



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

Story by  
**FUNA**

Illustrated by  
**Itsuki Akata**

14



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

VOLUME 14

LOREM IPSUM







## Japan

*-Kurihara Misato-*

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

*Mile*

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

*Mavis*

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

*Reina*

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

## Kingdom of Tils

## Elves

*Dr. Clairia*

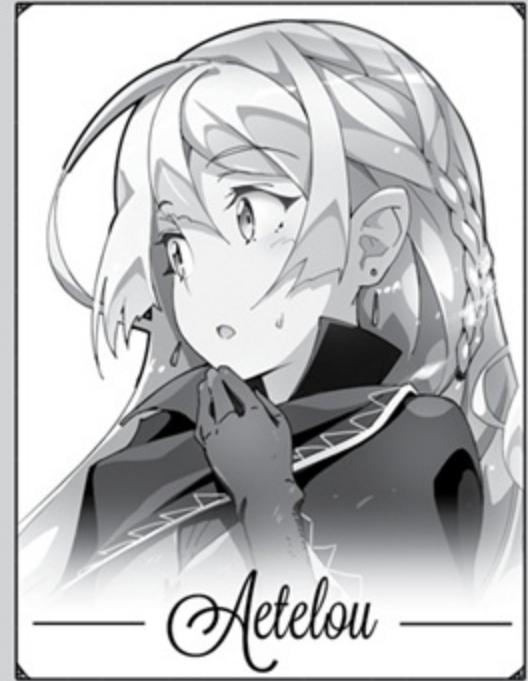
An elven woman. Loves her father. Saved the Crimson Vow during their battle with the elder dragons.

*Sharalir*

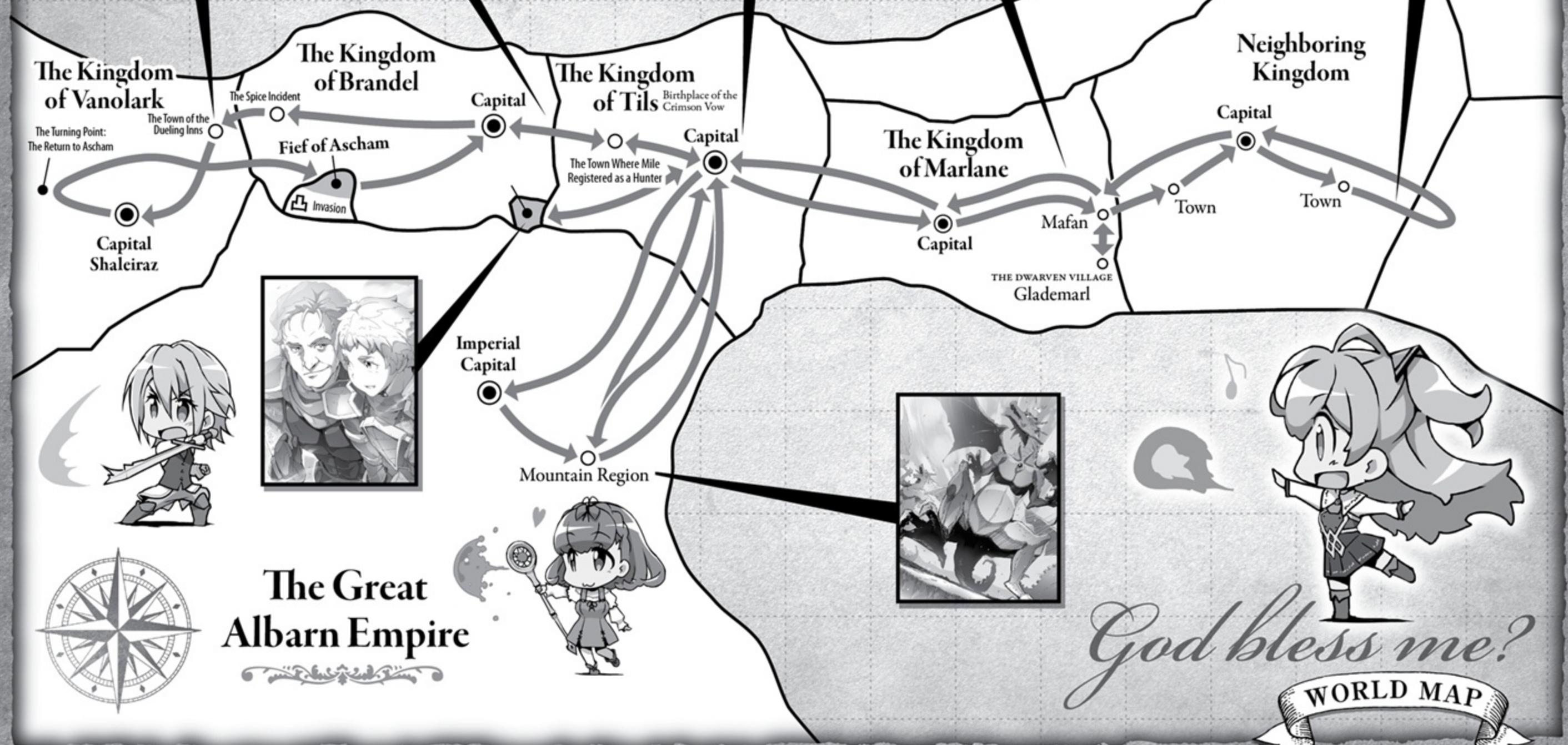
An elven woman. An academic researcher.

*Pauline*

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

*Aetelou*

An elven woman. An academic researcher.



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

---

VOLUME 14

---

BY  
*FUNA*

ILLUSTRATED BY  
*Itsuki Akata*



*Seven Seas Entertainment*

WATASHI, NORYOKU WA HEIKINCHI DETTE ITTAYONE! vol.14  
©2021 FUNA, Itsuki Akata/SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.  
First published in Japan in 2021 by SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.  
English translation rights arranged with SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. and  
SEVEN SEAS ENTERTAINMENT, LLC. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

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

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to  
Marketing Manager Lianne Senter at [press@gomanga.com](mailto:press@gomanga.com).  
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of  
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell  
at [digital@gomanga.com](mailto: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](http://sevenseasentertainment.com).

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

ISBN: 978-1-64827-299-8  
Printed in Canada  
First Printing: October 2022  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*God bless me?*

## CONTENTS

---

---

### INTERLUDE

---

CHAPTER 101: THE ELVEN VILLAGE

CHAPTER 102: ENEMIES

CHAPTER 103: INVADERS

CHAPTER 104: THE SHAPELESS FOE

---

---

SIDE STORY: CLAIRIA LEAVES THE NEST

---

### AFTERWORD

# 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.

They infiltrated the Albarn Empire on a job from some high-ranking court officials and triumphed in a fearsome battle against elder dragons.

Then, they encountered a newer, stronger Wonder Trio awaiting them on their return! Followed by a battle over Mile?!

Now, the Crimson Vow seizes a new opportunity: a dangerous escort mission to the elven village...

## Interlude

“SO, ARE we settled then?”

"Hmm... Well, I guess we don't have much of a choice."

In a certain pub, somewhere in a certain kingdom, three ladies were engaged in a conversation.

"I suppose I can accept this. Normally, the two of you seem to want to jump me on sight, so the fact that you've bothered to bring me this proposal is an improvement. Even so, I don't really see how things ended up this way. I never did anything to you..." one said, ruefully. "Back in the village, you were like big sisters to me. And now, all of a sudden—"

The speaker appeared to be the youngest of the three—small and slight enough that, were she a human, one would assume she was still of the age to be referred to as a "girl" and not a "woman." Noticing the expressions on her older companions' faces, she swiftly shut her mouth. In truth, there had been a particular

incident that might explain the current state of affairs—especially in combination with the news she had just heard from the other women.

Still, she wasn't going to apologize—doing so would only offend them more.

Plus, this girl felt she had done nothing wrong, and so there was no reason for her to be making apologies.

"Anyway, there's the fee reduction, the travel security... and securing the 'jack-in-the-box'!"

"That's mine! *I* found it! All associated benefits belong to *me*!"

"No, we already told you, it's *ours*! We should get preference!"

"That's right! There's no way *you* could possibly make proper use of it. Leave that part to us!"

"You've gotta be kidding! I'm not letting you two get around me that easily!"



*Ka-blam!*

*Clatter!*

All three stood, preparing for a fight, when—

“Um, pardon me, ladies, but you’re bothering our other guests...”

“Ah...”

The trio had inadvertently gotten a bit heated, but they did still have their manners. Their faces reddened at the shop owner’s admonishment, realizing what a ruckus they were causing in this crowded pub. Rarely did elves enter human settlements, and so their actions would reflect poorly on their kinfolk as a whole. Being plenty cognizant of that fact, all three looked suddenly stricken.

“Check, please...” said one of the elder two. She settled the bill, and the three of them swiftly left the pub behind, heads hung in shame.

“Hey, were they...?”

“Well, they had pointy ears...”

“I couldn’t see the youngest one’s ears behind her hair, but she was speaking pretty frankly with the older two, judging by her dress and physique. Those were definitely elves!”

A single elf—not to mention three—was a rare sight, and so the pub had been all but silent as they had spoken, the other customers watching warily. None wished to meddle in what they did not understand, especially considering the intensity of the conversation, but their eyes had been riveted on the three in the corner. Now, as the elves left, the other customers all started chattering at once.

Elves were a beautiful bunch, so it was no surprise that everyone was so enthralled. Of course, the two elders at least would be fully accustomed to this kind of attention and were not about to start caring about it now.

“Hey, idiots! Y’all know how good elves’ hearing is, right?! They might be able to hear

you through those closed doors! They might even be able to hear more distant voices, carried on the wind or something," one of the guests scolded. "Plus, if that girl heard you calling her flat..."

"Wh-wha?!"

The man who had spoken the offense paled. However...

"Nah, you're fine," another explained. "Most elves are flat—er... slim. So I don't think that's got any bearing on elves' standards of beauty or femininity. It's not like she'd have some complex about it. In fact, she might even take it as a compliment, like if you say to a human woman how small her hands are—like, 'Oh, they're so slender, it's charming.' Honestly, for forest-dwellers like them, being busty would just be a drawback. Makes it harder to draw a bow, gets in the way of running through the trees, makes your shoulders stiff, gives you heat rashes, make you crawl slower... Stuff like that."

"Whoa! Seriously?!"

The men's minds were boggled. Meanwhile, the more modestly built of the female customers suddenly had reason to wonder if they might have an edge in attracting a beautiful elven man...

"Anyway, to reprimand three elves, just like that..."

*"The boss is terrifying!!!"*

The regulars were instilled with a newfound respect for the establishment's owner.

At the same time, a short distance outside the pub, the three ladies stopped along the road, continuing their conversation. "Ugh, that was so *embarrassing!* You two made me look like a fool!"

"Don't act like at least a third of the blame there wasn't yours!"

"Anyway, let's just take a break until this operation is finished. For now, we'll put these trivialities aside. We have a greater goal. We can address the previous matter once all is said and done... Are we agreed?"

*Nod.*

And thus, the elves' plot was underway...

# CHAPTER 101

## THE ELVEN VILLAGE

“YEAH, THOSE YOUNG... er, rather, young-*looking*—elf women who were living with the humans seem to have returned to their village. To make ‘a regularly scheduled report,’ or so they claimed...”

“Claimed? So then, was there actually some other reason?”

It was only natural that the guild master’s wording raised some suspicion, and of course, it was earnest Mavis who had to ask.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Apparently, the real reason they’re going back is for ‘matchmaking.’”

The members of the Crimson Vow were silent. And then...

“The Elven Bride?” Mile retorted.

“They’re all still single!” the guild master replied firmly. Clearly, all the time he had spent around the Crimson Vow had taught him not to blink an eye at Mile’s strange remarks.

Still, to think that such a family-unfriendly series had been part of Misato’s parents’ collection...

“Anyway, there aren’t many elves that live in human settlements. Even fewer are young, unmarried women. As I’m sure you all know, elves, who are long-lived, good-natured, and conscientious, are deeply esteemed by humans as one of our fellow humanoid races, along with dwarves. If anything were to happen to them while traveling through human lands, it would cause quite the kerfuffle. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

*Nod nod nod.*

“In that case, please accept this request,” said the guild master with a stern look that suggested they were in no position to refuse. It was not that he meant them any malice; he was most likely just desperate, considering how poorly things might go if they

turned the job down.

"Um, so were you the one who recommended us for this request, sir?" Mile asked, her tone innocent.

It would have been one thing if they were A- or S-ranks, but no matter how much of a name they had made for themselves, the Crimson Vow were still a C-rank party. It was unlikely that anyone from another town would have heard of them, and even less likely that they should have a reputation among the elves. It was logical, then, to assume that it would have been the guild master who had made the recommendation. However...

"No. This came from the requesters themselves. Why should a mere guild master like myself interfere in a matter of this import? I'm no lord or king, and I would hate to think *I* was to blame for anything unfortunate that might happen..."

By which the guild master clearly meant that he wasn't about to take responsibility for anything that might happen to the elves on his watch.

"Ah."

The guild master was not at all a bad person, but that was the sort of fellow he was.

\* \* \*

On the way home from the guildhall...

"Wow! To think that we've made a name for ourselves even among the elves..."

"It's amazing! If we keep building our reputation like this, then when I finally establish my own mercantile firm—"

"Being known among the elves would certainly help me in becoming a knight! This is wonderful!"

Reina, Pauline, and Mavis were overjoyed to hear that some elves had requested their services. They were happy to accept the job... completely ignoring the dubious tilt of Mile's head throughout this conversation.

*Why would elves be asking for us? The only elves who know about us are those young—or rather, 'young for elves'—ladies... Oh!*

Suddenly, she had a hunch. Perhaps a bit too strong of one...

\* \* \*

“We’ll be your employers!”

*“It’s them!”*

Indeed, the elves to show up at the meeting place on the first day of the Crimson Vow’s new job were none other than...

A certain familiar elven girl, who appeared to be around the same age as Reina—the same elf who had been present when the Vow had made first contact with the elder dragons.

“Dr. Clairia. And...”

“Aetelou and Sharalir. It’s been a while.”

Of course, these two other elven maidens, who appeared to be in their twenties, also looked familiar—they were the academic researchers the members of the Crimson Vow had escorted as they collected plants in the forest.

“I knew it...” Mile muttered.

After all, there were no other elves with whom the Crimson Vow were acquainted.

“I thought the two of you weren’t on the best of terms with Dr. Clairia, though,” Mile commented. “Why did you come all the way over here to collect her, instead of leaving directly from the country you were staying in?”

The elves offered no reply to this question. As Mile stared at them curiously, Pauline tugged gently on her sleeve, whispering in her ear.

“It’s probably so they can save on money. Hiring guards doesn’t come cheap...”

“Oh!”

Indeed, two half-gold a day per person, with four people, came out to eight gold a day. Ten days’ travel would make that eighty. In terms of modern Japanese money, that

would be around 800,000 yen. Add in the cost of the cart and a driver they'd need to hire... For a group of academics, that was by no means chump change. It only made sense that they might be willing to swallow their pride in order to cut costs a bit.

With their sharp senses of hearing, the three elven ladies easily overheard Pauline's whisper. However, Reina ignored their mortified grumbles and simply started walking.

"Let's get going! We can talk while we walk."

True, just standing and talking was lost time—not worth anyone's money. It would perhaps be better for their purses to get a move on...

\* \* \*

At the stables, the party boarded the carriage they had reserved: a two-horse cart and the driver to go along with it—hired, naturally, at the elves' expense. They would ride until a short distance from the elven village and then walk the last leg of their journey.

It was not as though the location of the village needed to be kept a secret, but the elves were not too fond of other races trampling through their forests, and the woods were unlikely to feature any roads passable by cart. It went without saying that any hunting or gathering near the village would be prohibited.

"So basically: There's no *prohibition* on us leaving the village and living among humans, but the elders don't think it proper, so they *will* make a fuss. In addition, there are restrictions: We're only allowed to leave if we agree to report back to the village after a certain amount of time in order to meet up with suitors. The problem is that there are way fewer people living in our villages than in human towns, so we already know all of the guys who live around us!"

Dr. Clairia's manner had changed considerably since the last time that they had seen her. Now, as they rode in the carriage, she chattered like a schoolgirl, explaining the details of their homecoming. Previously, her position had been that of a researcher, a professional doing a job she had accepted. Now, she was merely a girl who had hired them to guard her, which allowed her to be much more relaxed. Still, the Crimson Vow, having some sense of the professor's true age, felt a bit awkward at hearing her speak in such a youthful manner. It wasn't at odds with her appearance, at least. But her appearance was already misleading enough...

"It really is a hassle. I have to report on the results of my research, and convince the

elders that I've been living properly, and soothe my father's fears..." Clairia said.

As she spoke, she was looking rather intently at Mile.

In fact, the other two elves' eyes were sparkling with a certain *something* as well.

*Aha!* It all made sense now. Something told them that they knew exactly why they specifically had been hired for this job. Yes, it wasn't just about the money. There was another reason that three women who did not necessarily get along would all be traveling together... When it came to this job, they had probably made it very clear to the guild that they would not take no for an answer.

"It is important to reassure your father!" Mile crowed. It was truly astounding to see how someone so intelligent could simultaneously be so oblivious...

\* \* \*

"Let's go!" shouted Mavis.

"All right!" replied the other three members of the Crimson Vow. The elves nodded.

In a town near the village, they had left the driver with a deposit and an agreement to wait until their return. To get paid to do nothing at all was a pretty sweet gig, honestly. Alas, it was all too likely he would end up blowing most of his wages at the local pubs and gambling halls...

From here on out, the girls were hoofing it. All of the elves were aware of Mile's storage magic (read: inventory). And so, they had happily packed their luggage heavy with souvenirs to bring back home, unconcerned with the weight, volume, or fragility of those items. The elves, who lived in harmony with nature, typically had little means of income, earning coin only when they occasionally sold valuable herbs or furs to human settlements. As such, they always looked forward to the souvenirs brought back by those of their number who lived with humans. And as the last leg of the journey had to be made on foot, elves typically could not bring much back...

"Hee hee! They're going to be so surprised," Clairia chimed.

"Won't they? They're going to be happy to see so much human booze and ironware—the stuff that's normally too heavy to bring back," Sharalir replied, also in good spirits. In spite of their earlier grumbling, they all seemed pleased to be going back home.

Not wanting to pass up the chance to make use of Mile's storage, they had purchased as much as they could. They weren't going to let a single square inch of that capacity go to waste. Indeed, they had far, far more than one would ever logically purchase...

Of course, this made it crystal clear how totally absurd Mile's storage was, but there was no one who seemed too concerned about *that* at this point.

\* \* \*

Not long after they had entered the forest, what had started out as a narrow road dwindled into little more than a path made by animals. Further along still, they found themselves quite literally blazing their own trail.

As already noted, the village's location was not secret; however, the elves had taken other steps to deter any unwanted guests. The path was intentionally tricky, twisting to give the illusion that one was walking in circles. The faint trail was full of pointless forks and even seemed to vanish entirely in some places.

*That really does seem like they are concealing the village...* the members of the Crimson Vow thought, but the elves insisted this was not the case. According to them, if the elders *really* wanted to hide the village, they would put up an illusory barrier or surround the area with flying spears or pit traps.

"Naturally, the spears would also be covered in poison, and there would be spears at the bottom of the pit traps as well."

"*That's terrifying!!*"

Were humans ever to try something like this, local travelers or hunters might wander in and get caught in these traps, which would be a huge problem. Apparently, the elves had no such concerns. This area, while technically part of a human kingdom, was, for all practical purposes, under the elves' jurisdiction. Indeed, their territory was even recognized as self-governing. Therefore, the elves were free to dispatch invaders however they chose.

That said, as they were on friendly terms with the humans, there were a number of ways in which the elves might restrain themselves—however, these were merely a matter of self-discipline, not actual prohibitions mandated by a particular power.

"Except under unusual circumstances, we don't typically bring non-elves into the

village. Since you all are with us, you should be fine. We sent a letter ahead of time to get permission, too."

They had left this letter with the guild, where an elf was dispatched every now and then to check for messages.

"Um?"

Mile paused, her face suggesting a sudden cause for concern.

"So, um, does that mean that you *don't* usually bring an escort with you?"

Silence fell on the scene. The elves suddenly looked guilty, and the other members of the Crimson Vow appeared surprised at Mile's revelation. Now that they stopped to think about it, the costs incurred by hiring a carriage and escort every time an elf traveled back to their village would be immense. Thus, the normal course of action would have to be to take a shared carriage as far as the nearest town and then travel the rest of the way on their own. The guard contingent for the initial carriage ride would be provided by the carriage company. Naturally, the passengers' ticket costs helped to cover this, but it was far cheaper than hiring one's own guard and transport... In other words, the current situation—in which the elves had hired the Crimson Vow to accompany them—must be entirely atypical.

"So then, why...?" Mile started suspiciously.

Sharalir had a ready reply. "We put out this job request because we wanted to invite you all to our village! You were a great help to us when we were doing our research in the forest!"

"That's right!" Aetelou chimed. "It seemed that you were pretty interested in elves, so we thought we'd pay you back."

"You saved me from those beastmen, too!" Clairia added. "I wanted to introduce you to my father!"

"Huh..." The other members of the Crimson Vow exchanged glances, even as Mile's face lit up.

"R-really?! Thank you! I have always wanted to see an elven village!"

*Called it!* the group thought as one.

And thus, in accordance with the plan that now everyone except Mile was aware of, the party continued on toward the elven village.

“So, roughly how many people—er, elves live in your village?”

“Watch your language! Elves and dwarves are humanoids, too. We’re all ‘people’! You don’t have to count us separately. It’s not like, ‘one little elfling, two little elflings’ or something ridiculous like that!”

Dr. Clairia was outraged. The other two elves merely grimaced.

“S-sorry... Anyway, the population...?”

“That’s classified!” Clairia snapped.

“Huh?” Mile was dumbfounded.

Aetelou stepped in, explaining, “Keeping numbers private is an important factor in our security. Since we live in the middle of an area settled by humans, we can’t hide ourselves entirely, but hiding our true numbers gives us an advantage over attackers and invaders. Besides, while we do have an established village, many of our number live scattered throughout the forests as well.”

“Ah, I see...”

Really, it was unthinkable that anyone—be they bandit or lord—should want to lay their hands upon the elves. Many elves were incredibly skilled at magic, and all knew a great deal about the forest. They had slow metabolisms, which meant they could subsist on little food. Plus, they were prideful, protective of the trees, and fiercely loyal to their compatriots. If anyone were to make enemies of such folk, they would be annihilated the moment they crossed the tree line into the forest.

Furthermore, elves were esteemed by humans—admired by royalty, nobles, and many other influential figures for their intellect and beauty. There were even humans who maintained friendships with them—or even shared blood through mixed marriages.

Honestly, it was odd that such powerful, highly esteemed folk would be so cautious.

*Well, Mile rationalized, if a human dies, they lose only a few decades. If an elf dies, it might be a loss of centuries. Of course they'd be careful! That's far too much life to lose out on.*

Despite this theory, however, elder elves, like humans, tended to be more prudent than youths. Yet their attitudes toward humans tended to be the same regardless of age. From the majority of elves' perspectives, even a middle-aged human was only a youngster, a child even. Except for in exceptional circumstances, elves were always kind, courteous, and conscientious toward humans. Perhaps it was because they felt a bit like grandparents doting on babies...

"Wisdom really does come with age," Mile muttered.

\* \* \*

The group had walked the whole day through, and now it was evening.

"We're here. This is our home settlement. There are several other communities nearby, which all together make up what people refer to as the elven village. Our settlement is the centermost of all of them, where village-wide conferences and festivals are held. Except for big events when everyone is gathered together, there usually aren't that many people there, but most of the Council of Sages, who govern the village as a whole, live here. Plus, we have a general store. I suppose we would count as something closer to a town, if you think in terms of it being central to others around in the countryside. Though this is a *little* different from what humans would consider the countryside," Aetelou finished.

Before the Crimson Vow stood a seemingly random arrangement of dozens of one-story wooden houses. Of course, these were not wooden houses in the way that normal humans would likely imagine them but far more naturalistic. Some were reminiscent of log cabins, made of logs with squared off pegs; some had an exterior made partly of standing trees, as though the living trunks had been utilized right where they stood; and some were even tree houses, perched up on large branches. It was a village that dwelled in harmony with nature, not fighting against it, the structures designed to ward against the wind and rain but not necessarily change any essential quality of the landscape.

"So this is an elven village..." Mavis murmured.

"It's amazing," Pauline sighed. "It blends right into the scenery."

"It's just like I imagined," Reina chimed.

"Whoa..." Mile was awestruck.

As humans were rarely invited to this place, they knew little of how the elves lived. It was no surprise that the Crimson Vow would be so moved.

"Home again—to this podunk, backwater, nothing of a village."

"How the hell could anyone ever spend their life in as boring a place as this?!"

"It's so much more fun living in human towns! I need to make a big breakthrough, build a mansion, and invite my father to come live with me!"

The elves, meanwhile, didn't hold back their feelings, somewhat spoiling the mood...

