!”

“Great job, girls. As things stand, we’ve been the targets of royals, nobles, wealthy merchants, and their heirs the kingdom over. They want us as betrothed or adopted daughters or concubines... but it’s not even us they’re really after. They just want us to be bait for Miss Adele. As something they can show off to get the attention of the common folk. And as mothers, to introduce our magical talent into their bloodlines. Is that what the two of *you* wish for?”

“No! No! A thousand times no!”

“Besides, it’s not as though we have any magical talent. We simply seem to—thanks to Miss Adele teaching us the secrets of magic that were passed down through her family and are never, ever to be shared, as well as the blessings we have received from the spirits from the realm of magic. It is but a boon... along with the results of us working ourselves to the bone, if I may be so bold.”

Marcela continued her speech. “Who knows what might happen to us the moment someone gets their mitts on us with ill intent in mind and finds out that we cannot do as they desire? What say you of heading to this so-called ‘new continent,’ where no one but the Crimson Vow knows us, and it is almost impossible for any information about us to spread there within our lifetimes?”

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Go, go, go!!!”

“Well then, I suppose we are all in agreement. It’s not as though we’ll never be returning to this place. In fact, we’ll probably have to make quite a few trips back here, perhaps frequently enough for no one to even notice we’ve gone. As long as our families hear from us regularly, there shouldn’t be an issue. As for her Highness, Princess Morena... well, she considers herself indispensable to our transit. She is not yet aware of the fact that we can simply have Mr. Kragon carry us or that if we transport only one or two of us via the Morena-Est connection, we can transfer the rest of the party by ourselves.”

“Our plans are in place, and our destiny awaits. Wonder Trio, roll out!”

“All right!!!”

And so, the Wonder Trio headed to the palace to test out the Morena-Est Connection, a revolutionary new form of intercontinental travel, the first of its kind in the world. Even Mile was not yet aware of this innovation.

These days, the girls only traveled to the palace when forcibly summoned there—but not this time. Their hearts were soaring, their faces full of hopes and dreams.

They were off to a new land, where old friends and new adventures awaited them...

* * *

“We thank you mostly humbly for your services.”

The Wonder Trio thanked the third princess Est—Estorina, rather—before heading for the castle gates. This country was currently at peace, so while there was an inspection upon entering the castle, the way out was free and clear. And so, no guard so much as raised an eyebrow at the Wonder Trio as they exited the castle, their staves and swords and armor stored in their inventories so that they would appear like normal citizens of the capital.

How would they travel back through the gates when it was time to return? They were but three little girls, so if they simply hid away anything that would mark them as hunters, as they did now, they could certainly manage something. Of course, while the

three of them were choosing to be optimistic, as cohorts of the Dragon Princess, they could probably be shown straight to Princess Estorina's room without the slightest pretense. They had not realized this yet, but before long, they would understand the benefits they had reaped in simply being associated with the now quite popular Morena...

The Trio had only made such a show of getting involved with royalty for one reason: On this brand-new continent, where there was no one that they knew for certain they could trust in, they certainly could not rely on just anyone to be in charge of operating their gate. What if they were betrayed and led straight into a cell? They could all escape into their inventory, but there would be no one to pull them out on the other side. It would be game over.

It was vital that the person in charge of their gate think that betraying the Wonder Trio would lead to the ruin of their own country. And it had to be someone who could never choose to sacrifice said country to apprehend the Wonder Trio. In other words: a royal. Aristocrats, wealthy merchants, and other such people could turn the force of the entire country against the royal family, if they chose to. Whether by assassination squad or other illegal means, royals would do everything in their power to crush Morena's enemies and prevent the elder dragons' wrath from falling on their land. And, under their command, anyone who angered Princess Morena's associates would be setting themselves against the whole nation as well.

As safety measures went, it was a very powerful one.

"Well, let us not delay. I'm sure that Miss Adele and the others will have headed straight for the capital from the port city they landed in, so let's go straight there ourselves and intercept her along the way. We must make certain to collect as much information as possible in each town we pass, though fortunately, the Crimson Vow tends to stand out. It doesn't seem likely we'd pass them by without realizing it. Now then, Wonder Trio! Roll out!"

"All right!!!"

SIDE STORY

THE ADVICE SERVICE

“...AN ADVICE SERVICE?”