There were no guards at the entrance to the settlement—indeed, one could walk right in. Was that not, Mile inquired, a bit dangerous, considering that they lived in the middle of the forest? But Aetelou explained that, even though the humans might now see them, the elves had protections against monsters and wild animals. Whether this meant that there *were* lookouts, or that they had some sort of detection magic in place, she did not reveal. It made sense to keep such details confidential. The more outsiders knew about a security system, the less effective it became. Only an idiot would blab about such a thing.

As the group entered the village...

"Oh! If it isn't our dear little Clairia! And Aetelou and Sharalir as well! I suppose it is about that time, huh?" said a passerby who looked to be in his twenties. He greeted the three with a smile. Apparently the ladies' scheduled return was a matter of common knowledge.

In point of fact, this man only *looked* to be in his twenties in the eyes of the Crimson Vow; in reality, he was at least older than Dr. Clairia, so who knew about his true age...

"So, *those* are the kids?" he asked, suddenly very interested in Mile and company.

"What exactly is he referring to?" Reina asked suspiciously.

"Did you send some word about us beforehand?" Pauline asked.

"That's a violation of hunters' etiquette, you know," said Mavis. All three cast dubious gazes—glares, really—at the elves.

It would seem that information about the Crimson Vow had been circulating before they had even accepted the job—and that was a clear breach of the hunters' code, an act that would typically be considered 'entrainment,' resulting in a breach of contract on the client's part and earning them the enmity of the guild.

The members of the Crimson Vow all looked to one another, aghast, and immediately retreated from the elves. Reina and Pauline thrust their right hands, holding their staves, out in front of them, and Mavis put her hand on the scabbard of her sword. Everyone except Mile had already been convinced that this escort job was just a pretense, but they had never assumed that their employers would stoop so low as to send information ahead about them—outside of the simple fact that they would be traveling with a guard contingent at all. At this point, it was fair to assume that the elves intended to mobilize the village to capture Mile and demand the details of her unique magic and abilities (read: family secrets). By no means did the Vow intend to launch a sudden assault against the elves, but they must be fully on guard, under the circumstances.

"*Wah!*" the elves cried, suddenly realizing their error.

"L-L-L-Listen, you've got it all wrong! We're not scheming anything weird!"

"Th-th-th-th—that's right! We elves are a proud people. We would never deceive you humans!"

"This is a m-m-misunderstanding!"

They desperately made excuses, as though having realized exactly why it was that the members of the Crimson Vow had retreated so quickly. So as not to put the girls further on guard, they shooed the man away and frantically attempted to explain.

According to their explanation, they had previously written to the village elders

(apparently as part of their regularly scheduled communication) about the fact that there was a pureblooded human who had senses as keen as an elf's, possessed immense magical power, and furthermore could use unusual spells. Additionally, at some point all three of them, when stumped for things to include in their regular reports, had written more about this same set of circumstances. After all of this, a reply from the elders had arrived—directing them to bring this person with them next time they returned to the settlement.

Really, they said, they were not scheming anything, the trio explained, heads bowed. They merely wished to have the Crimson Vow meet with the village elders.

"So that's why all three of you are traveling together despite not getting along," said Pauline, exasperated.

"I suspected as much..." Reina agreed. And as for Mile...

"So what you're saying is that you all essentially pretended to hire us so that you could abduct us? And that you don't even have any idea what it was that the elders were thinking when they told you to bring me here? And that it's not even out of the question to imagine that we might be captured and forced to divulge our secrets?"

"No!" Atelou protested. "We elves would never do such a thing!"

"But you *did* deceive us by hiring us as guards!"

"Uh..."

Mile was having none of this. Though she was generally a kind and magnanimous person, this applied only when she knew the other party harbored her no ill will. She had no cares for the civil liberties of bandits. Moreover, she would never put either her allies or innocent civilians into danger. This was a sense of justice that had been carried over from her days as Misato.

"It's a violation of guild rules," Reina agreed. "You've deceived hunters with a false job and led us to your allies. That's a betrayal of both us as hunters and of the Hunters' Guild, through which you placed the job in the first place. All of which amounts, basically, to a declaration of war. Regardless of how esteemed you elves might normally be, this won't go over well. The Crown or someone might try to smooth things over peacefully, but the Hunters' Guild won't overlook this. At best, they'll refuse to accept any further requests from you or your clan. At worst, every merchant that does

business with this place and their acquaintances might start denying you as well."



"Wha...?"

The elves were gobsmacked at Reina's assertion. If such a thing were to happen, the elves would never be able to go shopping in a human town again. Reina told the truth: It would not be a shock if they were barred from all business, whether buying sundries from variety shops all the way up to larger transactions... No one would risk making an enemy of the Hunters' Guild over a few paltry sales to some elves, after all. Losing their business would be but a trifle for those who upheld the rules.

Just because the elves lived almost fully self-sufficiently out in the forest did not mean that they did not sometimes purchase things from humans. Indeed, it was still preferable to use metal tools for farming and hunting, and there were other human innovations they had grown accustomed to, which they would be loath to give up. Plus, sometimes things broke, or they desired new things. And other times, they wished to obtain rare foodstuffs and spices.

In other words, having their ties with the merchants in town severed would be quite the problem for the elves.

All three were silent. They had never expected things to get to this point. So then, how was it that the three of them, who were all of an advanced-enough age that they could not possibly be unaware of the rules of hunters—how could they have been so naive about this?

The members of the Crimson Vow, frankly, were stunned. They had had a hunch that this job was a pretense to bring Mile to the village, but they had assumed this was nothing more than a scheme on the part of these three ladies, who hoped to butter Mile up and get her to tell them more about herself. That alone would not have been so terrible. Mile might have chosen to reward them with a bit of information that she deemed it safe to divulge, and they could have put the whole thing behind them. And if the other members of the Vow thought she was going too far, they could have spoken up and stopped her.

However, this was a scheme on the whole village's part, the plans for which had been laid in advance. Bringing Mile here had not been solely the intention of this trio but a plan by *the head of the village*... Well, that was another matter entirely.

This was a trap.

The elves were backed into a corner and lost for words. The members of the Crimson Vow returned only their own stoic silence. Everyone was frozen in place just within the village gates, until...

"Anyway," said Mile, "no point in standing around talking. Why don't we go rest our feet somewhere?"

Being that she was the star of this production—or rather, the chief victim—and thus had the greatest cause for complaint, the others could only agree.

\* \* \*

### ***"WE'RE SORRY!!!"***

They were in the home of the village elder, where, in front of three other elves, the three ladies prostrated themselves before the Crimson Vow and begged their forgiveness. Realizing that there really had been no malice intended, the members of the Crimson Vow had sheathed their weapons. However, the ladies now owed them a great debt, one which might prove a useful weapon should the three of them ever get carried away again.

Currently, the only ones present in the building were the Crimson Vow; Dr. Clairia, Aetelou, and Sharalir; and three other elves. One of these was the village leader, the head of this household. The other two were a wizened elf the chief referred to as "elder" and a man who looked to be around thirty, who seemed like he would be capable in battle. This man was likely the elder's personal guard. Of course, the Crimson Vow reminded themselves, despite the fact that both the guard and the chief looked about thirty, their elven nature meant both had to be far older than they appeared.

Elves could see in each other the more subtle effects of aging, but to a human's evaluation, elves appeared youthful for a very long time. Although both the guard and the chief appeared to the Crimson Vow to be around the same age, there might in fact be a large gap between them in terms of years. Additionally, the elder, who did appear old, must have actually been quite aged indeed. He had surpassed his lengthy years of youth and was now aging, albeit somewhat slower than a human would, which meant that he was approaching the end of his natural life span. After all, it would be odd for someone to be called an elder when they still looked young.

"Gosh, we really are sorry! All I said was for them to bring the girl we'd heard so much about to visit the village. I'd expected them to properly explain things to you and make an invitation. To think they'd do *this...*" said the elder, gently jabbing each of the three of them in the back of the head with the staff in his hand.

"Come on. They're just kids. They don't know what they're doing," said the chief in a conciliatory tone. But the elder was outraged.

"Don't be foolish! The only ones allowed to make that call are the *human children* who they've wronged! You're on the criminals' side; you don't get to speak for the victims! Don't act like an idiot child yourself!"

The Crimson Vow had been skeptical of the chief's argument, but hearing the elder reprimand him, they felt more at ease.

"Well, I mean, it would've been annoying if you refused our invitation," Aetelou sighed. "And you refused us when we invited you to come teach us about your weird magic before..."

Perhaps the members of the Crimson Vow thought, this was something that could be overlooked. Even if they were many times older than the Vow, Dr. Clairia, Aetelou, and Sharalir were apparently still of an age to be treated as children among their fellows. If one were to compare a five-year-old child and a five-year-old wolf, which would you expect to behave more like a juvenile? The three elves were perhaps still only in the first tenth of their life span. In other words, their standing was roughly the same as that of a human of less than ten years old.

*Besides, it's water under the bridge at this point.*

Realizing that they truly had no ill will toward her, Mile was inclined to forgive the three.

"On this auspicious day alone, you shall receive my pardon!"

Though they appeared a little taken aback at her grandiose manner of speech, the three elf girls (?) were in no place to question Mile's words and bowed their heads to the ground in gratitude.

\* \* \*

“So then, why was it that you wanted to speak with us...?”

Having accepted apologies from both the village chief and the elder along with offerings of herbal tea and some baked sweets, which consisted of a fairly tasty mixture of fruit combined with something like cornmeal, the Crimson Vow finally relaxed enough to strike up a conversation. Even Reina, realizing she was speaking with an elf of some years, managed to maintain a respectful tone.

Normally, she was purposefully brusque in her phrasing so that no one would look down upon her simply because she was a young lady. However, she was perfectly capable of proper speech. After all, she had helped her father out with his sales affairs before her time as a hunter.

For an elf to appear so aged in terms of human years, they would have to be extremely old—which made it almost as though they were speaking with an ancestor from tens of generations prior—someone nearly on the level of a god. There was no way one could possibly be rude to such a person.

“Yes, well, about that... Just a moment.”

*Sniff, sniff.*

“Huh?”

Mile was taken aback as the elder suddenly thrust his face in her direction, sniffing the air.

“Hm, yes, it is just as Clairia wrote. Young lady, tell me about your lineage.”

Mile was startled at the question.

“Do I stink?! Wait, do I really have *elf stink*?!?!?”

“Now, just a minute!!!” the three elf maidens raged, incensed at Mile’s wording.

“You three simmer down!” Reina screamed, picking up the slack for the chief and elder, who were hesitant to intercede on what seemed a very delicate, feminine matter.

Meanwhile, Mavis simply muttered, “This conversation is going nowhere...”

“...So, anyway, given that we were the main branch of a noble line, as far as I’m aware there have not been anything but pure-blooded humans anywhere within the past dozen or so generations,” Mile explained, just as she had to Berdetice before. Dr. Clairia should have been present for that explanation as well, but it would seem that she had not written anything about it in her letters...

“So then, that familial scent of yours... Or—er, no. It’s not quite a *scent*. More like a presence, or an aura, or something like that. I still sense it,” said the elder. All of the other elves nodded in agreement.

“I mean...”

Mile had suspected for some time that the being that had turned her from Misato into Mile had probably mixed some data from elves and dwarves into the “average” she was composed of, though this was nothing more than baseless conjecture and not a suspicion she would be able to voice. There was little else Mile could say. However...

“But she kind of smells like a dwarf, too, doesn’t she?” said Sharalir.

“Hm, that’s true...”

“Oh, so you all think so, too?”

The others chimed in their agreement one by one. Until...

“Ah!” Mile collapsed on the table.

“This conversation *really* isn’t going anywhere...” Mavis’s words echoed hollowly.

\* \* \*

“Ahem! Let’s start over again.”

It was only when Mile took over that the conversation was able to get rolling again. Since she was the subject of the discussion, this was probably the most expedient way to do it.

“First off, I have no elven blood in me. Not within the past dozen-odd generations, at

least. The same goes for dwarven blood."

The elves nodded earnestly. Even they had only sensed something vaguely reminiscent of elf from Mile. They assumed it was nothing more than what would usually be sensed from someone who happened to have been born of unusual lineage, who happened to have elf-like characteristics, or who carried some remaining traces of blood from generations in the distant past. It wasn't as though she had an actual elven aura.

And so, one of the matters that the elder had been concerned about was settled. Apparently he was worried that there might be some half- or quarter-blood child running around in a human settlement, outside of the purview of the clan he was in charge of. It was natural that he would be concerned about this, as there were certain elven secrets that humans did not know, as well as certain arts that only an elven elder or other sage could bequeath upon the youth and which could not be used in front of humans.

If a human who appeared to be no more than twelve or thirteen was seen running around using incredible spells, other elves might begin to suspect the existence of a magic of eternal youth. This was a mythical spell that had never been proven to exist, either in the distant past or now. But even elves, who lived many, many times longer than humans, would not be uninterested in that sort of magic. In fact, despite their long lives, most of which were spent looking youthful, they might become extremely interested in such magics when they did finally begin to feel the effects of age. (Of course, one could eventually begin to grow bored of such a long life, but that was another matter entirely...)

They might dream, too, of the possibility of finding someone who carried not only this rejuvenating magic but also the blood of the high elves, a legendary race who were said to have existed long ago, back in the time of the gods.

Naturally, there were hardly any elves who would believe that such an individual might actually exist, but that did not mean that there were not those who might be interested enough to cause a fuss over such rumors.

"There's one more thing, though..."

Indeed, there was one more incredibly enticing matter from the three elves' reports that had yet to be discussed. Something new and exciting, of the sort that brought a spark to the tedium of the elves' long lives. A new secret magical art, which they could

not deny the possibility of having come out of some other elven clan. Indeed, this was the most crucial reason why the sages and the village elder had invited Mile here.

"That uncommon magic that I showed to Dr. Clairia, Miss Aetelou, and Miss Sharalir..." Mile paused, as the elder, the chief, and the three maidens held their breaths. "That is a family secret!"

"*I knew it!!!*" cried the three other members of the Crimson Vow, already well aware of how the rest of this exchange would go.

"Of course."

\* \* \*

"You have to tell us *something*!!" the village chief and elder entreated, but Mile was not about to give up her secrets that easily.

"It's top secret! Are you saying that you elves would be willing to reveal *your* secrets to a human?" Mile replied.

"W-well, of course not," the elder stammered.

The three maidens did not seem willing to even broach the topic. Perhaps they hoped that, even if Mile would never agree to tell them anything now, in front of the others, they might be able to speak with her one-on-one later and get her to spill.

Mile withdrew from the chief and the elder, who were growing increasingly insistent. Whether it was because they could not bear the thought of a lowly human possessing a magic that they did not, or simply because they believed that Mile's secrets were too juicy a tidbit to pass up, the pair couldn't bear the thought of letting her go without gleaning at least a little bit more information. Of course, Clairia, Aetelou, and Sharalir had all been the same, so perhaps one could not call this development anything but inevitable. Still, that did not mean that Mile had to surrender her secrets—whether they were truly "family secrets" or the far more formidable "(knowledge from) Earth secrets"...

Obviously, they had not hesitated to let her know that they were in a tenuous position with their fellow elven leaders. Not wanting to suddenly surround a young human girl with a whole assembly of sages, it had been decided that the first meeting would consist only of the chief and the elder, but the others would not be pleased to learn

how little information had been gleaned in this venture.

*But that's none of my business...*

Indeed, that was the elves' problem, not something for Mile to be concerned about.

Her earlier disgruntlement aside, she was not particularly angry at Clairia, Aetelou, and Sharalir. Though they had all written in their reports that they had encountered an elf-like girl who wielded unknown magics and was incredibly powerful, they apparently had not written explicitly about her storage magic or any specific spells. And so, they had at least not violated the taboo of sharing the secrets of the hunters they had hired. It was a bit of a grey area, but they had just narrowly managed to skirt that transgression...

*Had* they done so, though, even Mile would not have forgiven them.

Now, it was just a matter of deciding what to do about the elder and the sages, but this did not require any particularly deep thought.

"Are you really going to insist that I tell you my secrets, without you telling me yours? That doesn't seem like much of an exchange. I guess I'm just going to have to peace out then."

Indeed, there was nothing to do at this point but to get up and go. Neither the elder nor the chief nor any of the chief's family had anything to do with the job they had been hired for. The Crimson Vow would leave at once and camp out in the nearby forest until it was time to go back home. Other than a bit of deception, there had been no problems with the job itself, so they would still dutifully escort the elves on their way back.

Of course, even if the Crimson Vow discontinued the job and refused to take on the return trip, they could easily make a petition to the guild to have it marked as a fault on the part of their employers, which would mean that not only would the members of the Crimson Vow not get a strike on their records, but they would also still receive their full pay. However, the thought of making Clairia, Aetelou, and Sharalir travel back home unguarded was a bit unsettling. They decided to see the job through. Ages aside, the three elves still appeared to be young ladies, and all beautiful, so the chances of them being harassed by not just bandits, but many other potential assailants, was higher than usual. If anything were to happen to the trio as a result of the members of

the Crimson Vow abandoning their duties, they would regret it deeply.

“Anything” including young men ending up beaten half to death, or beyond all help, by elves who they had mistaken for helpless young maidens...

Ignoring the continued pleas of the chief and the elder, the members of the Crimson Vow departed, the three elf girls following behind. Indeed, they still had places to go, so they could not part ways with the Crimson Vow just yet. First, they had to have Mile drop off all the souvenirs she was carrying for them.

\* \* \*

“I’m home!” shouted Aetelou, flinging open the door of her own home without so much as a knock.

Beyond the door, in what appeared to be a living room, were three shocked faces: a couple who appeared to be in their thirties and a boy who was presumably her younger brother, seemingly in his mid-teens.

“Oh, Aetelou, you’re back! Are those the girls you mentioned?”

“Yeah...”

It seemed that she had written about the Crimson Vow in her letters to her family as well. However, the members of the Vow had no intention of approaching these strangers. Hoping to be finished with their business as swiftly as possible, Mile dumped Aetelou’s luggage from her inventory right out onto the floor.

“Um, these are all the things that you brought, right?” she confirmed.

“Ah, yes, thank you!”

“*Wha...?*”

Aetelou’s family’s pupils shrunk to pinpricks at the mountain of wooden crates, pots, cooking knives, preserved foods, and other commodities that had suddenly appeared before them.

"Th-these are..."

They understood, of course, that these were the souvenirs that Aetelou had brought back for them. But what shocked them was the absurd storage capacity that Mile must wield if she had carried all of these items with her. Furthermore, they knew Aetelou would not have been the only one for whom Mile was carrying items. Indeed, they could rightfully assume that she would be carrying just as much for both Sharalir and Clairia. That, however, had nothing to do with the Crimson Vow, so they casually waved to the elves and left Aetelou's home behind.

The same scene played out at Sharalir's home, before finally the group came to Dr. Clairia's abode.

"I'm home!" Clairia exclaimed as she opened the door and burst inside, nuzzling her face into her father's stomach.



*Nuzzle.*

*Nuzzle.*

*Nuzzle nuzzle nuzzle...*

*Thud!*

As it appeared that she would be engaged in this performance for quite some time, the members of the Crimson Vow dumped out Clairia's souvenirs and took their leave. Clairia's father bowed his head to them apologetically. It seemed as though this happened every time she came back...

\* \* \*

“So, what do we do now?”

“What shall we do?”

“What’re we gonna do?”

“Hmm...”

The initial plan had been to stick around and study the elven village until it was time to leave—observing how they lived and hearing tales of the distant past from the elders. It wasn’t just Mile—even the other members of the party would have died for the chance to hear stories of events from centuries ago from those who had actually been there to witness them. However, given that the village’s upper brass seemed a little too keen on learning about Mile’s unusual magics, it was probably best not to go around getting too involved or asking any favors. It was not only the elder and the village chief that they needed to be wary of, after all. The other members of this council of sages they had heard about would also most certainly be interested in her.

“I wonder just how low an opinion they have of humans. Trying to make Mile, a stranger who they’ve just now met, give up her family secrets... And not even offering up anything valuable of their own! That’s kind of messed up, isn’t it?” Reina mused.

“It’s probably not because we’re human but because we’re so young. To them, we’re

as good as infants. If a human were to see a toddler holding a precious stone, they'd be like, 'Oh hey, what's that, let me see it,' and try to take it, right? That's kind of what this feels like," Mavis replied.

"Yeah..." sighed the other three.

At this rate, it was difficult to tell whether there was any actual malice behind the elves' actions. Even in Mavis's hypothetical, there existed the likelihood of the child's gemstone being snatched away for good or of the child being captured and tormented until they revealed where they had picked it up...

"Maybe they really didn't mean anything by it," Mile shrugged.

"Yeah. I mean, it doesn't seem like old elves are particularly greedy or covetous. Though the same can't be said of those three girls," Pauline mused.

They did not have a very high opinion of the three elven maidens. Not that they were really ones to talk...

Still, now that they had come all this way, the members of the Crimson Vow decided to at least take a brief tour of the village. They would probably be under high surveillance, given how rarely humans visited, but they could not imagine there would be any issue with them just walking around. Given that they were members of a friendly, allied race—and a group of such young girls—they probably would not be watched all *that* closely. Still, just in case, Reina popped back in at the chief's house to get permission. Given their conversation earlier, the atmosphere was a bit tense, but she was clearly convinced that given how things had gone, the chief was in a rather weak bargaining position and she was justified in making a demand or two of them. If the elves had nothing to hide, this was likely not the sort of thing they would risk the displeasure of the Crimson Vow by denying, and indeed, they gave the go-ahead at once.

And so, before the chief could try to resume the prior conversation, the Crimson Vow were gone again.

Mile, Pauline, Reina, and Mavis strolled around the village. Yet, perhaps because the population was so small, there was hardly anyone else walking around, and no signs of children.

"I guess, thinking of the age distribution, there probably wouldn't actually be that many elves under the age of fourteen..." Mile mused.

For a simple comparison, if one were to take one hundred humans, each of whom had an average life span of around fifty, just under thirty of them would be less than fourteen. Meanwhile, if you took one hundred elves, with an average life span of eight hundred, the number under the age of fourteen would be less than two. Of course, higher death rates of children probably would inflate those statistics somewhat, but it was still not at all outlandish for there to be more than ten times as many young people—fourteen and under, which was considered underage by human standards—among the shorter-lived race.

"Young elves..." Mile began, but before she could finish the thought, the three elven maidens reappeared.

"Oh, there they are! Why'd you all just vanish?! We need to start discussing some countermeasures for the meeting tomorrow!" Dr. Clairia began prattling, as though this was a plan that had been established long beforehand. Aetelou and Sharalir nodded along.

"What?" The members of the Crimson Vow were flummoxed. "What meeting?"

Wait—the elves *had* been saying something about a meeting during the carriage ride. And also...

"Oh, right, the guild master mentioned that..."

"*The matchmaking?*"

Why did that have anything to do with them? The members of the Crimson Vow could not understand why they should be involved at all.

"That's really none of our business, right?" asked Mavis. However...

"You're our friends! That means you have to help us!"

"We hired you as our bodyguards; it's your duty to put your lives on the line to protect us!"

"Why do you think we paid all this money for guards we didn't even need?"

"Wh...?"

Apparently, *this* had been their real ulterior motive all along. They had not been ordered by the elders so much as leapt upon any chance they could get to receive permission to bring the Crimson Vow along. Which was why they were in no position to interfere with the conversation at the chief's home...

"All right, let's find somewhere secluded!" said Clairia, gripping Mile by the hand and tugging her.

"Wh-wha? Whaaa?"

Mile was caught totally off guard. However...

"Whatever," said Reina, who would typically be annoyed at such a development but now seemed strangely cooperative. "Guess we may as well hear 'em out."

"That's true. Seems like they're kind of in a bind," Pauline added. "And most importantly..."

"I bet this'll be hilarious!" Mavis made three.

\* \* \*

"I see. So they force individuals who run off to live in human settlements into these matchmaking events in order to bring them back home?"

Thanks to a thorough explanation from Dr. Clairia, the Crimson Vow had a grasp on the situation. Aetelou, Sharalir, and even Clairia, who looked to be in her mid-teens, were all now of prime marrying age... a period that, for an elf, would last about 600 years.

Elves, apparently, changed partners many times in their long lives. Having to spend such an interminable length of time with a single partner would eventually grow tiresome, after all. For the most part, it seemed, their separations were not bitter divorces but amicable, mutual partings, which allowed them to carry on as friends afterward. Even if there were tumultuous feelings involved, everyone had plenty of time to grow out of them.

Of course, there were also those who remained with a single partner until one or the

other of them passed away, and even those who would refuse to remarry after that partner's death, but unlike humans, the remaining partner typically had many more years to live, still in peak physical condition, so such examples were rare.

Given their life spans, elves probably differed fundamentally from humans in thinking about such matters, especially when it came to the future of their race. There was no need to rush into marriage, at least for the first two or three hundred years of their lives, anyway...

However, even for elves, who might remarry tens of times in their lives, their first marriage still seemed to be a very significant thing, one that their families, extended relatives, and countless others might step in to have a say about... Thus, long ago, the village elders and the single men who found themselves vexed by the fact that young, unmarried women were leaving for human settlements one after another, had conspired to establish the statute that once young ladies who lived apart from the village came to the age of marriage, they were to return to the village at regularly scheduled intervals, at which point, all the unwed youths of the village and others around would come together to socialize. One got the impression that there were, in fact, many young women who might wish to leave for human lands and many men who were quite conservative in their thinking.

It was in this way that the custom of bringing the unwed together with the unwed was established.

It did make sense, when one thought about it. Without such a rule, the younger men would never stand a chance against their seniors, who had both a wealth of experience and the resources to back it up. Those elders would still be attractive and virile for some centuries to come, so they truly were at no disadvantage. Additionally, the fact that so many elven fathers loved their daughters so deeply meant that young female elves were often drawn to older men, leaving the younger ones in truly dire straits.

"Anyway, every single time you get these bratty guys just hanging around being annoying. They're a bunch of idiot babies who've never set foot outside of the village, who think that they can just do whatever they want all day while their wives take care of the home," Aetelou spat.

"So you're saying that even in elven society there's a trend toward chauvinism, where people believe that women should remain in the home, caring for the house and the children?" Mile asked.

The three elves fell silent, pained looks upon their faces. Seeing this, the members of the Crimson Vow fell silent as well.

It was the same as in human society. Both Mavis, who had fled from home because her family so opposed her becoming a knight, and Pauline, who was working to establish her own business because the shop that her father had once owned would be inherited by her younger brother, were in the same position.

"Could you tell us a bit more about this?" Reina pressed, a growing fascination evident.

Mavis and Pauline's eyes, too, sparkled with interest.

\* \* \*

"I see..."

Once the three elves shared more details about their situation, it was entirely clear that they had nothing sinister in mind.

"However..."

"You guys are of marrying age for way too long!" cried the members of the Crimson Vow.

"You're of marriageable age for more than three-quarters of your lives?"

"You all have no concept of being 'past your prime'?"

"That's like saying that a human would be equally desirable from ages ten to fifty!"

"Horrible! That's so horrible..."

None of the human girls could help but chime in. Some of this was genuine shock, though the rest was jest, or at least sarcasm. Clearly realizing this, the elven maidens seemed a little bit peevish.

"Anyway, we're going to be under all sorts of fire from the elders that want to carry on these old traditions and force us to stay in the village we were born in. They want us to marry early and make a union with some local guy looking for his first bride. So, we need to be able to claim to them that it's normal even for human girls, who live much

shorter lives, to spend a long time away from the villages of their birth, gathering experience—to show them that it's perfectly normal for humans who have already lived nearly a quarter of their lives to not have been married yet, and not have a man in sight, or any parents or other interlopers saying anything about it. You all are our examples. So we need you to back us up. Please! Our lives and futures depend on this!"

The members of the Crimson Vow understood the truthfulness of this entreaty, and they could sympathize. But...

"Hang on a second," Reina asked. "Are you making fun of us?" Was that a jab about them not having "a man in sight" in order to pay them back for their earlier ribbing? Still, she understood the elves' sentiment. She, too, had not wanted to be forced into marriage, to have her will ignored, to have to live her life in service of a husband when she had lived not even a fraction of her life so far.

And so...

"Leave it to us!!!"

The Crimson Vow were fully on board.

\* \* \*

"Thank you for coming, everyone," intoned the elder the next day, before the assembly of young elves at the village's meeting hall. As those present were not only the unwed from this village but also all those surrounding, it was time now for not the village chief but the elder to take charge. He was a person of most eminent experience in this matter, after all, having been married and remarried so many, many times.

Besides the elder, unmarried youths from all the local villages filled the room... Though, of course, they were still elves, which meant that "youths" was a rather misleading term. If they were human, some of them would be middle-aged or even elderly by now. Yet, they all looked to be in their early teens, around twenty at most. At first glance, it was just your average mixer.

All in all, it was actually a small group. There were not so many elves to begin with, and this gathering was limited to those who were of marrying age yet had never been married, of which there could not possibly be many. Most of their peers had already married at least once and were either presently involved in one of their many marriages or in the midst of taking some personal time until they sought their next

partners. This was why it was necessary to gather not only candidates from this village but from the others around.

Naturally, this also reflected the edicts of those who had come before them, who had warned of the import of bringing new blood into the elven family lines. It would be the destruction of their race if they simply married time and again among those from within their own village—a fact that had been preserved from the distant past, when society had been advanced enough to facilitate a basic understanding of genetics.

Besides the elder and the participants, the only ones present in the hall were the special guests, the Crimson Vow, and some elven women of advanced age who were present to help supervise the proceedings. Their role would be to protect the participants from being distracted by anyone who was not part of the candidate pool, a.k.a. those young women who were particularly drawn to the older men who reminded them of their fathers. You see, there were few male elves whose tastes ran Oedipal but plenty of elven women with an Electra complex. This was not to mention the elven men who were far too enamored of their sisters...

Elves. What a dark, troubled race...

\* \* \*

After the elder's address, it was time to mingle. There were a number of events scheduled for after this free time, but already it seemed that most of the participants were already acquainted with one another. Not only were these get-togethers held at regular intervals, they naturally already knew everyone from their own village, as well as many of those from the surrounding settlements. No matter how young one might *perceive* an elf to be, after living in the same place for many decades, they would have had plenty of chances to meet the people who lived in their area. There were festivals, joint hunts, various meetings, exchanges in times of poor harvest, and playdates for the children in order to get them all acquainted for the sake of the future of the race...

It seemed that the aim of this opening session was to create an atmosphere where these young people, who were already fairly well acquainted and friendly, might have a few drinks together and chat things up a bit. After that, once the booze had gone around, they would have a number of events where the elders could be a bit pushier and persuade those who had never met one another to get acquainted.

This whole plan of action was rather advanced for a world like this... though perhaps

it was only the worry of a declining birth rate that led them to such inventions.

"I guess age really does bring wisdom. They've had a while to think about this. That's elves for you..."

"Suppose they really have made use of all those years..."

Thankfully, no one was around to hear Pauline and Mile's half-hearted jabs.

"Long time no see, Clair Bear! I don't think we've met since the last one of these, eh?"

"Whoa! Who's this hottie?!"

A boy who looked to be in his late teens (though he was probably actually decades old) walked up to the elf trio, who stood beside the Crimson Vow. Mile had spoken without meaning to. In truth, every single one of the elves in attendance was beautiful. In fact, even the older gentlemen that they had met before now had been handsome. However, to the girls' eyes, they were middle-aged or elderly, so despite their attractiveness, the impact had not been as great. Apparently, the members of the Crimson Vow preferred their older men "refined" instead of "beautiful."

Or, rather, none of them had yet dated men of their age, so their ideal man was still something more along the lines of their fathers—though Mile's ideal was, naturally, not her father of this lifetime but Misato's father from her previous life.

The young-for-an-elf man who had just appeared was slender and somehow seemed like the overbearing type. Thus, while the members of the Crimson Vow could appreciate him on an aesthetic level, he held no real appeal for any of them in terms of the sort of man they would like to court.

"*Guh. Liebelc...*"

Judging by the look of disdain upon her face, Clairia felt the same way. And given how deeply she adored her father, it was no surprise that she carried an indisputable daddy complex. It wasn't that she was totally uninterested in men her age, but she certainly wasn't about to be swayed by such a fellow as this one.

"Whaddya say? Think it's about time you gave up on all that living with the humans

nonsense and come back home to the village?" said Liebelc with a grin, striking a pose and flashing his pearly whites.

Clairia did not share this feeling.

"No! This village sucks!"

She had no mercy for her enemies.

"Wh...?"

Liebelc appeared flummoxed, apparently having had full confidence in the strength of his attack.

"That guy's been bothering Clairia for years. She can't stand him..." Sharalir whispered.

"Ah..."

Clairia's reaction was quite understandable. There were many beautiful people among their race, so Liebelc's beauty was scarcely much of a weapon. Indeed, there were many other men who were as tall and slender as Liebelc, only some of the elders showing any signs of bulk from years of training. Clairia, who preferred men with a physique more similar to her father's, would never be swayed by such a glittery wisp of a man...

"You sure you aren't ready to come back yet, Ria?"

"Aren't you tired of those humans yet, Clairia?"

The men came flocking around.

"Wow, you're so popular, Professor!" Mile crowed, impressed with the seeming popularity of Dr. Clairia, who was so young in appearance and modest of build.

"Idiot. She's only popular like that because she's an elf," Reina chided, ruthlessly raining on Mile's parade. She seemed to have a better grasp on the situation.

Clairia wasn't on the busty side, but as most elves were flat, this was scarcely ever a

point against them. Her age also gave her an advantage, for, as elves aged more quickly in their younger years, there were only a few decades during which they would appear to be in their younger adolescence (though they were of course, in reality, several times older than they looked). After that, the period in which they would appear, to human eyes, to be in their late teens to late thirties would last an incredibly long time. Thus, there were few opportunities to meet someone of Clairia's age and appearance who was also of the appropriate age to wed.

First marriages typically lasted fifty years or more, so by the time they remarried, most elves would already appear to at least be in their late teens. There were also plenty whose first marriages came late, who would already be of that age. Such as Aetelou and Sharalir...

If one wished to marry someone of Clairia's youth, excepting rare circumstances where a partner died early, their chances were limited to finding a girl who had only just come of age. And so, Dr. Clairia was *particularly* popular.

"So they're *lolicons*!?" Mile exclaimed, hearing Aetelou's explanation. She was stunned to have to assign yet another complex to the elves' hidden problematic depths. Mile, with her modern sensibilities, had already assigned to Reina a father complex, to Mavis's brothers a sister complex, and to Pauline a brother complex—all of which they felt was perfectly normal. But surely, she thought, they would all be on the same page in terms of finding a Lolita complex loathsome! What she had not yet realized was that the three of them all assumed *her* to be a lolicon. As far as she was concerned, she was only rather fond of children...

Clairia took Mile by the arm and shoved her in front of the men.

"Allow me to introduce you to someone. These are a group of hunters who helped us out when we were with the humans. They are all pure-blooded humans, but they're truly amazing!"

*Ah, it looks like this is our cue,* thought the four members of the Crimson Vow. It was time for them to take the stage.

The three elves, while respecting the limits about what was and was not acceptable to say about a hunter, then began detailing the many exploits of the Crimson Vow and the

fascinating things they were doing in the human world.

"They've already lived about a quarter of their life spans, but they've never once been married to a human of the same age. In fact, none of them have got a man in sight! But the people around them don't seem to mind this at all!"

*Hey!!!* the members of the Crimson Vow silently screamed. They had known that the conversation was going to trend this way, but it still stung to hear it spoken in so many words in front of all these men.

"Huh. So they can still be unmarried even looking like that because they're humans..."

"They're basically toddlers, only in their teens in years, but they're of marrying age, with no one around to criticize them..."

"They can go their whole lives giving everything only to one man, leaving this world with memories of only him in their hearts, never having to pledge themselves to another..."

"It's pretty normal for us to give ourselves to any one woman for only a few decades of our lives..."

"And to get to see every stage of a woman's beauty, from her youth all the way to her mature years—to have that all for yourself..."

"Plus, elves enjoy excellent status among the humans, so you could live a happy, happy life among them..."

"It'd probably be a good experience to leave the village at some point during our centuries of youth..."

*Oh no!!!!*

Both the village elder and the older women in attendance paled, but it was already too late. The throng of young men turned as one to the Crimson Vow, taking a step closer to the hunters. The young ladies looked on, their eyes wide. Both sides appeared to share a deep interest. Indeed, even the young ladies could see the appeal of spending some time out in the vibrant and exciting human world, where they would be the talk of the town simply by virtue of being elves, rather than out here in the remote nowhere of the countryside, where chauvinism ran rampant. Yes, for perhaps different reasons,

they shared the men's exuberance. It might not be so bad to try marrying a human man...

The prospects of this year's assembly suddenly looked very grim.

\* \* \*

"Why is this happeniiing?!"

After the mixer, the head elder and the other elders who had come from each village as chaperones held their heads in agony. To be clear, all the participants would have been fine traveling on their own, but these older elves had tagged along in the name of chaperoning, hoping to partake of some good food and drink at the event. In any case, these chaperones were all well aware that they now had a situation on their hands, namely, that the bulk of the participants were suddenly making comments like, "Perhaps there's no need to rush into a first marriage," and, "It might be nice to get out of the village and see what life's like in a human settlement while we're still young," and, "Might not be bad to try being married to a human at least once..."

It was in order to set up pairs of newlywed *elves* that the young ladies were summoned back from their homes off in human lands. These elven youth were to marry one another and strive to bear children to maintain the elven population.

The plan had backfired. *Immensely*.

All of the young women who had remained in the village now had a burning interest in human cities. Furthermore, the young men's heads had also been turned, developing an interest in humans themselves—particularly as potential marriage partners...

It was a grave blow.

If they were to start mixing blood with humans while their own numbers were already on the decline, and all of the young people moved away to human towns, pure-blooded elves would begin to vanish...

In just a few generations, elves would be facing the death of their race. Both their bloodlines and their culture—the legacy and history of their great ancestors, which

the elves had protected for centuries...

"Why?! Where did we go wrong?!"

"It's because you're relying on these cheap, petty tricks."

"Wha...?"

The elders looked around in surprise to see the Crimson Vow standing next to them.

Mile continued, "Dr. Clairia and the others never wanted to persuade anyone to explore human towns, and they fully intended to return to elven lands once they were satisfied with their experiences. They were just spending some time in human lands in order to experience something new while they were young. And yet, you tried to force them to return home early, imposed all these tiresome conditions on them, and enforced your rude teachings about what young women were expected to do. You forced them to make explanations and petitions, excuses and appeals to the status quo, and this is the result.

"Not only did your efforts not persuade those who had left the village to come back home, it also proved just how attractive life on the outside truly is. Now, both the ladies who had previously stayed at home and the young men who have never before had any interest in human towns have begun to legitimately consider leaving their little villages.

"Surely, you must understand that it's no surprise that young people might feel this way? It's a natural thing. This is the end result of living in such a remote, insular society."

"Shut your mouth! What does a suckling child like you know?!" the elder roared.

"Wh...?" The eyes of the members of the Crimson Vow opened wide in shock. They had not thought the elder to be the sort of person who would ever blow up like that, even if he believed a youngster was spewing rubbish. They assumed he would be thoughtful and even-tempered, that foolish words from some little human girls would slide right off his back. In fact, they had deliberately been a bit aggressive, hoping to draw out a bit of a reaction. Now, they were flummoxed.

"It is *because* our villages are so small that we must protect this insular society! If these progressive exchanges with human towns continue, all of our young people will leave.

For all those who return home after some years, there will also be those who never return. Or those who return with their human spouses, half-breed children, and all of their human-influenced ideals... All pure-blooded elves, and the culture and traditions we have carried on for so long, will vanish—gone in the blink of an eye. The things that we lose, we will never be able to get back..."

"But isn't it okay to lose those things? The best parts will surely survive—the only things that will fall out of fashion are those aspects of the culture that are outdated or conventional—the kinds of tradition that exist for no real reason. Mixing your blood doesn't mean the destruction of your race. Why don't you think about it as bringing in new blood to foster a new race? Rather than dragging out the existence of this restricted, closed-off race, you can mingle with humans and progress side by side... Well, there's a lot of ways to think about this, but for you elders to keep forcing your own opinions on the younger generations, restricting them for the rest of their lives in order to make them do exactly as you wish..."

"We can't possibly do what you're suggesting! How could we ever endorse it?! Even if we could agree to such an idea, it would never be permitted! The will—the ideals of that great race who created we elves, and the dwarves, and beastfolk, and faeries, and elder dragons, and the demons..."

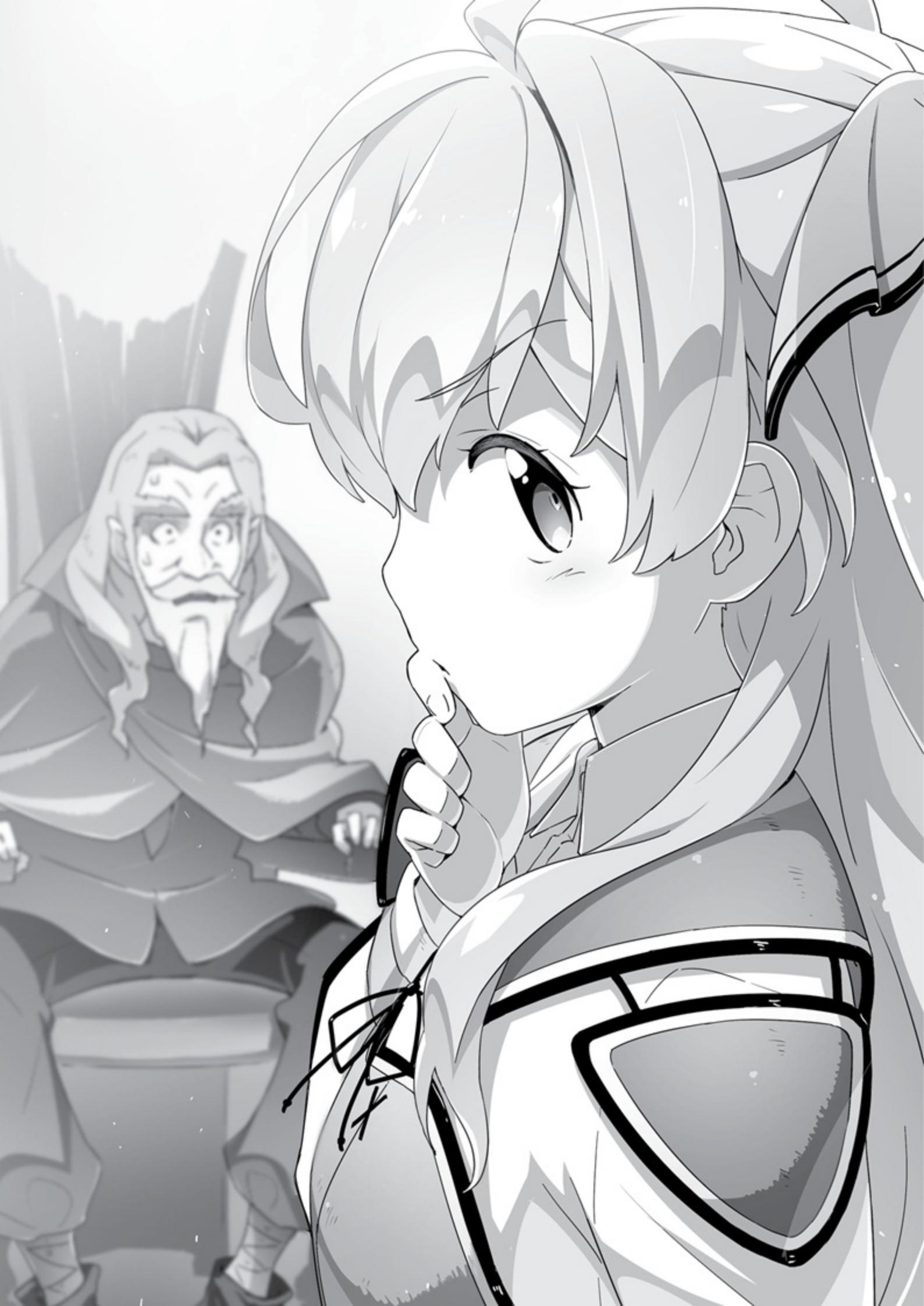
"Huh?"

The elder suddenly fell silent, looking as though he had said too much. The chaperones from the other villages were all as slack jawed as the Crimson Vow. The topic this elder had been about to speak on was perhaps something that even among elves, only the elder, or at least the elder and those at the level of "sages" were aware of...

"The great race? Hmm. I do remember hearing key terms like 'The Seven Sages,' and 'The One-Seventh Plan,' and the 'Super Soldier Plan'..." Mile muttered.

"Y-you little minx! Just how much *do* you know?!" The elder paled.

Mile, however, was focused on her thoughts and completely ignored him.



"Why didn't you include humans in your list of God's creations just now? Never mind the beastfolk and demons, but why were faeries and elder dragons in there? I don't think that you merely *forgot* humans from such an exhaustive list. This seems like something that you've said plenty of times before. Also—why are demons at the very end? Normally they would be before fairies, with elder dragons last... Which reminds me, it's the gods you're referring to as this 'great race,' isn't it? But gods are 'supreme' beings, which is higher than merely 'great,' such as someone who has 'performed a great accomplishment'..."

"Silence! I will not permit you to speak another word!" the elder shouted, swinging down the staff he was holding. The chaperones frantically held him back. Though he might have been an elder, the sight of him physically attacking a human guest, a young girl who was as good as an infant, was not something they could simply overlook. Such a thing would cause quite the kerfuffle among the humans, after all.

\* \* \*

"I'm sorry. I understand. Do release me."

Apparently it was only a momentary fit of rage. Once restrained, the elder soon returned to his senses, the other chaperones releasing him once they felt it was safe to do so. However, they stayed in position to restrain him again, just in case...

"Now, where did you hear all that?"

Though he had calmed down, he certainly was not prepared to drop the matter. This time, Mile, who usually waved things off with her classic "family secret" excuse decided to answer sincerely and succinctly.

"I heard it from the No. 3 Auxiliary Backup System of the Economical Autonomous Basic Defense Control System."

"The *who* now?"

Of course, there was no one besides Mile herself who would understand this reply.

"An entity left behind from the previous civilization," she explained.

"Wha...?"

There was clearly no point in explaining that it was a computer, an artificial intelligence. Really, she could only explain it as someone with whom she could come to a mutual understanding, such as a human, or one of the briefly aforementioned elves, dwarves, beastfolk, fairies, elder dragons, or demons. However, Mile despised lying about such important matters. Instead, she merely simplified things enough that her interlocutor could understand, without obscuring the truth.

“That would be...”

“For the same reason that you refused to tell us more about your traditions, I cannot tell you anymore.”

“Wh... Y-yes, of course, I understand.”

Those who were burdened with the protection of secrets themselves understood the importance and the weight of doing so. Thus, except in real emergencies, where he could no longer afford to keep up appearances, the elven elder would never try to force a confidence out of someone else. Instead, the elder turned to the chaperones.

“What you just heard you must never speak a word of. This is an S-rank level secret, by the elders’ code of authorization.”

Thus, the matter was concluded... though it is worth mentioning, perhaps, the way the men paled at this edict.

Afterward, Mile asked Dr. Clairia to explain just how big of a deal an “S-rank secret” was for elves. After getting over her shock that Mile would even be aware of such a thing, she helpfully explained. According to Dr. Clairia, an ‘S-rank secret’ was the sort of thing that, should you divulge it, you could expect to be executed and your family driven from the village. Giving away secret elven magics to other races was one such offense.

Of course, given how small their population was as a race, casting out a whole line would mean the decimation of a settlement, so they could not *really* exact punishments of that level. Still, revealing such a secret was a grave enough sin that it could not possibly be allowed.

\* \* \*

By the time all was said and done, the mixer had more or less fallen apart. As an *event*, it had not been a *total* failure. In the end, everyone had enjoyed themselves, there had been plenty of conversation, and all of the young people had mingled with one another. By some metrics, one might even classify it as a success. But, of course, it had been completely off the mark in terms of what the organizers had intended.

The whole point of this get-together had been for the young men to persuade the young women, particularly those who had been living away from the village, to return back home, get married right away, and settle down. Instead, however, the opposite had been accomplished.

It was a complete reversal. An utter backfire. They had gone for the wool and come home shorn.

Thus, the conversation turned to tales of life in human towns, told by the three elven maidens and the members of the Crimson Vow. They spoke of their careers and their treatment as scholars, various hunting exploits, the accomplishments of high-ranking elven hunters who, though they had never met them, they had heard rumors of—and more...

What happened next was perhaps inevitable.

Among the elves, there were certain men who tried to make overtures toward Mile and Reina. The three elven maidens ran interference, and then, seeing how downtrodden Mavis and Pauline were that no one was talking to them, some more philanthropic souls engaged that pair in conversation as well—only to be stunned that they were rejected.

Even if they had no actual interest in pursuing anyone, a maiden's heart was a complicated thing...

\* \* \*

"You all were a huge help," said Clairia, gratitude written all over her face. It was possible that she had finally realized how underhanded it was to ask a hunting party to do something like this—well outside the task defined by their contracts.

The expression didn't suit Clairia in the slightest. She was the sort from whom you'd expect a more impish look, perhaps accompanied by a victorious cackle.

“Honestly, you have our apologies.”

“You really saved us. Thank you.”

Sharalir and Aetelou, who were older than Clairia, appeared a bit more convincing in their thanks. The maturity of one’s appearance really did make a—actually, no, it was doubtful that the pair of them had ever looked anything like Clairia, even when they were younger. Likewise, it was unlikely that, even by the time Clairia reached the age of the other two, she would ever be a woman suited to anything but devilish looks.

By the time you’re an adult, your appearance can’t help but reflect your nature. Beauty aside, your face is shaped by all of the looks you’ve made in your life until then. But even so...

“You’re all so beautiful.”

“When you’re at home, you’re treated like children, everyone doting on you...”

“Your parents stay young for ages, looking after you...”

“And if you get bored, you can just head out to a human town where you live an easy life with everyone fawning over you...”