“Yes! I mean, I’m rather knowledgeable about a lot of things, if I do say so myself.”

“I guess so? Er, well, I mean, you do have a lot of logic-defying knowledge...” Reina chose her words carefully in order to avoid directly refuting Mile’s claim.

“I was thinking that this knowledge shouldn’t go to waste. So, on days when we aren’t doing hunter work, like when we’re taking breaks or just have some time to kill, I might like to run an advice service. It’s the perfect way to help people, socialize with other hunters, and pass the time in an entertaining way.”

“Something tells me that last one is the thing that most interests you...” Reina sighed.

“If it’ll make us some money, then I’m all for it, Mile!” Naturally, the prospect of profit was enough to entice Pauline. However...

“Pauline, if Mile makes money doing something by herself on our off days, then that money belongs to Mile. Or are you offering to contribute the proceeds from that for-profit healing you do to the party’s shared coffers?”

“Gah!” Pauline collapsed to the floor.

“Wow, Mavis’s congeniality attack strikes again!”

“Hold on, I don’t think Pauline is acting! There’s actually blood coming out of her mouth! Just how effective was that?”

“Oh wow, she’s twitching...”

“N-no seriously! Mile, heal her! Heal her right away!!!”

* * *

That was how the Crimson Vow decided to open an advice service together. Pauline avidly insisted that if all four of them were involved in running it, and not simply Mile alone, then the profits would belong to all of them. And since Mile was not particularly concerned about adding to her own purse, she readily accepted this. Though Mavis and Reina did have their objections...

The only reason Mile had even considered charging a fee was to prevent window shoppers or stave off customers who should have just gone to a fortune teller.

Fortune-telling, incidentally, was a legitimate business. It was a specialized profession, requiring a high level of expertise and utilizing a wide variety of knowledge. Fortune tellers needed well-honed insight, conversational aptitude, and psychological sensitivity. It was a real skill to put into words the worries and doubts of the person one was talking to and gently guide them toward the answer they were subconsciously seeking. So, Mile had no intention of getting in the way of that.

Besides, it was much more fun to hang out with the others than it would be to sit alone, twiddling her thumbs and waiting for customers to arrive. In fact, she was elated when Pauline suggested they should all go into business together. She felt that she shouldn't take advantage of her friends on their days off, but she couldn't resist the promise of their company.

Fortunately, the Crimson Vow's main line of work did not wear them out all that much. Unlike some other hunters, they didn't sustain frequent injuries or lose a great deal of gear. Even if that did happen, Mile or Pauline could heal their wounds, and Mile could repair their equipment, which meant that they never had too much to do on their days off anyway.

Well, no. Taking breaks was still important in avoiding burnout, but this specific proposal of Mile's sounded as though it would be quite relaxing and a fun change of pace. At the end of the day, it wasn't much different from what they usually did on their rest days—i.e. lay around and gossip at the inn.

"All right! We are now open for business!"

The Crimson Vow's advice service was operating out of a corner of the guildhall, where they had set up a nook near the guild's dining area, positioning two chairs facing a

small table.

This was, quite literally, an advice corner.

They had been granted permission to set up this area free of charge, after gently imploring (read: bullying) the guild master. As far as the guild was concerned, currying the favor of the Crimson Vow was good for business. All the more so if the young hunters could help solve problems that their fellow hunters were having. It was the hunters who were seeking their advice who would pay the consultation fee, so the guild would not have to front a single copper. For all this, they would gladly offer up a space that took up not even two square meters, and which no one was using in the first place.

Mile sat in one of the two chairs that faced the little table, the other sitting empty in anticipation of customers. The rest of the party sat at a nearby table in the dining corner, watching (and enjoying some snacks and drinks).

After a short while, some of the other hunters finally took notice of Mile, who was, after all, a well-known local figure. They began to gather, asking each other what she could possibly be up to now. As they drew closer, they saw a sign beside her table, which read:

ADVICE SERVICE

Whatever's on your mind, we're here to listen!

FEE: Pay What You Want. The level of advice will be determined by your offer.

EXAMPLE: Concerning coercion by ruffians.

1 COPPER: *Keep up the good fight! Don't lose heart!*

1 SILVER: *We will accompany you to speak with them and help you resolve the issue.*

1 GOLD: *Please wait a day. In just one night, we will crush the lot of them.*

PLEASE BE ADVISED: This is only a fictitious example. If one day some criminal organization were to suddenly be vanquished overnight, it will have nothing to do

with our business.