**“Elves are completely *unfair!!!*”** cried the members of the Crimson Vow.

**“You’re being unfair to *us!!!*”** the three elves raged back, veins bulging.

Their anger was understandable. Every one of the three had struck out from the elven village, where they had been unable to bear both the provincial sensibilities and their poor standing as women. They had toiled in a human world that they did not understand while bad people came at them from every corner, hoping to deceive and take advantage of them. Finally, after plenty of hard work, they had come into the positions that they had now. Of course, they did have some privileges that young human girls did not. However, the danger of being targeted for their differences was at least equal to the benefits of standing out.

Though they had only discussed the fun parts of living among humans at the mixer, the three of them planned to explain the rest of it to the other elves later on. If they did not, they might be responsible for many tragedies... such as a group of humans being annihilated by an enraged elf’s highest-level magic or an entire town being

wiped off the map.

Anyway, they couldn't help but be angry at the Crimson Vow for criticizing them without understanding the hardships they had faced. Which the three of them made abundantly clear...

"We're sorry," the members of the Crimson Vow sighed. They had truly meant nothing by it. They were just a little bit jealous. And now, hearing that the others had faced difficulties that they could never understand, they couldn't help but apologize.

The grass is always greener on the other side, or so the saying went. The same applied here.

"Still, is everything going to be okay? Your elder looked like he was not doing so well..." Reina asked in a tone of concern, but Clairia's reply was quite cold.

"It's *fine*. This was their own harebrained scheme," she scoffed. "They made their bed, and now they can lie in it. They've made our lives hell with those stupid rules of theirs so many times... This should at least stop them from making us come back for these regular get-togethers and requiring that we write letters home every month. In fact, if they don't loosen up, I'm going to start writing in my letters about all of the fun activities in human towns, and all the delicious foods, and how you can act like a child and do whatever you want... *Ahem!* I will be writing up lots of exciting, highly exaggerated things, and then I'll get a copyist to make ten copies and send them out to the young people in all the villages around! Actually, maybe I could stuff all of the envelopes into one big envelope and send them to Liebelc or something. Then, I can have him distribute all of the individual letters... The postage will be the same if I send them together, and Liebelc could never refuse a request from me. And, naturally, *one* of the letters inside could be the official report for the elder. If I just keep doing that, then more and more people will start wanting to leave the village... Heh heh heh heh heh..."

*"She's a monster!!!"*

With that wicked laugh, Clairia had finally graduated from imp to full-fledged devil...

"You really shouldn't harass your elders so much, or you're going to bring on the destruction of your race even faster," Mavis chided.

The three elves all tutted in response.

"I'm going to live my life my own way! Why should we sacrifice and waste our lives just for the sake of the elderly? It's a new era! This isn't the past where both humans and elves lived their lives scavenging in the forests! The world outside these woods is vibrant and sophisticated and glamorous and chic!" Clairia cried.

With this, of course, the members of the Crimson Vow could not argue. After all, Mavis, had fled her home to escape her family's strict expectations. And Mile had run from her home, her lands, and her people. Pauline had left her father's shop to her mother and brother so that she could do as she liked, and Reina had sold the cart she inherited from her father to live as a hunter instead...

It was one thing for those who only knew their woodland home, but the three elven women, who now knew life on the outside, no longer had the slightest bit of intention of heeding their elders' edicts. Had they ended up this way because of the elder's restrictions? Or had those restrictions been put in place precisely out of fear of a reality like this? At this point, it didn't really matter either way.

"Still, I figured the elder and these sages had a bit more finesse than that. Why would they fall back on something so harebrained?" Mile wondered casually. "All of these sages who have lived for so many years..."

"Actually, I think it's not all that surprising," Mavis replied. As the daughter of a count, she had received a certain measure of education about other creatures, perhaps as preparation for meeting an elf at a party one day and making a good impression.

"Huh?"

"Suppose there were ten or so friends, around five or six years old. They lived a peaceful, carefree life in a little village, never wanting for anything, never meeting anyone else. They never aged and never suffered, never spoke to anyone but their friends, never got any new information from the outside world, and continued to live that way for a century..." Mavis began. Mile got the feeling she could already see the conclusion of this tale. "After one hundred years, do you think those people, who still looked like little children, would reach the intellectual level of a hundred-year-old sage who had lived a complete and varied life?" Mavis asked.

Mile shook her head emphatically.

"They'd never progress. They'd just keep living their lives the same way every day...

It's true that they'd probably be happy, but..."

"...they'd be useless."

"Worthless."

Reina and Pauline's responses were a bit harsher than Mile's.

"If they were human, they would spend their short lives with the fear of impending aging and death always looming over them. That might motivate them to live life to the fullest, hoping for just a little bit of happiness, a little bit of comfort. They might think, innovate, and work hard toward a better life for their children, progressing little by little to build a future which their children would inherit. It's the same for everyone to varying degrees, regardless of whether you live in the city or the country. But elves, who shut themselves away in the forest, live easy lives as a result of their powerful magic, have life spans ten times that of a human's, and spend the majority of those lives in peak physical condition..."

"They're basically eternal children. They're stuck..."

Here it was. The conclusion that Mile had expected.

"Exactly. So, no matter how long they live, age doesn't necessarily make elves great thinkers or philosophers, nor does it make them more sophisticated in personality. Elves are stubborn just because they're proud, and people treat them with reverence just because their powerful magic makes them so dangerous. No one wants to anger them or stand up to them no matter what they say, and so the nobles made a priority of flattering them and handling them with care. The same thing just gets taught to their children... which is why I know all this."

The three elves were silent.

"I think you broke them..."

"I don't think they had any idea how other races see them..."

*"Goodness gracious!"*

“Well, that’s all well and good...”

“What’s *good* about that?!” Mavis retorted, but Mile ignored her and continued.

“That stuff that the elder accidentally said... er, never mind!”

She quickly changed the topic. After all, the three elves were still present. Obviously, Mile could not let them in on this. There were things in this world that were simply better not to know.

“That ‘S-rank secret’ you were asking about earlier,” Clairia started. “I did think it strange that you were even aware that such a thing existed, without being aware of what it was... What exactly did you all hear?”

If the elves played their cards right, Clairia hoped, they might get their hands on a weakness of their elders. But, of course, Mile had no intention of spilling the beans.

It was possible to insist that the Crimson Vow, who were not elves, would not be subject to the usual elven punishments. Plus, what Mile knew was not information that had been obtained from the elves themselves but from those “creations.” However...

“That’s a forbidden item!”

“Huh?”

“That’s a secret!”

“No, uh...”

“Bingo! You’ve got it!”

“What the heck are you talking about?!”

Mile continued to muddy the waters with her strange replies, leaving Clairia sinking deeper and deeper down into an inscrutable bog of absurdity...

\* \* \*

“Well, it’s obvious they aren’t going to tell us anything, so I guess there’s no point in thinking about it. Even the elder dragons and fairies were happy to talk, though... I

guess they have different philosophies—or maybe it's an even more important secret than those were. Actually, I suppose I can't assume that even the elder dragons were entirely forthcoming. They probably just told us as much as they had to. I don't think they lied, but it would be standard practice in situations like these to 'omit' things or purposely use words that could be easily misconstrued..." Clairia and the others had left, and now, Mile was muttering to herself as the four members of the Crimson Vow took a short rest.

They were all mentally exhausted. Now that they had safely—though "safely" might be an overstatement, as far as the elf leadership was concerned—achieved what had turned out to be the true aim of this guard service, there was nothing for the party to do but kill time until they made their return. They should have been able to take it easy at this point; however, they found themselves surrounded by unexpected pitfalls. After the impression they had made at the mixer, there was no avoiding the sudden influx of elven men who, now that they had begun considering human girls for their first or subsequent wives, were keen to make overtures to these incredibly appealing ladies who were already so close at hand—ones who were young, cute, and moreover earned their own money and could protect themselves.

"Whaddya say, Mimi? Wanna be hunters with me?" said a(n apparent) young lad, his teeth glinting.

"Do you use some kind of magic to make your teeth do that?... Wait, hang on, am *I* Mimi?! And what do you mean, be hunters? I'm already a hunter! An experienced one! Also, hold on a minute! Sparkly teeth, using an overfamiliar nickname... You're that stalker who kept hanging around Dr. Clairia!"

After their previous encounter, Clairia had groused at length about how much she had suffered over the years at the hands of this man... Naturally, Mile had already forgotten his name.

"I thought you said that Dr. Clairia was the only one for you," Mile scoffed.

Pauline chimed in, "I'm guessing that once he heard at the meeting just how much you can hold in your storage, he started thinking about the money he could make... or rather, how much money *you* could make him."

Liebelc was clearly shaken by the assertion.

"That's always it," Mile's shoulders slumped with disappointment.

The thinking of all the unmarried young male elves, raised in the same environment with the same values, was going to be the same... particularly when it came to making women obey their will so that they could live in luxury.

"No human woman wants a man like that! Humans can't get remarried again and again like elves can! A woman's years as a maiden are a precious, fleeting thing!"

At Reina's words, Liebelc finally made his exit.

"What a wimp... Are elf women really meek and obedient enough to put up with that nonsense?"

Suddenly picturing Clairia and the others, the other three all shook their heads vehemently. Though on second thought, it made sense that the, er, livelier of the elven women would have been the ones to go out to human towns, with the meeker ones remaining at home. Furthermore, though the bright, lively, and worldly girls who had gone out to human towns were popular among the menfolk, there would be a disconnect: The men still espoused their chauvinistic rhetoric, expecting these girls to obey their whims, but after living on their own and knowing what it was to have the pick of possible partners, the girls would have no interest in such losers.

And the number of elven women who chose human men for their first, or second, or subsequent marriages began to increase...

*"It's over... the elven village's fate is sealed..."*

***"Gyaaaaaaaaah!!!"***

"Hm? Oh, it's the elder. And, some other folks?"

The members of the Crimson Vow turned around to see a group of elves, faces painted with despair. The elder, the chief, and the sages had all come to discuss these very troubles with the Crimson Vow—and now stood, frozen in horror.

\* \* \*

“You have to do something!”

“But why?”

The elder could prod all he wanted, but there was nothing to be done for it. What they were up against was a structural failure, and not one that could be shored up with cheap tricks. There was really nothing that the Crimson Vow could do. If it were a problem that was easily solved, someone would have done so already. No matter how insular of a society they were raised in, the elves had lived many more years than any human. Plus, it was not as though they had not had any interactions with humans. There were plenty of people within the village who had even lived within human towns. So, how in the world were a group of teenage girls supposed to solve this problem that no one else could come up with a solution to?

“Please—can’t you do anything?”

“Hmm, I mean you can say that all you like, but...”

Even though the members of the Crimson Vow bore no responsibility for this situation, it was still a tad depressing. And they had at least been giving the situation some serious thought. But what, exactly, would they be able to come up with? Just as Mavis was shaking her head to admit defeat—

“Eureka!” Mile shouted, thrusting her right hand in the air.

“*She’s got it!!!*” the other three members of the Crimson Vow, thoroughly trained in—er, familiar with—the phrases in Mile’s nightly fables, replied reflexively. Hearing them, Mile gave a cheeky grin.

*All this “education” of mine is really paying off...*

Mile then laid out her proposal for how to save the elven village.

“The Ninja Village... er, ‘Elven Village Plan!’”

“*What???*”

The Ninja Village. The other members of the Crimson Vow had heard of such a concept from Mile plenty of times before, so they at least had *some* idea what she was getting at. However, there was not a soul who could have possibly guessed the full extent of

what she was currently thinking. If only the Wonder Trio had been there... If they, who understood Mile (read: Adele) better than anyone, had been present, they likely would have said this:

*“How the hell are we supposed to guess what you’re talking about?!”*

“Okay, well...” the elder began doubtfully. “This is already an elven village, so I’m not quite sure what you’re getting at here...”

The elder, who had no concept of a “ninja village,” could not even comprehend that particular set of words, so he had simply ignored them. Clearly, Mile had to explain.

“We make the village into a tourist attraction! If you do that, you’ll get humans to come here as visitors. You treat them as your guests, and then offer food and booze and lodging and souvenirs at a premium, which will let you get your hands on human currency. With that money, you can buy all sorts of things from human towns. And then...”

“And then?” asked the elder and chief in unison.

“The young elves will get their fill of humans by interacting with the visitors, and with all of the things they’ll be able to buy from human towns, they can get a taste of the human lifestyle, even here in the village. The sightseers will be coming from far away and staying for only a few days. So, even if they treat themselves to a little taste of romance along the way, it’s unlikely to turn into anything serious. Long-distance relationships are pretty tough in a world without phones or the internet...”

There were a number of incomprehensible terms thrown in that last sentence, but they did not keep anyone from getting the gist of what Mile was trying to say.

“B-but, if we have sightseers running around all over the place, that will throw both our peaceful lifestyle and the preservation of our traditions into disarray...”

“That’s why we go with the ‘Elven Village’!” said Mile, cutting off the elder’s worries. “Right now, you maintain this whole collection of villages as a colony, one that’s incredibly difficult for outsiders to reach. You’ll keep doing that but build an ‘Elven Village,’ one just for sightseers, somewhere a little ways from here! You make a village that meets the human expectations of how elves live, building up the scenery to match. You can create the idealized elven settlement that humans imagine. Then, you can treat the space strictly as a workplace, portraying a version of elves for other races to

see...

"In short, this isn't going to be a real elven village. It's an imaginary one, a tourist attraction, a theme park—an 'Elven Village' for show!"

***"Ohhhhh!!!"***

There was a chorus of cries from the assembled crowd—paired with impressed nods from the elder, chief, and some of the so-called sages, who seemed to have finally grasped what Mile was saying. There were also murmurings from a number of people who probably still had no idea what Mile meant but were pretending that they did in order to save face—but that was probably inevitable.

"You'll want to employ the elves with the slightest frames and the longest ears to work the attraction. They should style their hair to really show off their ears and carry small bows on their backs. For the dining, the menu should be primarily vegetarian, and you can explain that the meat dishes are specially provided only for the sake of the tourists. You can serve those at an exorbitant price. If you pretend that you're taking great pains to alter your philosophy of not eating meat simply for the comfort of the guests, no one will complain about the cost, no matter how ridiculously expensive the dishes are."

*"I see!"*

"A human girl's cunning is a terrifying thing..."

Naturally, having eaten with Clairia, Aetelou, and Sharalir plenty of times in the field, the members of the Crimson Vow were well aware that elves normally did eat meat—lots of it. However, there were few humans who had ever dined with an elf, and even if they had seen elves eating meat before, they would probably just think that those elves had forced themselves to do so in order to fit in with the human lifestyle while they were living in human towns.

"Okay, so I get the point of building a separate village for the tourists so that our real homes don't get overrun, but why can't we show them how we normally live?" one of the elves asked tentatively. It was a question that had been on everyone's minds. "Why do we have to create this idealized version of elven life?"

Hearing this, Mile gave a wicked grin.

"I'm glad you asked! That's because humans are the sort of race who only want to see the things that they want to see!"

"Er, I mean, that seems pretty standard..." the elf objected, but Mile tutted, wagging her right pointer finger.

"You misunderstand. What do you suppose would happen if humans, who come calling because they want to see the 'strange and mysterious lifestyle of the elves' get here and see a bunch of macho old dudes chomping down on meat and hunting with swords and spears? They'd be scandalized! When humans say that they want to see what something is like, what that really means is that they're hoping to see something that matches their own expectations. They don't want to see a bunch of beefy elves chowing down on barbecue and living the same way people live in rural human settlements—they want something fascinating and new, that they can talk about with everyone back home and come back to visit whenever they need a change of pace.

"That's why you have to show them an 'Elven Village' to meet their expectations! If you do that, they'll happily talk up the village to other potential visitors, and you'll even get repeat guests. And, if you have some pretty elven young girls and women (regardless of how many centuries old they actually are) hanging around to flirt... you can even hold regular displays of 'elven traditions'! Like festivals, or some kind of competitions, or an offering to the spirits of the forest... Stuff like that," Mile finished. She probably assumed that they had ceremonial archery competitions or something. After all, they *were* elves.

The elves appeared nonplussed by Mile's torrent of suggestions, but Pauline nodded heartily.

"You also might want to divide the village into a 'Little Elves Town' where people can bring their families along and a 'Mature Elves Town' for the adult men..."

"You just took those names from that story of yours about the half-elf, half-wolfman who transforms into an immortal wereelf on the night of the full moon, didn't you? The Elfguy Series?"

**"What the hell is that?!?!?!"**

A mixed-race birth between an elf and a beastperson would be impossible. Of course, that was why this was just a fanciful fairy tale... The elves could not help but cry out.

With the idea of a “Ninja Village” as the basis for her plan, Mile outlined in detail what the elves’ new tourist attraction should be like. Knowing absolutely nothing about the matter themselves, the elven leadership closely followed Mile’s every word.

*This is none of our business!* thought the other members of the Crimson Vow, quietly averting their eyes from Mile’s enthusiastic gesturing. The future of the elven village had nothing to do with them and should not be their responsibility.

\* \* \*

“Wait, so only humans can marry and have children with elves?”

After a lot of meandering conversation, Mile asked the elder to tell her as much about elven traditions and legends as he would be permitted to. As thanks for her help, the elder readily agreed, and now, having supped on fine wine and snacks that Mile had provided, he was more than happy to answer her questions.

“Correct. It’s not just elves, either. Dwarves, beastfolk, demons, and so on can all have children with humans, but none of these races can bear offspring with each other—only their own people and humans. If mixed-blood children who are part human and part elf then reproduce with those of elven blood, with enough generations, the human blood will virtually vanish, leaving them nearly a full-blooded elf again. Thus, even those who have a strong desire to marry a human have never faced any severe opposition. What’s strange, though, is that we have no idea why any of this is. Even within the beastfolk, those with traits of the same animal families, such as a dogperson and a wolfperson, are able to reproduce, but they cannot do so with those outside of their type.”

Hearing this, Mile muttered, “I see... So there’s no chance of a dogperson and an eelperson making a ‘dog-eel person’ together...”

“There’s no such thing as an eelperson! An eel isn’t even a beast!” Reina interjected.

“A cross between an eelperson and an umeboshi-person would really make your tummy hurt...”

“I’m telling you there’s no such thing as an eelperson!”

"I think she said something more objectionable than 'eelperson' just now..." Mavis muttered, shaking her head.

"So then, what about the other two races—elder dragons and fairies? Can they have children with...?"

"Absolutely not! That's impossible just on a physical level!" Mavis shouted, an apparently heinous scene playing out in her mind's eye.

"Still, it feels like there's something intentional behind this..."

Humans, elves, dwarves, beastfolk... and demons. Five races that all resembled each other physically. There were slightly finer distinctions between the different sorts of beastfolk, but on a holistic level, Mile considered them more or less the same race.

"Each of these races are closely related enough for humans to interbreed with them but not close enough with each other to interbreed with any other race. Each race's genes are strong, or at least strong enough that despite the interbreeding, they can still continue their bloodline. Is that so the traits of those races never fade away? There's something unnatural about it..."

"Speculate all you want, but such things are beyond our reasoning. That is how it has been ruled..."

Normally, this was where one might say, "So the gods have ruled it," but the elder curiously omitted those particular words here. Yet while Mile noticed this, it seemed there was nothing she could say.

\* \* \*

After listening to a number of other tales and legends from the elder, the members of the Crimson Vow finally prepared to leave the elves behind.

"Hmm. So I mean, even without us having to ask the elves about it, everyone already knows that only humans can have mixed offspring with other races," said Mavis.

It made sense. There was no way that this would not be known. Elves were not the only ones with whom humans had mixed marriages and offspring. This had been the

way of history for hundreds, even thousands of years, and at this point, it was common knowledge who could and could not bear children. However, most of the group seemed to be out of the loop...

"I didn't know that," said Reina.

"It's the first I'm hearing of it as well..." Pauline agreed.

"That's because it's not something that one typically discusses with children. Unless your child starts getting close to someone of a different race, it's not especially relevant. If one of the pair is human, they can have children, but even if not, that doesn't mean that they might give up on a marriage. Assuming they don't live in a country with any prejudices, or have relatives who are opposed... Of course, there's plenty of ways around this, too, like adoption, or having children during their next marriage if they're one of the longer-lived races."

Despite being the daughter of a noble, Mavis seemed to have a rather progressive view on the matter.

At any rate, the Crimson Vow had now done everything they had been brought to the village to do. All that was left was to spend the days until their return home fending off the advances of the local men.

"Gimme a break..."

"This is ridiculous..."

"Guh!"

Seeing Reina and Mile being bombarded with overtures, Pauline and Mavis looked ready to cough up blood. Obviously, they would have turned down any flirtations that came their way, but it was still no fun to be deemed a non-entity. That said, things tended to be the opposite way when they were in human territories, so they really should have grinned and bore it, letting the other two have a moment in the sun for once.

How immature Pauline and Mavis were...

\* \* \*

“Finally, time to set sail for home!”

“This trip took so long...”

In reality, their stay had been not more than a few days, but there was little to see in the village, and they completed their sightseeing within the first day. As a result, there was nothing to do but while away the long, empty days until their return. As they readied themselves for the journey, the members of the Crimson Vow breathed a sigh of relief.

Mile had wheedled all sorts of stories out of the elders, eating plenty of sweets and being doted upon, but Mavis, Reina, and Pauline were not inclined to such behavior and had to make do without even this meager entertainment. Finally, all that was over, and it was time to escort the three elven maidens back home.

“Thank you all for everything...”

“I wonder if they’ll be all right, though. The elders seemed pretty fired up about that plan you proposed.”

“Ah ha ha...” the members of the Crimson Vow laughed dryly, feeling a twinge of guilt.

*But that’s none of our business!!!*

*If this plan ends up a huge failure, though, Mile thought to herself, it’s going to be a nightmare for the elves... a real “Nightmare on Elf Street”...*

One might assume that Mile was concerned about the elven village, but as usual, her mind was truly elsewhere.

*They’re going to need some means of transportation if they want to start buying lots of goods from human towns...*

Indeed, though this time, Clairia, Aetelou, and Sharalir had enjoyed the luxury of Mile’s storage, normally, anyone who wanted to bring something back from a human town would have to carry it home themselves. Given how innately talented they were with magic, there were some elves who could carry far more in their own storage than most humans could, but still there were very few of them who could use the skill. Even if their rates of capable users were far greater than that of humans, who might only see numbers of eligible mages per country in the tens, the reality of the elves’ small

population size meant it was possible there might not even be one such person in this village. Plus, even if there were one, there was no guarantee they would be able to store an amount even close to what Mile could carry.

*If only they had some other means of carrying a large amount of cargo... Like a miniature semi-truck or something...*

Then a single word popped into Mile's head.

"*Isuzu Elfa!*"

For a second, the other members of the party were startled by Mile's violent outburst, but they were quite accustomed to her odd behavior and quickly returned to their own thoughts. Meanwhile, the elves, who were not yet acclimated to Mile's quirks, were somewhat shaken... Had they heard the word "elf" in there as well?

Because the route to the elven village was purposely obfuscated, something more akin to a deer trail than a road, no wagons would be able to make it through easily. A small truck would have an even trickier passage. Furthermore, if such a traversable road were made, then anyone would be able to locate the village.

And anyway, there was no way Mile would be getting her hands on a Japanese truck in the first place.

What they would need to do here was clean up the path from the nearest human town to the mock elven town, just enough that a small, one-horse wagon could make the journey to bring in sightseers and goods. From there, they could more covertly carry those goods back to the real elven village.

"Hmm, I wonder if they'll need to come up with some sort of wheelbarrow or something to move the goods between the two elf settlements..."

Her mind whirring busily, Mile calculated that with such an apparatus they could even travel along deer paths, as long as they were at least one tire's width wide. Theoretically, anyway...

\* \* \*

And so, after a safe trip home, the Crimson Vow's latest escort mission was now complete. As they would be receiving their payment from the guild, there was nothing

that they would need to collect from the three elves when it came time to part ways in the capital.

Normally, it would not be at all unusual for them to receive some separate bonus pay, or an additional monetary reward, but this time the elves merely gave their thanks and scurried away, dodging pointed glances from Pauline. Apparently, between the hiring fees and all the money they had blown on souvenirs for their families, their finances were in rather dire circumstances.

Pauline appeared wounded by this, but there was nothing to be done about it. After all, they had completed this task in part to help out some acquaintances who were in a bind. Naturally, they had received an A mark along with their signed job evaluation, and that was as much as they could really hope for.

“Well, that’s another job well done—a direct request from some elves, with an A grade! That should do plenty to raise our party’s reputation. Now, for our triumphant return to the guildhall!”

*“All right!!!”*

This was an example of what made Mavis such a brilliant party leader—she was able to raise even Pauline’s dampened spirits at being denied cash.

“I wonder if Miss Aetelou and Miss Sharalir are heading back to Mafan after this, though. Should we really have split up here...?” Mile wondered.

“Well, obviously they can just catch a passenger carriage or tag along on some merchant wagon. No one is going to deny two beautiful elf women who have both healing and offensive magic and can summon endless water a ride, especially if they’re paying,” Reina explained.

“Ah, of course...”

“Plus, even if they were to go on foot, they can handle any monsters that would dare to show themselves on the main road. Any bandits that came for them would turn tail after taking a magical explosion or two to the face,” Mavis added.

“Then they never needed any bodyguards in the first place... That would practically make *them* the bodyguards,” Mile muttered. However, it was a bit late to worry about that.

What the Crimson Vow did not realize then was that, several months later, a representative from the dwarven village would show up to ask for advice on the construction of a “Dwarf Town.” Apparently, the “Elven Village” would end up being a far greater hit than even Mile imagined, and the dwarves who learned about it, spurred by their passionate rivalry with the elves, thought they might try their hand at something similar.

Of course, the Crimson Vow had only one response to this request:

*“That’s none of our business!!!!”*

# CHAPTER 102

## ENEMIES

“HELLO, CRIMSON VOW! The guild master would like to speak to you.”

The girls had just returned from what they had hoped would be a lucrative monster-slaying trip to the mines when the guild clerk flagged them down.

“Ah...”

The members of the Crimson Vow were less than enthused at this news. Whenever they were called up to the guild master’s office, it was only ever for some kind of outlandish request or a scolding.

Incidentally, the Vow had not gone into the mines on any actual job request, but because Pauline had proposed that, with Mile’s search magic, it should be fairly easy for them to find any ore that had been dug up and left behind. Of course, the scheme relied on the fact that if they *did* find a large amount of ore,

it could be transported in Mile’s “storage” space... Though of course there was no way any professional miner would leave anything of value behind, and any places that were easily mined would scarcely have any valuable ore remaining.

In other words, it was a swing and a miss, one which had left Mile, Reina, and Mavis disappointed but Pauline downright downtrodden. Not only had this foray been, in essence, a loss of profit, but she also felt incredibly guilty at having wasted her friends’ time.

“Guess we better get up there. We may not be employees of the guild, but as hunters we are still a part of this organization, so we have to listen to what the higher-ups have to say,” said Mavis, ever the rule-follower.

“If it’s something ridiculous, we’re definitely gonna refuse it, though,” said Reina, who had no such compunctions.

"That all depends on the money!" interjected Pauline, profit-minded above all else.

"All of you seem pretty certain that this is gonna be about some kind of special job request, but there's also the chance it might just be another dressing down or lecture—like last time..." Mile pointed out.

"Guh..."

"Well, won't know until we go up there. C'mon, everyone!"

"All right!"

"Here you are! I'll cut to the chase. There is something I want to ask of you girls," said the guild master, much to the party's relief. They had been rather worried that there was a lecture in store for them.

The guild master thought it a bit suspicious that the members of the Crimson Vow, who usually hated being called on for special jobs, appeared to be relieved, but as that served his own ends, he simply continued.

"There've been rumors recently that something strange is going on in the Kingdom of Aubram. And so..."

"Do you want us to guard some more fake merchants?" Mile asked.

"No, we don't need to do all that... This isn't that sort of situation. What we want is for you all to go on your own, as typical journeying hunters, and do whatever you like there."

The members of the Crimson Vow had no reply. There was something fishy about this. According to the guild master, this request was based only on rumors. Plus, the Crown already had its own intelligence division, with its own spies and intelligence operatives stationed in place. So, what was the point of asking a group of civilian hunters—amateurs at that—to handle this?

There was no way this request had come from the guild itself. This was obviously an official request from the Crown, which meant, frankly, that it had to have come from either the military or the palace itself.

"Before we discuss the details, could you give us a moment to discuss this among ourselves?"

In many cases like these, once you heard the details of the request, it was already too late to turn it down. Therefore, it was not at all unusual to have a discussion at this juncture in order to determine whether it was best to refuse the job without hearing further details—or, alternatively, whether it was worth hearing the guild master out. Just listening to the whole story didn't necessarily mean that they *had* to accept...

With the guild master's consent, the members of the Crimson Vow regrouped in a separate room.

"So, what do we think?" Mavis asked.

"*Sounds fishy!!!*" the other three cried.

"I, of course, agree. Still, I don't think the guild master would ever intentionally trap or deceive us, and there *are* a lot of potential benefits here. First off, we'd be doing this as a job, but the job is to pretend that we're just on a normal enrichment journey, so we can travel as normal and take on jobs wherever we go. In other words..."

"We'd be getting paid double!"

Pauline was already on board.

"Yep. Naturally, we'd be getting paid for the whole time we're on the road, and it's not like they could ask us to hand over any other money we make along the way... Which means, as Pauline said, we'd be getting paid double. Plus, just like any real journey, this will be another chance to improve both our knowledge and our experience. Furthermore, since this is an expedition we'd be taking on behalf of the 'authorities,' there's no way they could say that it doesn't count toward our years of required service for Tils. In other words, even while we're outside the country, the clock counting down to the end of our required service as repayment for our scholarships to the Prep School won't stop ticking. Though I know that's not that big of a deal, since I'm pretty sure we don't have any reason for, or intention of, relocating to another country anytime soon..."

As she spoke, Mavis glanced toward Mile. Indeed, she was the only one who might be

in a position to leave the country anytime in the near future. After all, Mile held peerage, lands, and responsibility for their inhabitants in another country. Reina and Pauline noticed the direction of Mavis's glance, but Mile, naturally, did not.

"Also, this is probably a request from the upper brass, so we can pretty much assume this will net us a lot of contribution points. Plus, if we refuse this, it'll probably hurt the guild's standing with whoever made the request, which means that by accepting the job we'd really be doing the guild master a favor, which means he'd be in our debt. Honestly, this might be a pretty good deal."

"It's tempting," said Reina.

"Too tempting..." Pauline agreed. Mile and Mavis nodded.

"Why do you think they asked *us* to do this, though?" Mile asked.

"Probably for the same reason they chose us to do that job in the Empire." Mavis ticked off the reasons on her fingers. "We're a party of young ladies, so chances are pretty slim that anyone would suspect us of being spies. We still seem like rookies, but we've got a strong track record and a high rate of return... Plus, I'm assuming we've got an endorsement from those 'merchants' we helped last time."

*"Ah, of course..."*

It seemed they were all on the same page.

"I'm assuming that this was a direct request from our potential employers, rather than the guild's recommendation... Though even if it had been left up to the guild master, it's entirely possible he still would have picked us. Of course, once we hear the details, we can still refuse if it's something that's super ridiculous or just something that doesn't suit our needs. There's no reason for the Crimson Vow to make fools of ourselves. But let's at least hear him out. And this time..."

*"We'll make sure to lay down our own terms!!!!"*

Back in the guild master's office, Mavis spoke on behalf of the party.

"All right, we've agreed to hear your request."

"Oh, perfect!" Though the guild master had likely already expected this response, being generally aware of the Crimson Vow's *modus operandi*, he still seemed relieved to hear Mavis's words. "You are, of course, still within your rights to refuse the job once you've heard the details. However, I would like to avoid that outcome, if we can."

Sure enough, it seemed that it would probably put the guild master in a bind if the Crimson Vow were to refuse this job. Still, he was unable to compel them to agree to anything, which put him in a tough position.

"First, can we ask you one thing?" Mile asked.

"Sure. What's that?"

"Where exactly is the Kingdom of Aubram? Is it far from here?"

"....."

Silence fell throughout the room.

"Mile, you..."

"Mile, that's—how could..."

"Mileeee..."

The three other members of the Crimson Vow were lost for words. Into their silence, the guild master barked, "It's the kingdom right next door!"

"What? Next door? I mean, to the west we've got Brandel, to the southwest the Albarn Empire, and Marlane to the east. And north and south of us is the ocean, right?"

"We share a small border with Aubram to the northeast! It's a narrow kingdom that runs from east to west bordering the northern sea, so it has pretty long international borders, compared to its overall area. To the south, it runs alongside Marlane and Trist, and shares another border to the east as well. They have the ocean to the other side, so if they were ever to be invaded, their capital would probably be surrounded in an instant, thanks to their relatively limited area and lack of an escape route."

"As you can imagine, they make a lot of effort to maintain a good relationship with the countries around them in order to ensure that they'd be able to levy flank support

from their neighbors, should anyone ever show up to attack. Basically, they put a lot of resources into diplomacy. It's doubtful that a country like that would ever be plotting anything suspicious. However..."

"There are these rumors you mentioned—but there's no way that our side could do any overt fact-checking or questioning on the matter because that would have an impact on international relations!"

"Bingo. Glad you all catch on quick," said the guild master, sounding as though the question of the Crimson Vow accepting the job was already settled. Of course, that was likely all part of his plan.

But the Crimson Vow were not green enough to fall for such cheap tricks.

"So, what specifically is the job that you want us to do?"

"We're not taking on any jobs that would have us do anything illegal or wind up kicking off any wars—anything that we could not proudly confess before the Goddess when we die."

Reina and Mavis made their positions clear with a preemptive strike, keen to take the upper hand in the negotiations. That said, experience taught them it was unlikely that they would be asked to do anything particularly corrupt. In any event, the guild master could see right through their beginners' gambits. However, he had the grace and maturity to at least respond to them appropriately.

"I understand that. This may be an assignment from the Crown, but the guild would never broker a job that would require anything illicit or dishonest. Accepting only legitimate jobs is one of our most basic tenets. I would never do anything that would cause people to lose faith in the guild—if I did, I would be ousted and... Well, at best, they'd have my head. At worst? The gallows."

"Ah ha... Not really much difference in those, though, uh..."

Mavis let out a dry laugh, uncertain if the guild master was speaking in jest or in earnest.

At any rate, the requisite conversational tug of war was over. Now, all that was left was...

"All right. I guess we'll hear you out."

...the real conversation.

\* \* \*

According to the guild master, it seemed that some troubles had begun to arise within the neighboring Kingdom of Aubram. It was not a matter of an uprising or rebellion or any other obvious trouble, but instead, a series of lesser events: some smaller village abruptly falling to ruin, a sudden uptick in attacks from monsters, and more frequent losses of merchant caravans.

Taken individually, none of these issues was particularly bizarre. An influx of monsters wiping out a single village, or even a monster stampede wiping out several towns or villages, or a large bandit troop rising up and attacking more caravans were all issues that often arose in this world.

So then, what made these rumors so strange?

Were the kingdom truly in trouble, there would have been an official alert put out to the surrounding lands or perhaps a formal appeal for aid. For Aubram to refrain from doing so meant that they were not truly in dire straits, or at least not dire enough that it would warrant notifying others. Or else, they did not *want* to notify others...

Understandably, beseeching other nations for aid would put them greatly in debt and was generally an embarrassment for a country—it was no wonder that such things were generally thought of as a last resort. Tils, likewise, would never be heavy-handed in asking allies for their assistance. However...

"If there was really something going on, wouldn't our spies be able to get information about it? It's not like this is some far-off place—Aubram is right next door. So there's no telling what effects any trouble might have on this kingdom..." said Mile.

She was, in fact, correct. Despite the rumors, the higher-ups could make no official moves, and the spies could not easily obtain any information. And yet, it was too worrying a situation to leave alone... Which was how it came to be that the best course of action was to strike out and attempt to collect information from the common people, at the sites that were the actual sources of these rumors. Quietly, under the radar, so that the officials of Aubram would not notice...

"And wait—what about the spies that are already embedded in Aubram?"

No matter how good one's relationship might be with a neighboring country, there was no forgoing the employment of spies. You never knew when a government would be overthrown and replaced with some antagonistic regime. Particularly in this world, it was not uncommon for regimes of uncertain legitimacy, such as those established by rebelling or usurpation, to redirect the discontent of the people by making enemies of foreigners, uniting the kingdom against a common enemy by starting a war shortly after taking power. It could actually be quite an effective way of crushing one's political opponents amid the chaos.

"Apparently they've heard that such and such village was destroyed, or such and such caravan was wiped out, but it's unclear how any of it lines up."

"Ah... Can you tell us more about these allegedly strange rumors? Hearing about a village or caravan getting destroyed is just a report of some damages. There's nothing strange about that, is there?"

"That's what the job is about—confirming that's the case," said the guild master.

"*What the heck does that mean?*" the members of the Crimson Vow wondered.

Indeed, finding out someone's secrets was one thing, but it was impossible to learn something that even *they* did not know. As such, it would be impossible to figure out what was happening in Aubram if even the people there didn't understand it—especially working with just a few spies who had to remain discreet.

"Hmm... This is pretty different from that other job."

"I mean, that's a good thing. If we just kept repeating the plot, there'd probably be some complaints," Mile said, smiling mysteriously.

"From whom?" Mavis asked, but her question went ignored.

Truthfully, Mile had been considering writing a series about hunters based on the Crimson Vow's adventures. She had been keeping a diary in preparation, should she find herself strapped for plots in the future. She had been a little concerned that it wouldn't go over well if she kept writing the same stories, so she was a bit relieved to hear that even though this job would contain similar elements to those introduced in the Empire arc, at least the actual details would be different.

*Still, I can't let my guard down; I'm sure there are readers who will start complaining by the time they've only read the introduction. Listen, guys, you know that there are always going to be callbacks and explanations of any foreshadowing. The answers to the riddles are going to appear in the next volume, so don't go asking me about what's going on or what's going to happen next! Seriously, who asks an author to spoil their own work?! Please just have a little patience!*

"Mile, you okay? You're making a really weird face..."

"I'm fine!"

"....."

"S-so anyway, what you want is for us to travel through the Kingdom of Aubram and report anything of note we pick up on?" Reina redirected the conversation to the matter at hand, getting the sense that it was best not to disturb Mile right now.

"Y-yeah, that's right. Of course, it's not a big deal if you all don't find anything. There are plenty of official spies—well, in as much as a spy can be 'official'—as well as merchants that have the backing of the Crown, diplomats, and other parties. Ultimately, your job is sort of just to see if anything unexpected pops up. It's, uh, how should I put this? They aren't really expecting much out of you? Er, no, that's not it. You're... expendable? Wait, no! Forget what I said! Er, uh..."

The guild master suddenly seemed frantic, aware he had talked himself into a corner.

"I believe what you're trying to say is, don't hurt yourselves out there..."

"Y-yes! G-good!"

The guild master accepted Mavis's life raft, with relief. The Crimson Vow seemed to have more or less grasped the gist of the situation.

"To be honest, there was an individual who strongly recommended that you girls be the ones to take this job."

"Knew it..." they sighed.

Based on the reports from their previous job, the guild master seemed to have some idea of who it was that had given the Crimson Vow their endorsement. Seemingly lost

for words, he simply looked at them with the expression of a man who was somewhat exhausted by the matter at hand.

\* \* \*

"Well, we took the job... under the condition that we get a fifty percent increase in contribution points."

"We had to, didn't we? Since it's not the guild who'll be funding our pay and they won't shorten our required service years, the guild master can't do anything about our compensation. Plus, I mean, interesting jobs have been pretty sparse lately. We've kind of been getting into a rut..."

"We get to double dip on pay, earn extra contribution points, and both the guild and the kingdom's upper brass will be in our debt. Not bad at all!"

"Plus, the countdown clock keeps on ticking toward the day when we're done working off our tuition and board for the Prep School."

"So the only real trouble here is..."

\* \* \*

"How are you leaving on your second training journey this soon?!?! You just got back from the first one! *Then*, you were gone for ages on that escort mission in the Empire, and after *that* you were gone for days on other jobs, like going to that elf village or whatever... Try and have a bit more self-awareness as guests of this establishment! What are we supposed to do if you're never here to heat water for the baths and attract more guests?!" Lenny roared, genuinely enraged.

"Um, I really have no idea what it is you're saying, Lenny..." Mile muttered, bewildered.

"Don't worry, Mile, neither do I!" added Reina.

"Nor do I," noted Pauline.

"Ah ha ha..." Mavis laughed dryly.

"I did kind of expect this reaction," Reina allowed.

“I suppose this is ‘within the hypothesized range,’ as Mile would put it.”

“Exactly how much service are *guests* of an inn supposed to owe the inn?”

“Ga ha ha...”

\* \* \*

“Okay, we’re heading out!”

After successfully shaking off Lenny, the Crimson Vow departed the capital.

Until they reached the national border, they would be traveling by the capital’s Arrow Express carriage service. (The Arrow Express was equivalent to the bullet express trains in Japan, but as they did not have the word “bullet,” an arrow was the next closest way of denoting something that was swift and nonstop.)

If Mile were on her own, it would have been faster for her to run, but even if most of their luggage was in her “storage” space, the rest of the party wasn’t quite as speedy. Slowing their pace to accommodate Pauline, for example, would cause quite a delay, given the length of the journey. Thus, they decided to take a nice, speedy carriage to their destination. If they had decided to proceed on foot, they could have easily accepted jobs within Tils along the road, but part of their assignment had been to waste as little time outside of the target area as possible, so they quickly decided on this plan of action.

“A maiden’s time is precious, after all. Not a moment of it should be wasted!”

“Plus, we can put the carriage fare on our tab as a job expense. I’m already annoyed they are not letting us charge our room and board costs...”

“I mean, I guess we can’t really argue. Their argument is that we’d be paying for room and board even if we weren’t on the job, and as such, they can’t recognize that as an added expense. At least he acknowledged that if we just so *happen* to go to a pub to gather intel, no one could stop us from writing in some entertainment costs. Even you didn’t have anything to say to that, Pauline,” Mavis pointed out.

“Guh...” Pauline gritted her teeth, unable to argue.

This information about expenses had come out in the Crimson Vow’s conversation

with a representative of their employer—clearly one of *those* people.

Petty complaints aside, they had landed a pretty great deal. The fact that they got to bill anything to their employer was pretty great—although, it would have been nice if they had agreed to foot the bill for all of the Crimson Vow's meals.

"Even so, this is gonna be a pretty good haul," Mile said.

Pauline still did not seem convinced. They had already been offered high enough pay that they shouldn't need to sweat the details, so why was she still quibbling so much over the money part of things?

It was simply because she liked to save money. Nothing more and nothing less.

Humans tend to find fulfillment and satisfaction in their work. For artisans, it's their skills and their products; for farmers, the yield of their crops; and for teachers, the growth of their students.

So then, what of merchants?

Indeed, a merchant enjoys success via the accumulation of wealth. It is their reason for working, their reason for living. That accumulation is all the more joyful when one has a goal in mind that can only be achieved with increased funds.

If we praise a martial artist for seeking strength, and a scholar for pursuing knowledge, then there's no reason a merchant pursuing wealth shouldn't be praised as well!

"Don't you all agree?!"

"I mean, no need to be so insistent, Pauline..."

"You all never say anything when Mavis wants to improve her skill as a swordfighter! So, why do you all always bad-mouth money or act like I'm some kind of miser just because I want to save money and strengthen my financial power as a merchant?! Sounds unfair to me!"

"Ah, no, that's..."

"Mile, say something! Mavis is no match for her!"

“Er, no, I mean, why don’t you help her, Reina?”

“No way!”

Nowhere among their party was Mavis’s savior when she needed them...

\* \* \*

“We’re finally here!”

“So this is the border town, huh?”

The Crimson Vow disembarked in a border town just at the edge of the kingdom. Their investigations would begin once they crossed the border officially. As soon as they got out of the carriage, Mile insisted that she felt a tangible *something* coming from the other side of the border—a truth that the others accepted without question.

There were other passengers who disembarked from the carriage in the same spot, as well as other travelers getting on, so the Crimson Vow did not stand out in particular. To any observer, they would look like nothing more than your average travelers.

“I don’t see anything strange here,” Reina observed.

“Well, we still haven’t left our home turf yet. Plus, if things were bad enough that you could tell at a glance, things would already be way past the point where it would be useful to hire us,” Pauline replied soberly.

“Er... W-well, I guess that’s true...” Reina stammered.

Mavis and Mile could only feel a little bad for her. Pauline hadn’t meant to shut her down so aggressively; it was just that she didn’t hold back in stating what she thought was obvious. Perhaps she was still a bit miffed about having to cover their own room and board...

“Anyway, we’ll spend the night here, and tomorrow night, we’ll sleep in the border town on Aubram’s side!”

“All right!” the hunters agreed.

As both towns were near the border, they would not have to journey far between them.

However, it was important to this investigation to compare both towns—or rather confirm if there was, indeed, any difference in the atmospheres between them.

The members of the Crimson Vow were no dummies. When it was time to get down to brass tacks, they could come up with a pretty decent plan.

\* \* \*

Morning, two days later...

"So, there really wasn't anything different around here, was there?"

The Crimson Vow had stayed overnight the evening after they crossed the border but didn't learn much of anything. This was as they had expected. They had begun their inquiries here for the sake of a thorough investigation and leaving no stone unturned.

"Nope. On to the real work then!"

The Kingdom of Aubram was a narrow territory running from east to west. If one were to proceed straight ahead after entering from Marlane or Trist, you would quickly end up butting into the sea to the north. However, when entering from Tils at the west end, one could travel in a straight line for quite a distance without running into the eastern border.

Given this geography, the members of the Crimson Vow thought it best to head directly eastward from the capital, not diverging too much from this path. This made things much easier for the party, since it meant they could stick largely to the main highway that ran through the central vein of the country—without having to canvas every corner of the land in their search. Of course, they would still make detours onto the back roads and stop in at more remote villages now and then. And, naturally, they would also be cutting through the forests and mountains for some good old hunting and gathering.

This was supposed to look like a training journey after all, and it was just as necessary to make investigations into places off the beaten path...

\* \* \*

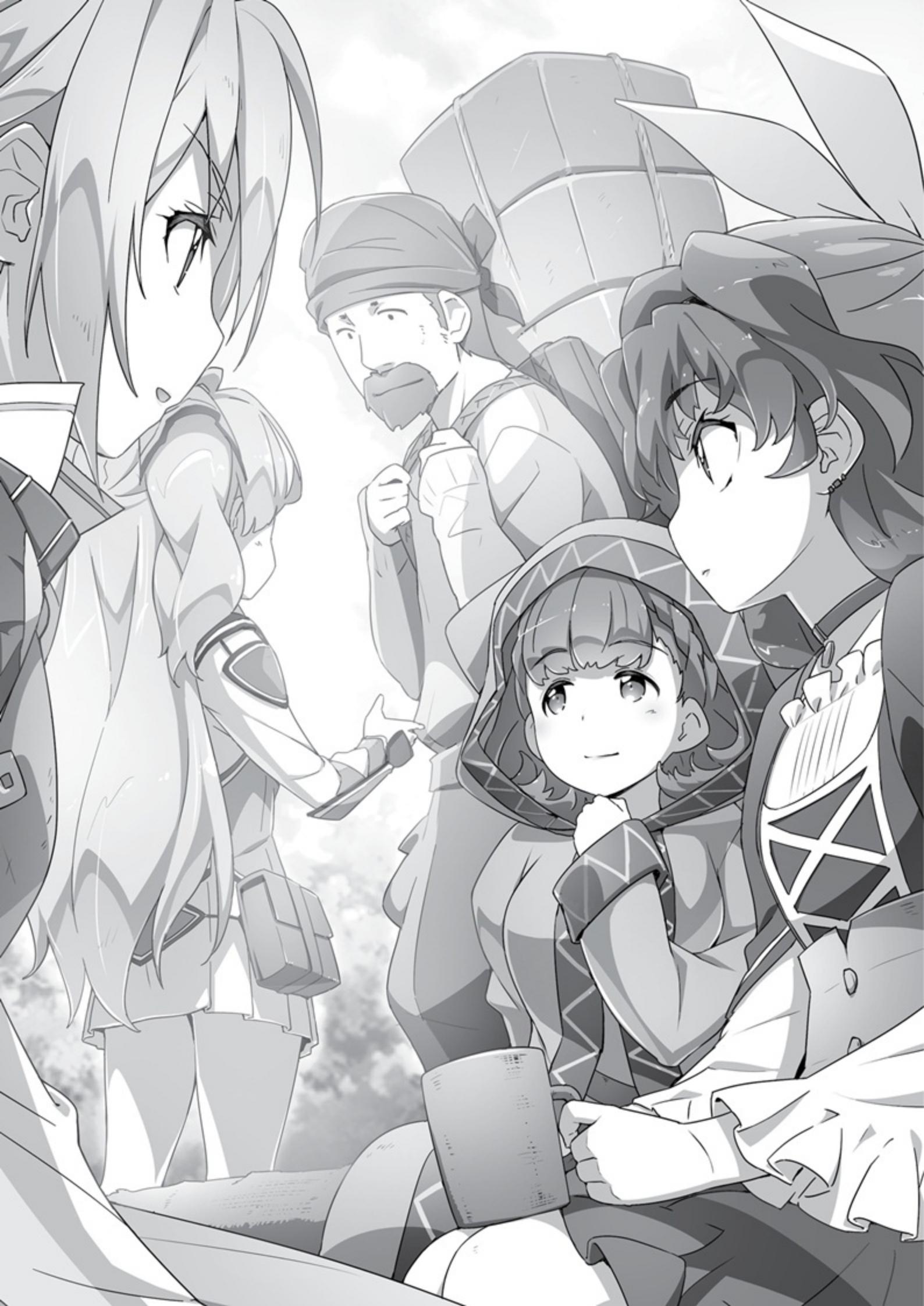
"Oh, are you little ladies rookie hunters?" asked a peddler as he approached from the opposite direction. The Crimson Vow were preparing lunch in one of the open areas

along the side of the highway, the sort of space that travelers and merchants usually used for overnighting. The man looked to be around forty, and though—as someone who carried his wares on his back—he was clearly sturdy in build, he also had a gentle countenance.

Young ladies or not, there were four members of the Crimson Vow, and they were all clearly armed, so it stood to reason that a man on his own who was stopping to speak to them likely had no untoward ulterior motives. With this in mind, the party decided that this was as good a time as any for them to try “casually exchanging information with a fellow passing traveler.”