The hunters who looked upon this fell silent. And then...

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAAAT?!?!?!"

The citizens of this new continent had sadly yet to build up a resistance to the Crimson Vow's shenanigans.

* * *

"Could I... ask a question?"

About twenty minutes after Mile sat down, their first customer arrived.

"Please, go ahead!" Mile sat at attention.

When she had first stepped up, those in the vicinity had eyed the table with interest, but everyone seemed hesitant to actually approach. Finally, a sacrifice—er, hero—had appeared! Whenever a new, uninsured product launched, there were always those brave souls who were the first to purchase it, regardless of the fact that they might find it to be bogus. Without these brave warriors, society would never progress!

"So then, what would you like to ask us about?" Mile prompted.

"I want to have storage that can hold tons of stuff, too! I want it so bad I could cry, but I don't have that ability, so I can't make very much money. Please do something!"

"Sir, our shop offers only discussions. We aren't taking job requests... But, seeing as you are our first customer, I'll do you a special favor. How much capacity are you after? And also, how much are you planning to pay for our advice?"

As the sign suggested, the level of service depended on the payment.

The customer was rather astonished. He'd thought his request an impossible one, but Mile seemed to actually be considering solutions. Was she going to teach him how to use storage magic? No, that was an incredibly difficult magic to master. In that case, maybe this child—who, everyone knew, did have storage magic—would come along

with him on his hunts? No, or wait, perhaps she would lend him the legendary magical tool known as a Bag of Storage, which could hold many more times than it looked like it should?

No way. That would *never* happen!

But wait, the customer thought. The most important aspect of storage magic was capacity. Perhaps he could specify a large amount for a low fee... After all, it was Mile who had offered to do him a solid as their first ever customer. So maybe...

“I want six cubic meters. And I’ll pay one silver!”

Several impressed *oohs* and *ahs* echoed through the room. How scandalous! How shocking! A request truly fitting of the title of “hero”...How was this little girl going to respond to this reckless hunter’s request?!

“You’ll receive the storage you seek from the carpenter over on Third Street.”

Is she talking about a storage room?!?!?! all the hunters screamed internally.

“You should be able to store tons of luggage and any prey that you bring back home from your travels in there!”

In all fairness, the hunter who came to Mile had never specified storage *magic*. Furthermore, a single silver was only roughly equivalent to one thousand Japanese yen.

If he had specified an even smaller capacity, she might have just directed him to a broom closet... thought one hunter.

If he wanted something crazy, he should have offered the money to match... thought another.

Behind him, other hunters, began to wonder if perhaps she might give *them* storage magic if they offered enough. Suddenly, quite a few took out their coin purses and began counting coins. Sadly, before they could even finish, Mile pasted a new piece of paper onto her sign:

TODAY'S FORBIDDEN TOPIC: STORAGE

“Noo! No, waaait!”

“It’s all that idiot’s fault!”

“Gods dammit!!!”

Soon, the next customer arrived. This time, it was not someone seeking anything outrageous but, rather, a person with a normal problem.

This particular customer was a female hunter in her early twenties. “Um,” she said, “I’m pretty sure my party leader, who I’m dating, is cheating on me.”

Mile immediately and enthusiastically spouted number 53 on her “list of phrases I’ve always wanted to say.”

“It’s time to kick him to the curb, girlfriend!”

She huffed through her nose, feeling immensely accomplished, when suddenly... *Smack!* She was struck soundly across the back of the head by a rolled-up tube of paper.

“Quit acting ridiculous. This woman trusted you with a -difficult fact of her actual life!” Reina was furious. She had intended to be there only as an observer, but she could not let this one go.

After the female hunter came a mage who was worried they had plateaued in strengthening their magical power—as everyone knew, “skill” could be improved via training, in terms of incantation speed or accuracy, but there were times when even training had no effect on actual “power.” For this mage, Mile was able to offer a few training techniques. Without divulging the existence of nanomachines, she gave them a handful of tips and tricks to help them level up in their abilities.

And so it continued.

With the exception of the individuals who brought up subjects on which Mile was useless (read: inexperienced)—such as romance and other difficult human relationships—most of her customers left the table relatively satisfied.