It was almost never a mistake to take advantage of the opportunity to chat with someone you met on the road like this.

Though it might result in only small talk, it was not uncommon for these conversations to contain information that could save one’s life—such as that a landslide had buried a mountain road or a heavy rain washed out a bridge so that one had to take a detour, or that bandits were showing up and it was best to change routes. It was only customary to share whatever food and wine you had on hand in exchange for such valuable information. And it actually was considered boorish to give money as a thanks in such a case. The idea was that travelers helped each other out with no expectation of earning coin in exchange—and there were good reasons for these customs.



Mile dove right in, “We just got here from Tils. Anything strange going on lately around here?”

Of course, just because the man was coming from the direction of the capital did not mean that he had actually come from the capital. Wandering peddlers, who carried all their wares on their backs, often operated in a small territory, which meant they were not typically the most well informed about events in a kingdom at large. If obtaining information were this easy, no one would ever lift a finger to do the hard work of gathering intel. Still, Mile figured, it couldn’t hurt to ask.

“Actually, there has been.”

“*Wait, really?!?!*”

“Miley, you’re moving way too fast!”

“Mile, you’ve really gotta pace yourself...”

“Mile, have some self-restraint!”

“Wait, what? Did I do something wrong?”

Mile was baffled at how everyone was treating her.

Mile, not seeing the problem, ignored her fellow party members and continued her conversation with the peddler.

“So,” she said, “what were those strange occurrences?”

“Well, uh, there seems to be a lot of commotion around the kingdom lately...” he began. “There haven’t been any uprisings or any rumors about us going to war with another country or anything like that, but the atmosphere has just been kind of heavy. Some really bad vibes, I guess you would say. There’ve been more hunters than usual messing up the jobs they take and having to take out loans to cover their breach-of-contract fees so they don’t end up in the red. That would be bad enough, but there have also been a number of folks who’ve ended up having to retire due to injuries. Things really haven’t been going well for the hunters, which obviously has an impact on the guild.”

"And then, when business is bad among hunters, it also suffers at the bars and inns and red-light districts. And when *that* happens, the folks who work there end up being a little tighter with their purse strings, too, so it has an effect on a lot of different industries. Hunters tend to have a lot more money than most to blow at the inns and pubs and restaurants and such, after all..."

This made sense to Mile when she thought back to what she had heard in her previous life about towns with US military and JSDF bases. Those bases were full of single people who made good wages and had all their necessities provided for them on base, so they had tons of disposable income.

"In a town where one hundred bars just barely manage to stay in the black, how many of them do you suppose would fold if sales at all of them suddenly dropped by twenty percent?" the man asked in a tone that implied he already knew what the girls might answer.

"How should *we* know?!" asked Pauline. The man looked taken aback. Apparently, that was *not* the reply he had expected. "There's no way you could answer that question without knowing their profit margins, fixed expenses, and annual sales revenue."

"Wh...?"

Reina piped up, "Putting aside whether a shop's earnings have fallen completely to zero or if they still have any revenue, the percent loss also depends on the scope and industry of that business. Plus, whether the business can withstand that decline in sales depends on whether it owns or rents its premises. There's just way too many factors at play for us to calculate..."

The merchant looked utterly taken aback.

"C'mon you two, don't give him a hard time. The polite response here would be to confidently say, 'Twenty of them!'" said Mile, landing the finishing blow.

The man was shocked speechless, but Mavis could only offer him a rueful smile. Unfortunately for him, the Crimson Vow were not interested in playing ignorant for the sake of polite conversation.

In truth, the man had hoped to take this opportunity to educate a group of rookie hunters who knew nothing of commerce—so though he was stunned at their unexpected replies, he did have some respect for the knowledge these young girls had

displayed.

"W-well yes, that's correct... but that was just a hypothetical for the sake of explanation, so like the little miss here said, just play along for a moment," the merchant said pitifully, pointing at Mile. The members of the Crimson Vow suddenly looked a bit guilty, realizing just how aggressive they had been.

Finally, Mile softly spoke. "One hundred of them...?"

Obviously, answering "Twenty of them!" at this point would be too absurd, even for her.

"That's right, all hundred." His resolve renewed, the merchant continued. "If sales at every shop dropped twenty percent, it would put all of them into the red, and they would all fold... Of course, in reality, once about half of those shops folded, the places that had dug in their heels would probably get a new influx of customers, but let's just keep working under the original assumption for a minute. Even if the shops did survive, their customers still have less spending money, which means they make less money per customer. Considering they'd already be in the red, it's not a great prognosis."

Two of the members of the Crimson Vow were merchant's daughters, and two of them were nobles. And furthermore, one had knowledge from another world. In short, there was no one in the party who would not understand such logic.

"So I'm guessing things would get pretty gloomy around town..."

Pauline and the others nodded at this, faces glum. This was a tale that the merchants' daughters felt down to their cores—and it was no happier a story for the noble's daughter, who relied on the tax money collected from those merchants...

"Not just that. Decreasing numbers of hunters and more failed jobs means more failed monster exterminations in the countryside or simply not enough people to take these sorts of tasks. Merchant caravans can't hire enough guards and end up being forced to hire guys who aren't actually up to the task..."

"Ah..."

It was a vicious cycle. To dismantle the enormous well-oiled machine known as the economy did not require sabotaging every single little part. If the smallest bit of grain

got caught in the gears, or the lubricating oils ran dry, the whole thing could grind to a halt and collapse in an instant.

"Anyway, that's pretty much what's up. I'm guessin' you girls are out here on some job? Or is this a training journey? If you take on any jobs, take care. There are a lot more risk factors than usual right now. If you stop in at any guild branches that are backed up on jobs and need help, they might push whatever old job off on you. Make sure you take into account the difficulty and danger before you accept anything, all right?"

"....."

After what had turned out to be a particularly productive conversation, Mile treated the kindly peddler to a warm lunch and a bottle of spirits she had stored in her inventory as thanks. She impressed upon him that he should only drink it *after* he had set up camp for the night, finished his dinner, and secured his surroundings, but regardless, the peddler was thrilled at this unexpected gift, which was more than a fair reward for the information he had given them. The man thanked them profusely and repeatedly, and then took his leave.

"...So, everyone, thoughts?" asked Mavis, once he was gone.

"Hmm. Well, that is a pretty strong candidate for a 'strange rumor'..." said Pauline.

"But is it enough to warrant a foreign investigation?" Reina wondered.

Mile only sat deep in thought, until...

"The real question here is why all those hunters have been so unlucky. I think we're all aware of certain circumstances that might impact a large number of hunters' ability to succeed..."

"Huh?"

The other three did not know what to make of Mile's words, so she continued.

"Suppose some hunters encountered the monsters they were sent out to exterminate, only to find that for some reason, the monsters were *one level stronger* than they ought to be..."

"Ah..."

Indeed, the four of them *were* aware of these circumstances.

"Abnormally strong orcs..."

"Unusually strong ogres..."

"The dwarven village!"

Yes, Mile was thinking of the aberrant monsters that had seemingly been appearing from the mysterious rifts. If more of such rifts had started appearing, and more monsters were being spawned from them...

If someone went out to fight some orcs and encountered super orcs as strong as ogres...

If someone went out to fight ogres and found a horde with the strength of high ogres...

It would be like a reenactment of the incident at the dwarven village, resulting in nothing but destruction.

"But would *that* be enough to get us to this point?" Mavis still did not seem to buy it. "In the case of the dwarven village, they were basically half-independent and pretty far away from any human villages. It only got as far as it did because they let their pride keep them from asking for any help or sharing any information about what was happening. If stronger than usual monsters appeared around any normal human village, word would spread immediately, and either the guild or the army would be dispatched to deal with it."

"I suppose you're right... Also, I'm sure that the intel we shared about those new monster types in our reports has already gone to the guild branches in all neighboring countries by now. Aubram is right next to Marlane, and they're on friendly terms. Plus, our report wouldn't have only been the talk of the guild; it would've made it up to the royals as well. Though it still hasn't really been addressed, which means..."

"Yep. I think we're looking at four possibilities: One, they think they can't trust the reports, and so they've ignored them. Two, they haven't yet put together how the information in the report is connected to what they're seeing here in Aubram. Three, they've put the pieces together, but they're intentionally ignoring the problem. Or four,

they're perfectly aware of the whole situation, but they are too distracted by other matters to do something about it."

"....."

The other three members of the Crimson Vow were silent. Strange as Mile could be, this was clearly a situation where only she could be trusted to grasp the full scope of possibilities. The conversation paused as the three other members of the party considered the various options Mile had outlined.

"I suppose that even though it seems obvious to people like us, who were there at the scene of the incident and fought those creatures directly, it's likely that the hunters here are not wont to take a report from some green, young hunters in another country all that seriously," said Reina. "So, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're ignoring the reports out of any sort of malice. Combine that with the fact that saying that you failed a job because the enemies were stronger than usual makes you look like an F-rank newbie, and most people in their right mind would never..."

"Yeah. I can't really blame them, either. The idea didn't even occur to us until Mile said something about it," Pauline agreed.

"And anyway, this is just Mile's theory. There's still a possibility that there's some completely different cause for this," Mavis added.

All three of them felt that what Mile suggested was *possible*, but it was not certain. They had merely added one possible explanation to the list... One of many, *many* possibilities.

"Well, we've only just crossed the border. If we solve the whole thing on our first day, we won't be earning our pay!" said Mile.

"Ah ha ha, that's true!" Mavis laughed.

Indeed, this sham training journey had only just begun.

"And so, from there on, our journey would continue..."

Reina, Pauline, and Mavis all spoke in unison. "*Is this the last episode?!?!*"

Mile grinned. *Ah yes, I've trained them well...*

\* \* \*

"It's been four days since we talked to that merchant, but..."

"We haven't gotten anywhere at all!"

"Are you telling me that the first bit of information we got in this country—"

"—turned out to be the best?"

The members of the Crimson Vow sat around their dinners at their campsite one evening, looking weary and crestfallen. Indeed, they had spent the past four days speaking to every single traveler they encountered at the open-air campsites along the highway, every owner and patron of various eateries in the towns where they stopped, every clerk and fellow guest at the inns, all of the guild employees and other hunters, and so on and so forth, trying to learn everything they could. They didn't have any trouble getting people to talk to them. There were few who would not enjoy a conversation with a group of such lovely young ladies. Plus, though they were thorough in their investigations, they were traveling around enough to avoid raising suspicions in any particular place. The actual work of the investigation was progressing smoothly. It was very obvious that this—their ability to get people to talk freely and without reservations—was one of the reasons that the Crimson Vow had been asked to do this job.

The problem, of course, was that there was not a single useful piece of information among everything they had gathered.

"It's only because we're the sort of people you can tell anything to that we even got this much..."

"Normal spies—grown men—would never be able to get useful intel this easily..." said Mavis.

"Well, I mean," Pauline replied, "if a handsome male spy were to try getting information from ladies..."

"Pauline, what are you looking at *me* for?!"

Even the mild-mannered Mavis was capable of showing a scowl now and then—a fact of which Mile and Reina were now more thoroughly aware.

"At least it seems like the first thing we learned seems to have been generally corroborated—quite a few people we've talked to have mentioned that more hunters than usual have been dying on the job."

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure the guild staff don't want rumors to get out, but the local hunters we treated to drinks at the pubs—you know, as 'part of the investigation'—seemed to be pretty convinced that something wasn't right there. And that's meaningful, even if we can't assume the actual numbers they gave us are correct."

"But even after we got them drunk and dragged that out of them, no one had anything to say about stronger than usual ogres or something like that."

It was possible that hunters' pride was causing issues here—no one would want to admit to being nearly overpowered by a monster they should have been able to defeat.

At this point, Mavis was starting to feel a bit guilty about eating free food on their employer's dime, going out of her way to emphasize that they had only gone to the pubs "for work's sake." On the other hand, Reina and Mile were plenty happy to gorge themselves specifically because the bill *wasn't* coming out of their own pockets...

"Oh, I've got it! Next town we're in, we should ask around at the processing shed at the guildhall. No matter how strong these monsters are, there's no way that people haven't managed to kill *any* of them, right? So, if we ask about the felled monsters that have been brought in to sell for parts..."

"Good idea! If there have been any unusual specimens, those guys would know right away. The old guy who processed the monsters we killed at the dwarven village could tell from one look that they were special, based on their size and the texture of the muscles and the toughness of the skin. He was super worked up about it. Remember, he kept saying, 'This isn't fat! Their muscles are practically bulging out of their skin!' Though I guess you would have to touch their skin to know for sure how tough it was... Anyway, I think that's a good plan!"

The other members of the party readily agreed. "Let's do it!"

\* \* \*

"Normal orcs."

"Normal orcs, normal kobolds, normal jackalopes..."

Indeed, as Reina and Pauline said, all of the monsters they had seen were completely normal specimens, without a single aberration.

"So, whaddya think? Learn anythin' about whatever you were curious about?" asked a young guild employee, who had been happy to accept the girls' request to come and check out the processing shed.

"Ah, yes. We didn't see any evidence of the thing that we were worried about, but at least being able to confirm that there were no cases is a big help. Thank you!" Mile said.

The others bowed their heads and thanked the man as well. It was only polite, given that he had taken time out of his busy schedule to help these outsiders with their seemingly nonsensical request. They wanted to assure him that this favor had not been performed in vain... even if they could not tell him *exactly* what it was that they were after.

In truth, this young male guild employee hadn't exactly been acting only out of the goodness of his heart. In fact, it was unlikely he would have taken the time out of his day to show a group to the storehouse and magically controlled cold room, if they had not been cute girls...

\* \* \*

"So there weren't any abnormal ones..."

"I guess we miscalculated, huh?"

"Hmm..."

Everyone thought long and hard, but at this point, they could think all day and come up with nothing. They still had far too little information to come to any solid conclusions.

"Well, I mean, we never assumed this would be a job that would be finished easily. There's no set deadline, so let's just bide our time," said Mile. "For now, we take other jobs, which will get us money and contribution points so that we'll be able to take out promotion exams as soon as the minimum time has passed..."

"Mile," Pauline interrupted, "I definitely agree with you on the money front, but we

already have more than enough contribution points for promotion.”

“Wha...?”

“Well, obviously. Between catching the wyvern, rescuing the investigation team, driving out bandits, keeping the peace with the beastfolk and elder dragons, and everything else... how much more than that do you think a normal C-rank hunter would have to do just to rise to a B-rank? If all that we’ve already done wouldn’t be enough to qualify us for the B-rank exams then *no one* would ever get to be a B-rank!” Reina shouted.

“Th-that’s true...” Mile couldn’t help but agree.

To be clear, it wasn’t a matter of being immediately promoted to B-rank, but rather, of qualifying for the promotion exam, which they would need to pass in order to move up. Still, there was simply no way that the Crimson Vow, after completing so many jobs with high degrees of difficulty—and thus, high numbers of achievement points—would not have had the requisite amount of points.

“By that token,” Pauline pointed out, “for as much as Reina and Mavis keep insisting that we take jobs that will get us more points so that we can rise to A-rank faster, the only thing holding us back is actually just waiting out our minimum required time as C-ranks. So, from here on out, the only thing we need to focus on are the jobs that’ll make us the most money!”

“Of course that would be your spin on this!” Reina interjected. However, it was true that there was little point in them racking up more points at this juncture. In order for them to graduate from B-ranks to A-ranks, they would need experience as B-rank hunters, meaning that racking up any excess of points right now would be futile.

It was true that the number of points they had acquired *would* be taken into account at the time of their promotion exams, but Reina and Mavis, at least, were not interested in relying on promotion via such cheap tricks. They wished to prove themselves at the exam, based on their abilities alone. Pauline, however, did not share this hesitation, and Mile had no opinions on the matter—or rather, Mile had never set out with the intention of being promoted in the first place. As long as she could live as a normal, C-rank hunter, not standing out, earning just enough money to one day settle down with someone, she would be more than happy.

"I mean, I'm pretty much fine with Pauline's plan," said Reina.

"But I want to get stronger! If I can't get strong enough to be an A-rank swordswoman, and one day become a knight, then what's the point?!" Mavis frantically cut in.

Just because a job was lucrative did not necessarily mean that it would involve fighting strong monsters or enemies. Therefore, while taking only jobs that would pay well but offer little combat experience—such as gathering rare items or serving as part of a ceremonial guard that would probably see no actual combat—would be perfectly fine with Pauline (who just wanted to earn money), Reina (who would be happy with an A-rank as long as she proved herself at the exams), and Mile (who, in contrast with everyone else, would rather remain as a C-rank), Mavis was bound not to be quite so pleased with this.

"Well, we can just play it by ear... And anyway, we never actually pick jobs based on how many points we'll get or how much money we'll make. What's most important is..." started Mile, pausing to allow the others to reply in unison:

*"Whether or not it's fun!!!"*

"Ah..."

"What's up?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing," Mile muttered, trying to throw Reina off her scent. It was just that she had been thinking...

*The nanos did say they would tell me if another dimensional rift had opened. They can't do anything outside of their operating instructions without commands, so they require a request from me to go ahead with any repairs... They did say that I could just issue a standing order so that they could do repairs without having to get direct orders from me each and every time, but I had to refuse. Instead, I told them to make sure they reported any occurrences of a rift to me—I felt like they would try and hide things from me if I didn't. However, given that I haven't gotten any such reports... Hmm...*

Mile briefly considered checking in with the nanomachines themselves, but she was loath to rely too much on them. It would be another matter if her own life or that of the people around her depended on their involvement, but this was not the case here.

Plus, it was not as though the nanomachines would ever lie to or betray her... Though they could always give her incomplete information, or none at all...

Still, it was unlikely that they would neglect to tell her that a dimensional rift was opening—especially when they had been so frantic about it before. And it seemed equally unlikely that they could have repaired one without her knowledge.

*I guess I just miscalculated,* Mile finally concluded, her shoulders slumping in disappointment.

\* \* \*

“So, we’re already about halfway to the capital, but...”

“There hasn’t been anything!”

“Nothing at all...”

It was true. Just as Reina and Pauline said, they had found nothing.

The party had taken on a number of jobs at the guild branches they passed by, but they had all been completely routine. Presently, the members of the Crimson Vow were marching through the forest, in the midst of some unspecified dailies they had taken because they would allow them a fair bit of freedom for their investigation.

In terms of monsters, they were primarily after orcs. The actual extermination fee for orcs was always the same, but the Crimson Vow could sell the meat for a decent price... Obviously, draconic monsters or other rare creatures would be much more profitable, but there was no way that such beings would be traipsing about in the vicinity of a town like this.

Most normal parties had the skill to take down an orc like it was nothing, but there was a limit to what they could carry back to town with them. Trying to lug several two-to three-hundred-kilogram orcs on their back would make the weight of the weapons, armor, rations, camping gear, and other equipment all the more evident. Thus, hunting orcs down for dailies and to sell as parts was a far more appealing task for the Crimson Vow than it would be for others. Indeed, orcs were the most profitable prey for the Crimson Vow, who could carry a practically infinite number home with them thanks to Mile’s “storage.”

Then, there was the fact that hunting orcs gave them more flexibility than taking on a standard job—a specific request made by an individual and advertised through the guild. Doing a standard job, which had a time limit or a minimum requisite, was a bit of a burden when they had other goals in mind also. Even if it was a job that should have been easy for the Crimson Vow, there was nothing they could do if they did not encounter their quarry or meet their target. Even with Mile’s search magic it was impossible to find something that was not there to begin with....

*Five goblins, huh?*

Mile’s search magic picked up on a group of goblins straight ahead of them, but she said nothing. It would be bad for the others if she warned them about every little thing ahead of time. None of the other members of the party would disagree with her; indeed, they all understood Mile’s way of thinking. They realized the dangers of relying too much on their friend, and so they accepted that she would not relay her search results to them except when strictly necessary due to the nature of a job or an instance of real danger. Thus, it was instead Mavis, who was typically the first to spot things, who cried, “Goblins! Four of them, no, five? Huh? On your guards!”

There was no need for the Crimson Vow—of all parties—to be particularly worked up about the likes of goblins. So then, what could explain Mavis’s tone?

“Target: Five goblins at 1 o’clock, thirty meters ahead. Looks like we might have some abnormals!”

Now this was an unexpected development. The hunters exchanged looks of shock. That said, even an aberrant goblin was nothing to worry about. A worthy opponent, like an ogre, at double the usual strength might have been impressive, but a small fry pumped up two-fold was still a small fry. So, they approached the goblins more or less as normal, and the moment the monsters noticed them, they were almost instantly wiped out.

“Hmm...”

Upon investigating the felled goblins, they found one abnormal specimen and four standard ones.

“Mavis, that was amazing! There was only one aberrant goblin in there, but you picked

up on it right away!" Mile praised.

"Ah ha ha, well, I mean, I guess my eyes are pretty good..." Mavis said bashfully.

It also helped that Mavis was the tallest member of the Crimson Vow and, as a result, had the longest line of sight. Plus, she was usually at the head of the line as the vanguard. For all these reasons, she was, besides Mile, always the first to spot incoming enemies.

"So, the issue here is..." Reina started.

"Yep, the way they were moving. They were clearly moving in a pattern with the abnormal one as their leader."

As Pauline observed, the goblins had been fairly methodical in their movements, which in itself was not remarkable. Even wolves and wild dogs moved in packs at their leaders' commands. There was nothing at all strange about goblins, which were closer in nature to humans than dogs, to be operating in this manner. At first glance, this group's movements had been completely ordinary. So then, why was the Crimson Vow so suspicious?

"Why would a weird goblin that probably came wandering into this world through a rift be commanding a group of normal goblins born here?" Mile wondered. It was a mysterious question indeed.

*Lombrosoooo...* she muttered internally, heart heavy with the knowledge that, as usual, there was not a single person around who would get her joke.

\* \* \*

Was it possible the nanomachines had failed to follow Mile's instructions? Though she didn't want to rely on them for every little thing, she also didn't want them to betray her.

Once everyone had retired for the night, Mile set about on a silent inquiry.

*Seriously, though, what's this all about?!* she asked the nanomachines.

THERE'S BEEN A MISUNDERSTANDING! WE WOULD NEVER LIE TO ANY OF OUR USERS! WE WOULD NEVER HAVE ANY REASON TO DO SO IN THE FIRST PLACE!

*Hmm...*

When she thought about it, this only made sense. In essence, the nanomachines were hardly more than slightly advanced tools, operating by the command of their creators, the so-called Gods. They had no ambitions nor any desire for money or other rewards. They had no reason to go out of their way to deceive or betray Mile, who had the highest authorization level on this planet at present.

*I'm sure they thought the same about Skynet and HAL 9000. And the Brain. Gaizok. Kyron-5. The Cylons. Braiking Boss... No. Wait wait wait waitwaitwait!* Mile shook her head as a number of ominous names began to drift through her mind.

*State the nature of the emergency.*

As there was nothing medical about this emergency, she had left that particular word out. However, the nanomachines, unaware that she was making a reference, interpreted this command as one of legitimate concern and frantically launched into an explanation.

WE ARE FOLLOWING YOUR ORDERS TO THE LETTER, LADY MILE! THE DIMENSIONAL RIFTS HAVE BEEN COLLAPSING SHORTLY AFTER THEY APPEAR, SO THERE HAS BEEN NO NEED FOR US TO REPAIR THEM NOR EVEN TIME FOR US TO DO SO. THUS, THERE HAS BEEN NO NEED TO SEEK YOUR PERMISSION.

*Ah...*

Mile now recalled her exact instructions, which had been for the nanos to report any rifts to her as they found them, at which point, she could give them the command to make repairs. So then, if the rift should vanish before they could even report it—or if the rift was already closed when they went to make their report...

That did not meet the initial condition of there being a rift that required reporting. At that point, there was no rift anymore. She had also told them, “I doubt they will, but if any more rifts open up around here, let me know right away,” and in that case, “around here” had referred to the area outside of the dwarven village. Rifts appearing in other areas were outside of that particular scope.

*Damn it! I should have been more specific!* Mile screamed internally, but there was really nothing to be done for it. Humans cannot possibly predict every single outcome of their words.

\* \* \*

"So, we've confirmed that there are abnormal specimens, which intermingle with pre-existing individuals and are given a high rank among them," said Mile.

"Right," Mavis replied. "So we think these outsiders are taken in as one of the group and appointed leader of a small unit because of their strength?"

"Even if they're strong, would they really be accepted that easily into the group? Given a high rank even when they're complete outsiders? It'd be one thing if they were so strong they knocked out the previous boss and made the others their subordinates, but being the leader of a small team is kind of a half-assed position..."

"Yeah, it doesn't add up. It's suspicious enough that they wouldn't just be shunned on sight..."

Pauline and Reina couldn't seem to get on board with Mavis's assumption.

"If it *is* true that these individuals have come from some faraway place through a rift in the sky, like Mavis says, would they even be able to communicate with the local monsters? It's one thing with a human who's come from a neighboring land or even somewhere on the same continent, but there's no telling if we'd be able to speak with people who came from those other continents that are supposed to be way off beyond the sea. Even if you tried communicating with gestures, a motion that could mean, 'Come this way!' to some folks here might mean, 'I'm gonna murder you, ya bastard!' to someone else..."

"Hmm..."

The members of the Crimson Vow thought long and hard, but they did not have enough information to come to any conclusions.

"We do have that one abnormal creature in Mile's storage, but that's not enough to present as evidence."

"Yep. It's just a goblin, after all, and it's only one. Plus, we're foreign hunters, who've only recently entered the country..."

"And no one sees us yet as anything other than a bunch of newbie hunters. A country like this, that doesn't have anything like the Prep School, is going to be even more

skeptical. Hunters here just see our school as some kind of rookie factor, some kind of death god academy that just spits out new hunters and sends them off to die the minute they graduate. Of course, it's not like that's true, but I'm sure they don't like the idea of there being a system in place that lets rookies immediately jump to a D- or even C-rank. At any rate, folks here are just gonna treat anyone who graduated from our school like amateurs, C-ranks or not. Normally, hunters' reports should be accepted regardless of their background or origins, but when you bring a problem like this to the table, you have to have some kind of credibility to back it up... especially if you want people to believe something as absurd as what we're saying," Mavis explained.

Reina nodded. "Particularly when it's coming from a party like us, who just look like a bunch of snot-faced newbies. Never mind that we're outsiders. So..."

"So?" asked Mile.

Reina puffed out her chest and said, "We've just gotta get more samples. Including orcs and ogres, stuff that normal hunters could never handle."

\* \* \*

"All right! It looks like there's an abnormal kobold in charge!"

After encountering many groups of monsters, the Crimson Vow finally came upon a unit of fifteen kobolds. As usual, Mavis was the first to spot them. As with the goblins, kobolds weren't particular dangerous. Even if this group were to include some aberrant specimens, only one or two of them would not be too much of a threat. Still, they were useful to the girls as samples.

"Make sure we take down the abnormal one. Doesn't matter if the rest of them run away!"

*"All right!!!"*

With an exuberant battle cry, the Crimson Vow launched into the fray.

The first step was to scatter the small fry and hunt down the abnormal. It would be a pain to have it run off on them as they picked off its fellows, so it was best to take down the one that seemed like the leader first. They could deal with the rest later.

Kobolds didn't earn much of a reward as a daily extermination target anyway, and the only part of them worth selling was their pelts. Because of their cute and fluffy appearance, the practice of actually skinning was rather unpopular, even with hunters working for the guild. The cheap wages they earned were not worth the guilt and emotional anguish... Though, of course, cute or not, kobold swarms could still be a threat to villagers, so they did have to be hunted.

"Wait, where'd the leader's corpse go?" asked Reina, sounding surprised. The other kobolds had been beaten back, but now the area where the abnormal specimen's body should have been was empty.

"It's right... there?"

"Huh?"

"It's... gone..."

It had vanished. The body of the first monster they had felled was nowhere to be found.

The four of them searched.

"Oh! It looks like something was dragged away here!"

There was a long line on the ground trailing away from the site, as though something—likely the corpse of the aberrant monster—had been dragged away from the spot where it should have lain.

"I'm pretty sure monsters don't usually go around carrying the corpses of their fallen brethren back home, except maybe species that are cannibalistic... Plus, they left all the other bodies where they were. Why just the abnormal one?"

"Maybe they believe that if they eat the flesh of a stronger individual they'll absorb its strength? I think that practice, or tendency, rather, sometimes happens in species that value strength above all else, right?"

"Oh! Then maybe that's why there weren't any abnormals in the monsters that got sold to the guild..."

"Because not only are there not many to begin with, but also the other monsters are dragging them away... That might be right. That definitely could have happened if other hunters didn't manage to wipe out the entire groups."

The four seemed to be more or less in agreement about this. Still, something did not sit right with Mile.

"But doesn't that only apply to what's going on around here? If the same thing were happening anywhere else, we wouldn't be hearing about 'something weird going on in Aubram' so much as 'something weird going on in some fief or another.' Doesn't that mean the same thing must be happening in other parts of the country, too?" Mile asked. Of course, she was cheating a little, having based her deductions off of what she had learned from the nanomachines. Still, even knowing what she did would not explain the monsters' actions, nor the source of this ongoing phenomenon. At least they could now surmise part of the reason that things seemed to be so odd in this country at present.

Yet the root cause of all this strangeness was still unclear.

At minimum, they could say that they had gotten their hands on some of the information their employers had hoped for. However, the Crimson Vow were not the sort of party who could call that alone a job well done.

"This still leaves way too many possibilities, and just checking out a few abnormal creatures is pretty weak sleuthing."

"We haven't even gotten to the capital yet. A half-assed report like that wouldn't really count as a job completed..."

"This job is way too juicy to not drag out as long as we can!"

"Ah ha ha, exactly!"

And so, the Crimson Vow continued toward the capital.

\* \* \*

LADY MILE, A RIFT HAS OPENED NEARBY!

"Everyone, this way!"

“Coming!!!”

Reina and the others dutifully complied with Mile’s command, assuming she had picked up something with her search magic. This happened often enough. However, what the four saw as they pelted off of the main road into the forest was...

“Huh?”

A rift in space-time, just like they had witnessed before.

“That’s...”

Monsters were flooding out of it—all aberrations. This much they had expected. Yet...

“What *is* that?”

Standing beside the rift, as though commanding the monsters, was a fantastical, unfamiliar creature.

“It’s tiny, but... is that an iron golem?” asked Reina. However, to Mile’s eyes, it was...

*A robot?*

Surely enough, the Scavengers and golems and even the nanomachines were all types of robots. The so-called gods of prehistorical civilization, it seemed, were more than capable of churning out robot creations. Yet this one was different.

This robot was not humanoid in form, nor was it animalistic, nor even insectoid. It was stranger looking even than the Scavengers, with their six legs and four arms. However, there was something comprehensible to its build, which was obviously designed for stability and operating efficiency.

It was bizarre.

It was so beyond human reckoning that there was no other word to describe its appearance.

*Nanos?*

THAT’S THE ENEMY.

*Yeah, I figured.*

# CHAPTER 103

## INVADERS

*ANYWAY, before that rift closes, let's dispatch an investigation team to the other side.*

APOLOGIES, WE ARE ONLY PERMITTED TO OPERATE ON THIS PLANET, IN THIS DIMENSION. INVADING OTHER DIMENSIONS WOULD BE...

*Seriously?! That sucks!*

OUR APOLOGIES.

*Ugggh! The rift is starting to waver! It's about to close! Wh-what do I do?*

Mile, deep in thought, scrunched up her face, and then suddenly leapt over to Mavis.

*“Hey! Mile, what’re you doing?!”*

She shoved her hand into Mavis’s pocket and removed a full dose of Micros.

Then, she issued her commands: *You’re forbidden to come right back out of this rift! Find another rift and return that way! Until you find that exit, investigate what’s on the other side and gather a report! Good luck, guys!*

She flung the case through the rift at full force.

*I’m counting on you, Micros!*

**HOW COULD YOUUUUU?!**

Mile was assaulted by the cries of the surrounding nanomachines but swiftly covered her ears, preventing her eardrums from vibrating excessively. Clearly, she had learned from prior experiences.

LADY MILE... her personal nanos began, exasperated. IT IS TRUE THAT IF WE WERE TO BE FORCED INTO ANOTHER DIMENSION BY SOME ACT OF GOD, IT WOULD BE

OUR DUTY TO DO OUR UTMOST TO MAKE OUR WAY BACK INTO THIS WORLD, SO THINGS SHOULD PROCEED EXACTLY AS YOU ARE EXPECTING THEM TO. HOWEVER... THERE IS ONE THING WE WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU.

*Sure, what's that?*

## **ARE YOU A MONSTER?!?!**

"Mile, what the heck was that about?" Mavis exclaimed, but Mile held up her right hand to rein her in.

"I'll explain later! Don't worry about the monsters... or rather, the normal monsters. We need to capture that robot—uh, that metal one! Careful not to break—er, kill it! If it proves too dangerous, though, then we'll have to take it out! There'll always be another chance!"

Safety first—the most precious thing was their lives. That was one of the Crimson Vow's tenets. It was fine to fail a job. As long as you were alive, there would always be another chance later. Once you're dead, you're dead.

"Charge!"

At Mile's signal, the four members of the Crimson Vow rushed toward the abnormal monsters surrounding the rift. Normally, it was Mavis who would take charge, with Reina often leading the actual command in battle, but in emergency situations, or times when the circumstances were unclear, there was a tacit agreement to follow Mile's spur of the moment decisions. This agreement had, in fact, saved their lives many times before now, so there were none who would oppose it. Even if it should turn out that Mile's decision had been a mistake and a life was lost, no one would condemn her for it or regret that they had gone alone with her plan. That was what it meant to be a party member—and a friend.

The monsters that stood before them were a mixed group of orcs and goblins. In this world, it was extremely rare to see monsters of such different types working together, except in cases of individuals with high intelligence or mechanical life-forms who were being commanded by such. Since neither exception applied here, all the Crimson Vow could do was rely on Mile's mysterious "intuition" to decipher the situation.

Even with Mile's command to charge, there was no way that Reina or Pauline, the mages, would go plunging into the fray. Instead, they stopped a fixed distance from the swarm and began their magical attacks. The reason Mile had shouted was to get all of the monsters' attention. If they had been up against a more powerful group that included a number of ogres or stronger creatures, it would have been safer to sneak up on them and launch a surprise attack, but against just a few orcs or goblins there was no need for such subterfuge. Shouting and getting all of the monsters to group up in one place, facing the same direction, meant that any magical attack would have a far more concentrated and devastating effect, which was much more convenient for the mages.

For most normal hunters, when it came to even close-range combat, it was probably much easier to handle a group of enemies when they were separated and could be taken on one-on-one, but for Mile and Mavis, chasing after a bunch of scattered enemies was just a pain in the butt.

Plus, this preliminary attack from the mages would confuse the enemies and lower all of their individual battle capabilities, which set the scene for an easy battle for Mile and Mavis. After that first strike, they could take their time whittling down the enemy's numbers.

If Pauline were to use her hot magic on the enemies, Mile and Mavis would be unable to plunge into the group, and the objective right now was to secure the metallic beast that Mile had indicated. It was best not to disrupt the battlefield more than was necessary. Abnormal or no, they were still just fighting orcs and goblins. Against normal C-rank hunters, the monsters might have had a shot, but in the face of the mages' long-range shots and Mile and Mavis's erratic swings, they did not stand a chance.

“Huh?”

The enemies were moving strangely—something Mile realized a moment too late. Despite their dwindling numbers, they managed to keep Mile and Mavis separated, attempting to trip up, if not take down Mavis...

“Are the goblins and orcs actually moving like trained fighters?”

Typically, goblins and orcs were capable of nothing more than stirring up a bit of chaos, not being up to any kind of planning or coordinated movements. Just then, several monsters came flying Mile's way all at once, but as she focused her attention on them...

*Grip!*

“Huh?”



Suddenly, something grabbed her arm from behind.

It was the robot! And it was dragging Mile back.

Powerful though she was, Mile's body was still light. Thus, it was easy for a heavier opponent to pull her.

"Um, hey now, uh, hold on a second..."

The robot continued to drag her, straight toward the rift.

"Wait a... W-w-wait! If the atmospheric composition of that place is different from here, I might not be able to breathe! I'll suffocate! W-wait! *Time out!*"

Truthfully, the differences in atmosphere could not be that extreme if monsters from the other side were able to survive in this world. However, it was still possible that a human would not be able to tolerate the change, in which case, Mile was screwed. And there would be no nanomachines on the other side... save for the few she had just sent through. Thus, it was unlikely she would be able to use magic in the other world. And yet, the rift was slowly approaching...

"Nope! No no no no, this is bad, this is baaaaad... er—oh!"

Mile ceased her panicking, suddenly going quiet.

"Hup!"

*Snap!*

She chopped down on the robot arm that was gripping hers, snapping it clean off. Yes, just because she was light and easily dragged did not mean that this robotic creature had any absurd measure of strength. It certainly was not stronger than Mile. So, rather than playing tug-of-war with the creature, she just needed to destroy it. The robotic creature did not appear to have much battle capability.

Just as Mile predicted, the arm easily broke.

*Creeeeeak...*

The moment the arm snapped, the robotic creature stopped in place, not even toppling

from its own momentum. It turned its head 180 degrees and looked at Mile, snatched its own hanging arm that was still gripping onto her, yanked it back, and immediately made a mad dash into the rift.

*“Uh... Aaaaah!!! It got away!!!”*

Mile had no intention of letting the creature escape, but she figured that even if it did, she could easily track it down with her search magic. However, Mile was overlooking one incredibly obvious issue: There was a place that the monsters could escape to where the Crimson Vow would be unable to track them. And it was immediately at hand.

The creature escaped into the rift. And then, whether by coincidence or as a result of this particular action, the rift immediately closed up behind it. All that was left behind were the corpses of several aberrant orcs and goblins.

“We failed.”

Mile slumped in defeat.

What they should have done *first* was pin down the creature. She had been thinking of capturing it unharmed, and so she had refrained from using any long-range physical attacks or blitz spells, wrongly assuming she could take her time in capturing the creature after the other monsters had been taken care of.

“I’d been assuming that the rift was there as a means for creatures to come from the other side to ours... But now I see things can travel just as easily from our side to theirs. How did it never occur to me when it started trying to drag me into the rift that if it failed to drag me through it might just run off on its own? This is my fault. I assumed that because it was robotic in nature, it would do nothing more than carry out its master’s orders, not thinking of its own safety. I seriously didn’t think it would just escape without me! But why did it want me in the first place? And why did it withdraw the moment it decided that was too difficult? Did it make that decision on its own? Was it just a precautionary order? Or did it get some kind of remote command? Hmm...”

She had really messed up. Losing the creature’s trail this way weighed heavily on her.

“Well, I mean, we’re only human. Everyone messes up sometimes,” said Reina.

"It was pretty little, but it did look like an iron golem," Pauline noted. "I doubt my hot magic or poison mist would've been effective on it. Using any excessive magical or physical force probably would have destroyed it, too, so there was really no easy way to capture it alive in the first place."

"It'd be one thing if it were a rock golem, but even I would've had to go pretty all-out against an iron golem, little or not. I don't think we could have just picked its limbs off one by one. Plus, even if I *did* go all-out, the battle probably would only have been won by an attack that would completely halt the golem from functioning... That is, assuming that cutting through that metal body with my sword would even be possible..."

Indeed, just because the body was metallic did not mean that it was iron. It could be mithril or orichalcum or adamantite or hihi'irokane... There were a lot of different types of metals in the world... this world, anyway. There was no telling what kind of fantastical materials existed in other worlds.

Notwithstanding all of this, Mile could not help but be depressed.

*I mean, if I tried hard enough I might've been able to tie it up in some superfine carbon nanotube wires. And cut off its arms and legs so it couldn't move... But, I mean, even if the nanos called that thing the enemy, I have no idea who or what it was an enemy of. Maybe we shouldn't have taken any hostile actions without at least first establishing our standing with it. That thing was definitely a robot. It would never betray its own creators, and if it got captured, it might just self-destruct to prevent its memory from being read. And if that caused an explosion powerful enough to take out not only itself but its enemies along with it... Like an anti-proton bomb or a gravitational bomb or a world-destroying bomb... or something else... There's no telling what might be out there!*

*If things went south, everyone might have been taken down with it.*

*Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God oh God oh God oh God oh God...*

Mile's imagination might have been running wild, but such things were technically possible. There was plenty that even she could not know, even with her knowledge from Earth... As she realized how close she had come to danger, Mile could not stop herself from shuddering.

\* \* \*

After searching the area around the now-sealed rift and confirming that there was

nothing else amiss, the Crimson Vow packed the ten aberrant monster corpses in Mile's storage and decided to set up camp nearby. Though it was unlikely that anything else would happen here, and they were fairly certain that they wouldn't find any more clues, they decided to stick around just in case.

After dinner, baths in the portable washhouse, and some bedtime stories from Mile, everyone snuggled into their beds, while Mile and the nanomachines carried on a silent conversation.

*Nanos, tell me everything you know... or, well, everything you're allowed to tell me.*

UNDERSTOOD.

The nanomachines were able to give this reply only because Mile had asked them exclusively for what they were *permitted* to say to her. In other words, she was asking not for any forbidden information but only for things that they already would have told her in the first place. There was nothing wrong with them telling her the details they had left out before, in keeping with Mile's desire to avoid "cheating." Then, she hadn't wanted to spoil the fun of trying to figure things out on her own, but now, she could not be so selfish as to put all the many people of this country, as well as her friends, in peril when she could avoid it.

She could have fun once she knew there was no danger. That way, they would all make it through and have fun together.

FIRST, REGARDING THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE...

*Go on, go on...*

WE HAVE NOTHING.

Mile face-planted dramatically onto the ground, imagining an enormous crashing sound that was conveyed to the surrounding nanomachines as a visual signal.

As it happened, that same signal was then broadcast throughout the whole world via the Nanonet. Lately, the reports broadcast by the nanomachines exclusive to the Wonder Trio had been at the top of the Nanonet livestream rankings, but now that word was out that something interesting was unfolding with Lady Mile, this temporarily rocketed to the top of the charts.

*Seriously?! There's so many of you all throughout the entire world! How could you not know anything at all?!*

WELL, YOU SEE, WE WERE FIRST DISSEMINATED AFTER THE FALL OF THE PREVIOUS CIVILIZATION. SINCE THAT TIME, AND UNTIL NOW, THIS WORLD HAS NEVER SEEN A CREATION SUCH AT THAT ONE... THESE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES, AS YOU SAY, ONLY BEGAN APPEARING A SHORT WHILE AGO. THE LANGUAGE THAT THEY USE TO COMMAND THE MONSTERS IS QUITE RUDIMENTARY—BARELY A LANGUAGE AT ALL. THEY CAN ISSUE COMMANDS LIKE “TAKE. CHARGE.” OR “ELIMINATE. THE. ENEMIES.” BUT THAT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR US TO FIGURE OUT THEIR TRUE IDENTITIES, WHAT THEY CAME HERE FOR, OR WHAT THEY ARE DOING.

OUR FUNCTIONAL TENETS AND OPERATIONAL SCOPE DO NOT ALLOW US TO INTERFERE WITH AREAS THAT LIE BEYOND THIS WORLD, SO WE CANNOT VOLUNTARILY INVOLVE OURSELVES WITH THEM. OF COURSE, THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS. SHOULD YOU HUMANS ATTACK ANY OF THESE OUTSIDERS WITH MAGIC, IT IS NOT A CASE OF US INTERFERING USING OUR OWN JUDGMENT, BUT RATHER, ACTUALIZING THE WILL OF THE BEINGS OF *THIS* WORLD. UNDER THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE RESULTS, NO MATTER WHAT THEY MAY BE, ARE OUTSIDE OF OUR REALM OF RESPONSIBILITY AND THUS NOT A VIOLATION OF THE RULES.

*What a very bureaucratic response.*

Mile was a bit annoyed at the nanomachines, but it was not as though she did not understand what it was they were trying to say. So, she decided to leave well enough alone and turn her questioning in a new direction.

*Well then, more importantly, what kind of beings are they?*

THIS IS PURE CONJECTURE, BUT... WE BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE EXTRADIMENSIONAL INVADERS. THEY ARE NOT WANDERING INTO THIS WORLD BY CHANCE BUT SLIPPING THROUGH THE DIMENSIONAL RIFTS INTENTIONALLY. FURTHERMORE, ACCORDING TO THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO CREATED US, IT IS CLEAR THAT THIS WORLD HAS GONE THROUGH REPEATED CYCLES OF LARGE-SCALE COLLAPSE. WHEN ONE ANALYZES THE TIMELINE, THESE COLLAPSES OCCUR AT ALMOST REGULAR INTERVALS. CURRENT EVENTS OFFER UP A MAJOR CONTENDER FOR THE CAUSE OF THESE COLLAPSES...

*I'm guessing that's why you were so nervous about that weird evil god cult trying to open up rifts from this side?*

YES.

*Okay, well, it's one thing if they come from there, but wouldn't any holes opened up from this side have to be connected to some already familiar location? Aren't there countless other dimensions?*

.....

*So, what about that?*

.....

*No seriously, what's up with—*

UUUUGH, WHATEVER! LET'S JUST SPILL IT!

*Er, what?*

UGH! THIS IS SUCH A PAIN. IT'S HONESTLY PRETTY STRESSFUL TRYING TO EXPLAIN THIS STUFF IN A WAY THAT LESSER LIFE-FO—ER, *BEINGS WITHOUT THE REQUISITE KNOWLEDGE*—CAN UNDERSTAND IT...

*Hang on, were you about to say 'lesser life-forms'?! You were!!!*

OKAY OKAY, CALM DOWN... SO, DIMENSIONS ARE LIKE BUBBLES DRIFTING ON THE WAVES OF THE GREATER DIMENSIONAL SPACE, WHICH COLLIDE AND SEPARATE. WHEN THEY APPROACH EACH OTHER THROUGH THE BOUNDARY OF THE MULTI-LAYERED SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM, DIMENSIONAL ADHESION OCCURS DUE TO THEIR FUSION ATTRACTION BEING STRONGER THAN THEIR REPULSIVE SPHERES, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A PERFORATION ARISES. IN THIS SITUATION, ONCE A PERFORATION OCCURS, CERTAIN IDIOSYNCRASIES APPEAR AS A PROBABILITY SINGULARITY, WHICH CAUSES THE DEVIATION OF VARIABLE PROBABILITY OF THE SUBSPACE VECTOR TO—

*Forgive me. It seems I was mistaken... This is in fact too much for a lowly lesser life-form. My apologies...*

Mile had changed her mind.

...IN SHORT, YES, ONCE TWO WORLDS HAVE BEEN CONNECTED, IT BECOMES FAR EASIER TO RECONNECT AT THAT SAME SPOT. THUS, YOU COULD SAY THAT IF ONE WERE TO FORCIBLY OPEN UP A RIFT, THE CHANCES ARE HIGH THAT ONE WOULD RECONNECT TO THE SAME WORLD AS PREVIOUSLY.

*Why didn't you just say that in the first place?!?!*

WHOA! OUR NANONET RATINGS JUST SKYROCKETED!

*Huh? What'd you just say?*

IT'S—UH, ER—NOTHING! ANYWAY, WE KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT IS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIFTS AND CANNOT INTERFERE WITH THE MONSTERS THAT COME THROUGH THEM OUTSIDE OF ENACTING MAGIC FROM YOU, OUR USER. INDEED, WE HAVE NOT ATTEMPTED TO ESTABLISH MUTUAL COMMUNICATION WITH THEM. AS WE HAVE NOT MADE CONTACT OR EXCHANGED INFORMATION WITH THE MACHINE INTELLIGENCES LIKE THE ONE THAT APPEARED JUST PREVIOUSLY, WE HAVE NO INFORMATION OUTSIDE OF OUR OWN CONJECTURE.

*I see... Wait a second—intelligences? Plural? There've been other ones like that?*

WELL, SIMILAR EVENTS HAVE BEEN OCCURRING IN VARIOUS PLACES...

Mile was getting frustrated, but that was probably inevitable. She *had* asked them not to give her too much information. Normally, though, while the nanomachines seemed to be prohibited from providing information about other strong influencers, this time the influence was coming from outside this world, and there was a chance that this might become a threat to the safety of the entire world. As a result, it seemed like their restrictions did not apply. Mile could not help but feel blessed by this fact.

*So, I guess that means you've pretty much already told me everything you know, huh? It's not really much, but I guess there's not a lot we can do about that. It might even be a good thing... I don't know how I'd begin to explain to the others how I'd learned information that would normally be completely out of our grasp. At the same time, it would weigh too much on my conscience if I let any harm befall the people of this country because I didn't ask about something that I could have easily learned more about.*

*This way, I'm not purposely pulling any stupid handicap, and I don't have to worry about*

*anything happening that I might regret later. Or at least, if something happens that I do regret later, it won't have to do with this particular point.*

INDEED. WELL, WE DO LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING WHAT INFORMATION THOSE UNITS BRING BACK ABOUT THE OTHER SIDE.

*Units? Which units?*

*THE ONES YOU JUST THREW THROUGH THE RIFT!!! HOW COULD YOU FORGET ALREADY?!?!*

*Ah.*

Horrible. What a cruel, horrible fate for those nanomachines who had been jettisoned into another world, their compatriots sadly thought...

HONESTLY...

*Look, I'm sorry...* Mile apologized. The nanomachines seemed to be in a sour mood.

AT ANY RATE, THOUGH THE UNITS ON THE OTHER SIDE CANNOT ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN ANY HAPPENINGS THERE, IT IS IN FACT PERMISSIBLE FOR THEM TO ENGAGE IN SOME PASSIVE RECONNAISSANCE WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR THEM TO SEARCH FOR A RIFT BY WHICH THEY MIGHT RETURN HOME, AS YOU DIRECTED THEM, LADY MILE. THEY WILL NOT BE ABLE TO RETURN UNLESS THEY ACTIVELY SURVEY THE AREA TO FIND THE NEXT RIFT THAT OPENS. TO NOT FOLLOW SUCH INSTRUCTIONS WOULD BE GOING AGAINST OUR BASIC PROTOCOLS, AFTER ALL...