At the times when Mile was lacking, Mavis, Reina, or Pauline stepped in to help. Reina was worldly, and Mavis, as a noble's daughter, was skilled in explaining things. She had been trained to help resolve the complaints of landholders and other officials. And Pauline was able to impart techniques to crush one's opponents and utterly break their spirits with a smile. When she spoke, she positively glowed... with a dark, menacing aura.

Finally, a certain customer made an appearance—and what an ominous appearance it was.

“Say, Mile, if I wanted to date you, how would I go about that?”

“Come again?”

“I'll pay a whole gold! That'll definitely be enough for you to solve my problem, right?”

“Wh-what?”

The man pointed to the words written on the sign:

1 Gold: *Please wait a day. In just one night...*

“So, tonight...”

“Wh-wh-wh... *huuuh?!*” Mile howled, going red in the face.

And then...

Crunch! Crunch!

Two hands gripped the man's shoulders—one each belonging to a menacing Reina and Mavis...

Pauline's radiant smile never faded when there was anyone other than her party members around. "My, my, *my*! Would you like to go on a date with *us*?" Her smile remained... but it was a bleak one.

"Eek!"

The man looked as though he had seen a ghost.

"Why don't you come cool your head a bit?" asked Reina, even as she muttered an incantation for a fire spell. Before the customer could do anything of the sort, ice ran through the veins of everyone in the guildhall.

"Waaaaah! Oh, gods! H-help me! Help!"

Drag, draaag...

"M-Mile! Please help me! S-someone h—*grrk!*"

Draaaaaag...

Mile thought that she heard a sound of cloth being stuffed into someone's mouth, but it was probably just her imagination... or so she forcibly convinced herself.

Best to forget the things she did not wish to think about.

"Welcome to our advice corner!" she proclaimed. "Whatever's on your mind, we're here to listen!"

BONUS STORY

MARCELA QUESTIONS MARIETTE

“YOU ARE MISS MARIETTE, the pupil of Miss Adele—or rather, Miss Mile—are you not?”

“Y-yes I am! It’s wonderful to meet you!”

The Wonder Trio were aware that there was a little girl named Mariette of whom Mile was quite fond. This was their first time meeting, but in the deluge of information about the Crimson Vow that had come out in the past half year, the names Servants of the Goddess, Lenny the Innkeeper, and Saint Mariette kept coming up alongside their own on the list of Mile’s friends and intimates. Unlike the first two, who were nothing more than an associated hunting party and the girl who worked at the inn where the Crimson Vow usually stayed, this Mariette seemed to be something quite special. She was, by all accounts, a beautiful girl Mile had spent a great deal of time teaching the secrets of magic she had imparted only to the

Wonder Trio—and not even shared with her fellow members of the Crimson Vow.

It was cats and little children that Mile loved the most, but the next best thing was a cute younger girl... Knowing this about her was enough to instill a sense of danger in the Trio.

While Mile-001 was temporarily out of the room, it was time for them to properly assess the level of threat this Mariette posed. However...

“You all are *such* an inspiration! I can’t believe I actually get to talk to *you*, the Wonder Trio! The ones who supported Miss Mile throughout her school days, strove alongside her, and who led a legendary assault during that battle half a year ago!”

“I would say you led a legendary assault yourself...” said Marcela, a bit put off by this girl who now stared at her, eyes glimmering. The Trio had thought that a three-on-one conversation might be intimidating, so Monika and Aureana had agreed to stand by while Marcela did all the talking.

"Miss Mariette," Marcela continued, "Just what are you to Miss Mi—er, just how much did Miss Mile teach you of the principles of magics, how to use powerful spells, and her 'family secrets'?"

"Oh, well she introduced me to the Goddess's retainers, who have been helping me with magic. She also taught me about the structure of the human body, silent casting, how to form an -effective image, the composition of matter—the tiny little grains and the even tinier ones... And also gravity magic, lattice barriers, and some other stuff."

That's everything!!! the Trio silently screamed. *Also, probably some stuff that even we don't know!!!*

After the battle, Mile had met with Mariette numerous times, teaching her a bit more with each visit, so that she would not be snatched away by any bad actors now that she had become famous herself. Of course, Mariette thought Mile would *surely* have already taught her good friends, the Wonder Trio, anything that she had taught Mariette... which meant she didn't hesitate to tell Marcela everything she knew.

Marcela was pale in the face as she asked a number of additional questions but was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief when she realized that, despite her deep admiration for Mile, Mariette did not consider herself Mile's equal, nor harbor any grand delusions of traveling together with her...

* * *

And so, the Wonder Trio left the temporary shrine behind, heading back toward the kingdom of Brandel to enact their plans.

"We, the Wonder Trio, are the ones who shall take Miss Adele's hand as she travels off on this new adventure, reaching out to say, 'Come along with me!' We shall never let *anyone* else serve as her companions! We shall follow you to the ends of the earth, Miss Adele... No, beyond there, even! Now then, Miss Monika, Miss Aureana, let us go!"

"All right!!!"

* * *

MAN, THINGS ARE REALLY GETTIN' GOOD.

[YEAH, THEIR RATINGS ON THE NANONET HAVE JUST SKYROCKETED!]

{I AM SO GLAD WE ENDED UP ASSIGNED TO THE WONDER TRIO. I DON'T THINK WE'LL BE BORED FOR QUITE SOME TIME... }

Somewhere nearby, some tiny beings, invisible to the naked eye, were congratulating themselves on their good luck in a way that humans could never hear...

AFTERWORD

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone. FUNA here.

Average Volume 17 has finally arrived! One-seven! Just like *Daitetsujin 17*!

This is the fourth volume now since we changed publishers. Along with this novel, Volume 1 of the *Average* manga reboot, now being serialized on Gangan Online, will also be available in book form from Square Enix. At this rate, we'll be leading you on a journey across the entire comic sales floor!

This comic is a fresh start, so this time we'll get to see in full the Eckland Academy arc from back in the beginning, which was entirely cut from both Nekomint-sensei's version and the anime. I hope you enjoy it!

In this volume, the Crimson Vow heads toward their final battle. Cue *The Time Étranger!* Cue the *Doggie March*!

All of the Crimson Vow's journeying and adventuring has led up to this point.

A union of races and artificial beings!

The brilliance of life. And the glittering of souls.

Now, Death Raptor! Strike the killing blow!!!

REINA: "No one would even remember a weapon from a space opera that came out that long ago!"

MILE: "It's fiiine! Don't sweat the details!"

MAVIS: “I wonder if he took that ‘two-stage lens’ from *Lensman...*”

REINA: “Not a single person alive is going to catch that reference!”

MILE: “It’s fiiine! Don’t sweat the details!”

PAULINE: “So, you put ‘spray’ and ‘raygun’ together into ‘spraygun,’ and morph it straight into ‘splaserbeam’...”

MILE: “Ugh, shut up! I! Can’t! Hear! You!”

It’s time for the Crimson Vow’s journey to the west.

REINA: “What is this, *Ultra X Weapons?!*”

On a new continent, the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio slide into a new adventure!

MILE: “So you’ll want to point your feet outward and start gliding...”

REINA: “Why does sliding immediately make you think of skiing?!”

REINA: “Also, why is every princess that this author has show up in his books a third princess? Is there some reason for that?”

MILE: “Oh, honestly? He’d never realized it until it was just pointed out to him.”

REINA: “You’re saying it’s a subconscious decision? What is going on in his psyche?”

MILE: “I mean, I don’t think it’s that he has a pattern of meeting up with third princesses in real life.”

REINA: “Of course not! If there was a Japanese light novel author who was friends with a princess, I’d be terrified!”

MAVIS & PAULINE: “.....”

At any rate, please do enjoy the *Average* novels and the manga reboot!

And finally, to the chief editor; to Itsuki Akata, the illustrator; to Yoichi Yamakami, the cover designer; to everyone involved in the proofreading, editing, printing, binding, distribution, and selling of this book; to all the reviewers on *Let's Be Novelists* who gave me their impressions, guidance, suggestions, and advice; and most of all, to everyone who's taken these stories into their homes, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I am sure that we will see each other again with the next volume...

—FUNA

AFTERWORD (OR SOMETHING)

WHERE MILE IS NOT,
MILE-001 DOES
MANY MILE-LIKE THINGS
IN A MILE-LIKE MANNER
BY MILE'S COMMAND

亞方逸桂
ITSUKI AKATA





Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter



PtFF by: traktorA7EN