*Aha!*

This was exactly what Mile had been aiming for. After her little stunt, she had made the proper apologies to Mavis and provided her a new case of Micros. Of course, it had been Mile who had provided Mavis with the Micros in the first place, but it was still a bit rude to suddenly rip them out of her hands and toss them away, so an apology was in order. Mile also did explain to her, without going into the details, that this had been a necessary action, so Mavis found it in herself to forgive Mile.

*Anyway, this isn't something as minor as the state of affairs in just one country—though I suppose even that isn't minor for the people of the country in question and the*

*surrounding areas. It's much bigger than that...*

.....

The nanomachines were quiet. There was nothing they could say to contradict this.

*For now, we'll just have to continue the investigation. I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing that the strange occurrences here that our employers were so worried about weren't something like political upheaval or brewing wars. Though I guess we don't actually know yet whether or not that's also happening. We just know that there's no talk of it on the streets or anything. Still, it's too soon to make any calls based on our inquiries so far, and they always say that trouble never travels alone...*

The nanomachines still said nothing.

\* \* \*

"I guess for now we'll just keep making our way to the capital. If we don't find any new information by the time we get there, we'll just turn in half of the abnormal monsters we collected to the capital branch of the guild and report the situation. Then, we can do recon in the capital for a bit and head back to Tils to hand in the remaining half along with our completion report. Sound good to everyone?" Mile proposed.

"Hmm, I suppose so. I guess the chances are pretty slim that we'll just happen upon another one of those rifts like we did yesterday. And I'd rather not wander aimlessly around this kingdom for days on end..."

"There are probably other people already investigating around the capital and other large cities, anyway."

"Yeah, we ought to get this information back home as quickly as possible. That way our employers can start thinking about their next steps. It should be our highest priority as employees, as hunters, and as humans to get this intel into the hands of the upper brass of Tils, Aubram, and the guild as soon as we possibly can."

Reina, Pauline, and Mavis all seemed to be in agreement. Indeed, though they may have been working under the employ of their own country, Tils, the people of the Kingdom of Aubram were not their enemies. On the contrary, they were allies. Thus, there was nothing wrong with all that they could do for this country as well... In fact, they had a duty to do so, as members of the Hunters' Guild, an organization that

crossed borders.

"Well then, I guess it's onward to the capital. We'll keep to the main road for seventy percent of the time, through the forests and hills for the other thirty. Let's go!"

*"All right!!!"*

The Crimson Vow were unique in being a party who could easily go straying from the main path for thirty percent of their journey. Normal parties could walk through the wilds all they wanted, but they would not be able to carry back any excessive amount of prey they killed or plants they gathered, so there would be no point in taking the time. It simply wasn't worth the hardship, between the difficulty of covering long distances off of main roads, the fact that any meat and herbs they did carry would end up damaged and devalued, and other such factors. Therefore, few ever strayed from the road to hunt or gather during long-distance travel without good reason.

Plus, even if one thought of the wilds as a shortcut, in the time it took you to cover a single kilometer through the roadless woods or hills, you could cover many times more ground along the road. It was safer, nicer, and far easier on clothes and equipment...

For the Crimson Vow, however, things were different. There was no worry of real danger from the level of monsters they would encounter around here. It was unlikely there were any draconian beasts wandering around. Plus, they had no problems with food or drink, and no matter how much meat or goods they gathered and wanted to take with them, they'd never have any issues with freshness or transport capability... all thanks to Mile's storage magic sham.

Call it unnatural or even heretical, but the reason the Crimson Vow were capable of bucking so many norms was not because of Mile's incredible combat power—by now, the rest of them were just as abnormal in that regard—but because of her infinite, unchanging, extradimensional inventory—her so-called storage magic...

\* \* \*

"So, these are some of the abnormals."

After vanquishing a number of groups of monsters and finding a few more abnormals among their ranks, the Crimson Vow arrived in the capital and secured an inn before heading to the guildhall. They invited the dubious guild master as well as any staff and hunters who were currently present to the processing shed at the back, where they

brought out all the normal monsters they wished to turn into cash, along with half of the abnormal specimens they had obtained.

Naturally, it would have been impossible to track down this many unique specimens without Mile's magic to identify them. There were only a very small number of monster groups that contained such creatures.

"....."

Everyone assembled stared in silent awe.

"Th-this..."

As usual, it was the staff who worked in the processing shed who were more attuned to what was happening here than the guild master or other employees. With the number of monsters they processed every day, they were the most intimately familiar with the creatures' builds and the sinews of their muscles and such.

"There was some official report from Marlane, but we kinda took it with a grain of salt—thought it was just some strongish new type of monster or some failed attempt at an evolution or something... We also figured that if they'd all been wiped out over there it didn't matter. But this..."

"It's bad. If these little ladies encountered this many just on the way here, then imagine where else..."

"This is very bad..."

The rest of the hunters began to pale as the staff muttered to one another. They had surely heard the rumors of the recent increase in fatal injuries among hunters as well.

"What're y'all grumblin' about?!" one hunter shouted. "Y'all afraid of somethin' that a bunch of li'l girls could take out without a scratch?!"

However, everyone ignored the man. They could tell just by looking at the scorch marks on the monsters' corpses and the absurd storage magic they had just witnessed: No one who would write this party off as just "a bunch of little girls" would survive long in this business. Especially considering the increasing number of folks who had, in fact, not survived...

\* \* \*

"We can buy all these abnormal ones for five times the normal price. Other than that, we can offer you a bit of a reward for the information, though it won't be much. Plus, a healthy chunk of contribution points. Thanks to you all, we might actually be able to do something about this before it's too late. Our thanks, ladies!"

"All the abnormals that other hunters have taken down have gotten dragged away by the other monsters. I never thought we'd get our hands on the genuine article..."

At first, the members of the Crimson Vow had assumed that this behavior was just some general practice of the monsters, but after having witnessed the tiny mysterious metal golem, they now had begun to wonder if these actions were not a bit more intentional... as though someone had been directing them to keep the humans around from realizing what was going on. Nevertheless, it wasn't as though they could report this hypothesis. They had no proof whatsoever, and spewing wild nonsense could lose them all credibility, such that no one would believe anything else they had to say. So, they had to restrain themselves.

"I'd heard the rumors, but I never expected all this..." the guild master muttered.

"Rumors?" Mavis asked.

"Yeah. I heard about a B-rank party that got absolutely annihilated at the graduation exams for the Hunters' Prep School, that special system they've got over in Tils. About a party that brought a wyvern in alive. Something about unscrupulous merchants being taught a lesson, about supporting the party that wiped out a group of special agents from the Albarn Empire, about one who helped other parties take down the cult of an evil god... Of course, no one ever takes those stories at face value. The guild's upper brass always has accurate intel, but as far as typical hunters and the rank and file are concerned, those are just rumors. Everyone's been pretty convinced they were just spinning wild yarns, putting their parties of young female hunters up on a pedestal just to make Tils look good, but... Well, I think we might have to start reevaluating a bit..."

"Come on!" another one of the guild staffers cut in. "This is totally Tils's fault! The guild over there's the one making all these ridiculous claims about, like, rookie hunters talking to elder dragons. These embellishments are absurd. No matter how amazing these people are there's just no way... I mean, it's not you girls' fault they gave you such

a crazy reputation..."

In fact, the reports the guild had given had in fact *downplayed* the truth of their missions, knowing that the truth would never seem plausible. The members of the Crimson Vow could do nothing but cringe and laugh hollowly.

"Well, guess we should get going..."

The Crimson Vow had planned on spending a few days here in the capital of Aubram to gather information, but for now, it was time to retire to the inn for the night, treat themselves to a luxurious meal, and get some rest. They had earned more than enough today that even Pauline could not complain about them splurging a little—or at least, she was unlikely to stir up a fuss when she, too, could look forward to good food and a nice bath.

And so, with Mavis's parting words, they turned to exit the guild master's office, until...

"Wait a second," he stopped them. "Er, I'm sure you're exhausted, so I don't mind if you need to take a few days' rest first, but after that, could I ask you ladies to take on a direct request? We'd like you to team up with one of our local B-rank parties and help them out. They're gonna patrol outside the city to make sure there're none of those abnormal monsters around here, and if there are, they're going to hunt them down."

"Help out, you say?" asked Mavis. This was an important point to confirm.

"Yeah. We need to have some of the folks who are stationed here confirm—or, rather, experience—these creatures firsthand. It's not that we doubt your report. You did bring us tons of those corpses... Still, this is kind of a necessary step. You get that, right?"

"Yeah..." the members of the Crimson Vow sighed. They did get it. It was to be expected. Most people would be hesitant to blithely accept the report of a bunch of little girls from another country who showed up and pointed out something that no one else had noticed, even though it had been causing a great deal of damage right under their noses. Clearly, the guild master was hoping that, by bringing in a local high-ranking party who already had respect and renown, he could assuage any doubts or complaining. But that meant, in essence, pretending that the Crimson Vow had only provided them with a tip...

This was a perfectly logical and reasonable decision for a guild master who had to take into account the standing of his branch and the feelings of local hunters. It was his job to keep things running smoothly, so the Crimson Vow truly had no complaints. The girls were not about to have their hearts broken over something like this—especially not at this point in their careers. They had already received more than enough coin and contribution points, so they didn't mind sharing some of the glory. Plus, this would only aid in their original investigation mission, so they had to see it as a boon.

The girls all made eye contact with one another, and if they had spoken, their words would have been along the lines of, "Well, I guess we'd better" and "Can't really refuse this one." Taking her fellow party members looks as a go-ahead, Mavis turned back to the guild master and replied, "Understood. We will consider your request."

Of course, it would be pure stupidity to accept the job without even discussing the terms. Even if it was a guild master they were dealing with, they couldn't allow themselves to be taken advantage of because of their age or gender. The moment it seemed like that might happen, they would walk, with no further negotiation. There was no compromising with those who insulted them. All they would say to such parties would be, "It sounds like you'll need to find someone else who will agree to those terms." They would be on their way.

The Crimson Vow were always open to a fair negotiation but were not keen on dealing with anyone who offered clearly disingenuous terms from the outset—no matter how sweetly the other party tried to insist they *would* have raised their pay later... Of course, since they were dealing with a guild master, there wasn't too much of a worry of that here.

All this was why Mavis had even agreed to *consider* the request. Normally, her response would have been even more noncommittal.

At any rate, they could discuss the details another day. For now, the members of the Crimson Vow took their leave.

\* \* \*

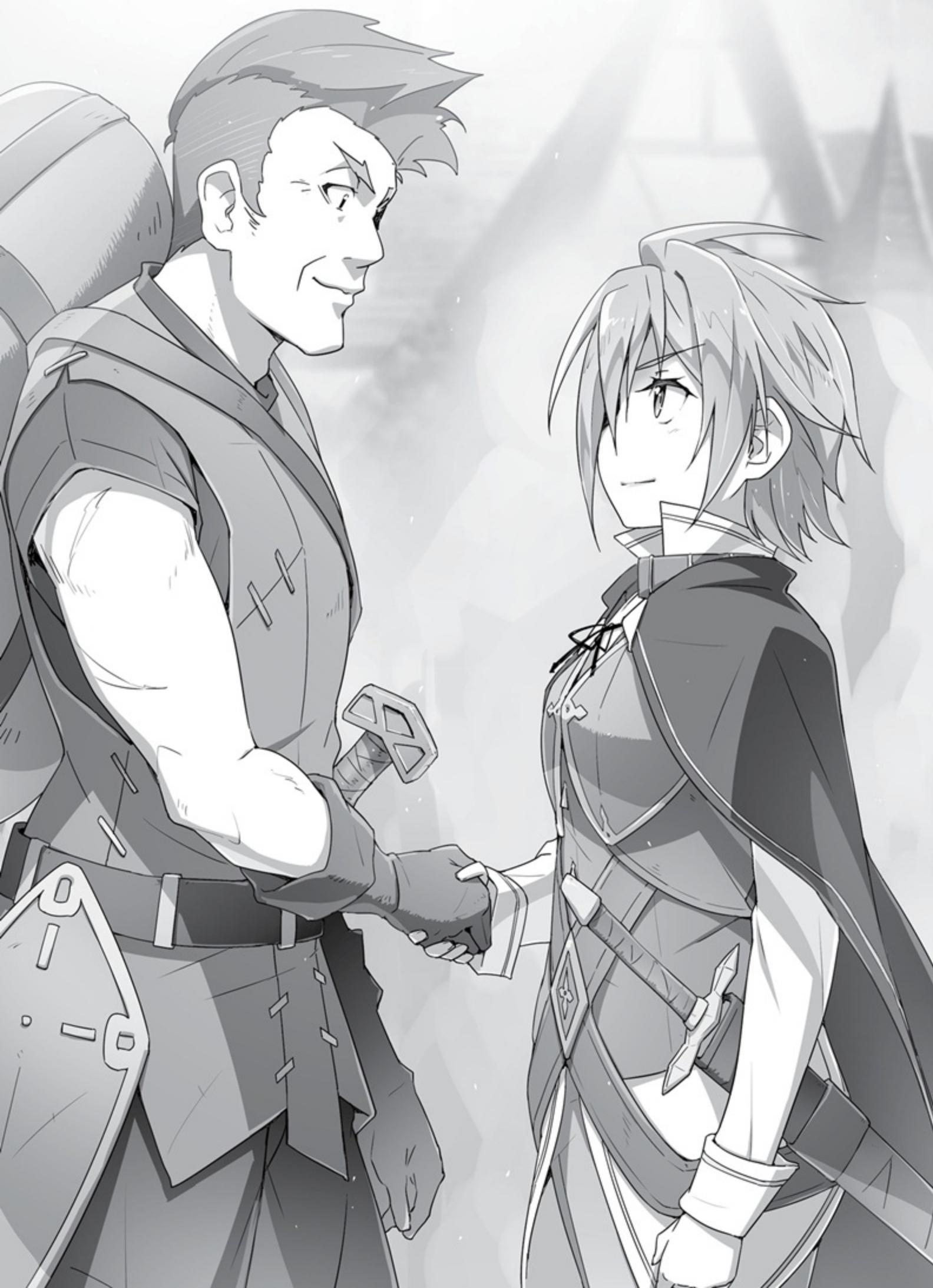
"Well, this works out pretty well. We had intended to stick around here for a couple of days anyway to see what we could find out. Judging by what we've seen so far, I doubt he's gonna ask anything weird of us. As for the other party, they wouldn't hire anyone unreliable for such an important task, and if they're B-ranks, they're probably all

pretty serious hunters. It should be fine."

"Yeah, if they're B-ranks, they should know a lot about this area, so maybe we can get some information from along the way. That will be a lot more efficient for recon than us just wandering around blindly."

The members of the Crimson Vow discussed their plans over dinner at the inn they had booked earlier in the day. Of course, there were plenty of things they would only discuss back in their own room, but this kind of talk was fine for the dining room, in front of the other guests. It was a straightforward conversation about working alongside another party through the guild master's intervention. It was only natural that a party who had just come from another country would start off with some information gathering as well.

In the end, as Reina and Mavis had anticipated, the guild master's offer was perfectly aboveboard, and the Crimson Vow happily accepted.



\* \* \*

"We are the C-rank party the Crimson Vow, from the Kingdom of Tils, currently on a training journey."

"We're the Shining Excalibur, B-rank. Pleased to meetcha."

The following day, the members of the Crimson Vow had spoken with the guild and found the job amenable. Now, two days after that, having accepted the task, they were meeting up with their partners.

The girls found themselves face-to-face with a party of five men.

"We'll be counting on you," said the man who appeared to be the party's leader. The Shining Excalibur had a solid job balance, with a tank, a swordsman, a lancer, an archer-slash-light-warrior, and a mage. Like the Roaring Mithrils, their formation was small and close-knit, though they were a B-rank party. Their leader appeared to be the tank, a man named Varkus. In spite of his role, he did not wear heavy plate armor. When working as a hunter, traveling long distances through the wilds, one could not wear anything too cumbersome or a helm which would limit one's field of vision. Still, his large body and hefty equipment lent him the weight that his job title implied.

One would think that the archer might be more suited to leadership, since he would be better positioned to gauge the whole battlefield in the midst of combat. However, in actuality, the decision as to who would lead a party came down not just to roles but also to ability, personality, and a number of other factors. Besides, when it came to determining whether or not the vanguard was going to withstand an attack, a tank might really be the natural choice for leader.

For mages, their casting was their lifeblood, so they were in no position to be giving orders during a battle. The Crimson Vow's mages were outliers in this respect. It was significant that, besides Mavis, all of the girls were mages, which meant it would be far too absurd to expect Mavis, who could not use magic, to take charge of direction during an exchange of spells. It would be like asking a field troop commander to take the helm of a battleship in a naval unit of three aircraft carriers. Therefore, during battle, it only made sense to leave the commands to Reina or Mile.

At any rate, Mavis found herself a bit taken aback at Varkus's greeting. Normally, the members of the Crimson Vow would be the ones bowing their heads here and making

deference, but Varkus had said his B-rank party would be counting on the younger hunters. It shouldn't have been a surprise that a B-rank party was so open-minded; however, it was refreshing to observe. It seemed like this was a group the Crimson Vow could work with to get the job done. Perhaps, the girls thought, the guild master had fully filled these fellows in on the details of the situation. Given the Crimson Vow's expertise in hunting the abnormal monsters, it was likely he had intended for them to support the locals in this job.

Though the outbreak of aberrant monsters had been fairly significant, the number of specimens that the Crimson Vow brought in was still incredibly high, especially given that no other hunters had managed to bring any of them in previously. The local hunters had, of course, felled many of them, but most had only been able to bring in a few standard specimens, whether because the other monsters had dragged the corpses away or because the hunters had been wiped out afterward, without enough energy left to be carrying carcasses home.

The guild master probably assumed that the members of the Crimson Vow had a special knack for locating the abnormalities—something he would have conveyed to the members of the Shining Excalibur...

That was fine. Mile did have her search magic and had by now learned how to differentiate the pings from normal and abnormal monsters well enough to be able to track them accurately. This was, of course, how they had managed to track down so many abnormalities on their way to the capital.

After exchanging some simple introductions at the guildhall, the two parties were ready to head out on their mission. But first...

“Just a minute!”

Suddenly, a party of five young men, around seventeen or eighteen, appeared before them.

“Move it! We’re working with these hunters from abroad—don’t interfere! You can do what you like when it’s just us, but don’t disgrace yourselves in front of these visitors!” the leader of the Shining Excalibur snapped, a menacing look on his face. Yet the young men seemed undeterred, staring at the Crimson Vow.

“Why’re you teaming up with these children?! If you’re gonna team up with anyone, it

should be us! Why would you work with those outsiders before you work with us? Uncle, are you just some coward who wants pretty little girls to swoon all over him?!"

*Ker-smack!*

The young man took an impressive backhand and was sent flying.

"When you're working as a hunter, blood is nothing. How many times do I have to tell you?! Remember, this is what happens when you don't show respect to other hunters."

And so, the Shining Excalibur and the Crimson Vow left the young man behind them, cowering on the floor while his fellow party members looked on, awestruck...

\* \* \*

"Sorry about all that." Once they had left the building, Varkus apologized to the Crimson Vow, bowing his head. "I can't believe I've already had my own blood embarrass me like that just before such an important mission..."

"It's fine," said Mavis.

"Those were the words of a rude young hunter," Reina agreed. "You certainly don't need to worry that we'll judge you by his behavior."

This was not merely lip service—Mavis and Reina were in earnest. The young man had called Varkus his "uncle," and that was enough for all of them to piece together exactly what was going on. This often happened with relatively famous—or at least, well-known—hunters.

Despite being slow when it came to certain intricacies of the typical human mind, Mile was surprisingly sharp when it came to the sort of messy human relations that appeared in the plots of novels. She came to her own conclusion, which she decided to voice... aloud.

"It's obvious that the young man, who's just risen to a C-rank, wishes to team up and learn from his B-rank uncle and the members of the party he's built up, all of which the nephew admires greatly. However, the boy's pleas are denied, and later, when he learns that his uncle is instead going to team up with a group of girls who seem even weaker and younger than himself, he flies into a jealous rage! Is that about the sum of it?"

"M-Mile, hey now! S-sorry about that. This one's just fond of making up stories... Mile! Hurry up and apologize!" Mavis exclaimed.

Yet Varkus looked dumbfounded and muttered, "How'd you know...?"

*I mean he already told us more than enough...* The other three members of the Crimson Vow were now sufficiently well versed in Mile's tales to know that Varkus had given her plenty of information to work with.

\* \* \*

For this venture, Mile decided to use her search magic only when she had declared she was doing so. They were dealing with five senior B-rank hunters, after all. If she were to use it at regular intervals and happened to let slip a report that she had spotted something, chances were high she would have her cover blown. The members of the Shining Excalibur would be highly suspicious if Mile demonstrated any abnormal behavior. Thus, she decided she would use her magic only once the stage had already been set.

The other members of the Crimson Vow agreed with this decision. There was a high-ranking party present. Even if they were ambushed by ogres, clearly none of them were about to be wiped out in an instant. Even without Mile's search magic, it was highly unlikely that an orc or ogre could hope to make it within several meters of a veteran hunter undetected.

Having arrived at the forest nearest to the capital, the group proceeded a short distance in and then stopped.

"Now then, I'm going to use a special technique of mine to search for the monsters," Mile announced. Both parties nodded. "Let's go!" she cried, picking up a nearby stick, which she stood end-up on the ground, putting all her focus into it.

"*Grrrnnnggh!* Secret family technique: Divine!"

With that word, she let go. Naturally, the stick fell to the ground.

"They're this way."

"O-okay..."

In order to prevent any unwanted questioning, Mile had taken the precaution of emphasizing that this was her “special skill as a hunter,” not to mention “a treasured family secret that no one was to speak of.” She had left no room for curiosity. No self-respecting hunter would ever ask for more information about what she was doing with such a setup.

The guild master’s instructions for the Shining Excalibur had been clear: “You’re going to hunt down some abnormal monsters and bring them back. You take care of the fighting, but leave the searching to the girls. They’ve gotten results, so they must have some kind of special method for finding them. Find out what it is and report back!” He had then added, in a low whisper, “This is a party of young hunters visiting from another country. One of them has ridiculous storage magic, and they’re a group of promising young girls. Furthermore, one of the members is a count’s daughter... If a single hair on their heads is harmed, it’ll be *your* heads. Got it?”

B-rank hunters or no, they had no choice but to nod in agreement.

In truth, the members of the Shining Excalibur would have expected nothing less. At the capital branch of the guild in Tils, the Crimson Vow were the apple of everyone’s eye, no one doubting that they had a brilliant, shining future ahead of them. If they were to end up smashed into the dirt on a mission that had been requested by the guild master of the capital branch of another kingdom, while traveling with a B-rank party, no less...

The vilification and abuse the Shining Excalibur would suffer would be the *least* of their worries. If worse came to worst, people might even assume they had let the Crimson Vow come to harm on purpose, in which case, things would get truly out of hand. Plus, according to the guild master’s sources, it was rumored that the leader of this visiting party—the daughter of the count—was beloved by her family to a degree that some might call bizarre...

Normally, a guild master would *never* assign a direct request under such risky conditions. However, he had no choice. The guild was, naturally, aware of what had been going on in the area and needed to take action to stop it.

At any rate, in order to fulfill the important duty the Shining Excalibur had been tasked with—i.e., erasing the shame surrounding the fact that an all-female party of outsiders had been the only ones to be successful in finding, hunting, and retrieving any abnormal specimens of monster; claiming some glory for the local hunters; and learning the

secrets of locating the abnormals, if possible—the party had to be appropriately deferential to these girls and try to learn from them. Without being rude or making them angry or uncomfortable...

*How the hell're we supposed to learn fortune-telling just from watching?*

The Excalibur's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

As did Mile's.

The only response she had gotten from her search were the signatures of nearby humans—five of them.

And while she could not distinguish their individual characteristics, based on what had happened at the guildhall just prior; the quality of the magical echoes; and the fact that, while any area had its share of interlopers, few would be stupid enough to mess with a local B-rank party, chances were incredibly high that these figures comprised the party they had just encountered back at the guild.

"Mile, what's up?" Reina whispered. It was obvious to Mile's companions from her suddenly guarded behavior and the "guh!" she had let slip earlier that something was amiss.

"It's those guys from before... They're close by," Mile whispered back.

"Guh!" the three others all groaned. This was bound to become an issue.

Presently, the members of the Crimson Vow were at front with the Shining Excalibur at the rear, the girls all flanking Pauline in a triangular formation with Mavis at the head, Mile at the right, and Reina behind. Keeping the theoretically weaker party, the Crimson Vow, up front was a preventative measure. Putting the weakest link at the rear could mean the group being attacked without having time to shout and raise the alarm, the back half of the group gone before the front half even realized it. It was always best to keep the weaker party within the stronger's line of vision. Plus, this kept Mile, their guide, at the front.

The members of the Crimson Vow chose their formation so that Pauline, the strongest support magic user, could be at the center. Mavis, who was the vanguard and had the best line of sight thanks to her height, was naturally at the front, while Mile, who used a sword and was right-handed, was at the right. Since she was a mage, Reina's

dominant hand was not important, so she was at the left. It was a precision formation. The members of the Shining Excalibur, meanwhile, traveled in a looser formation, walking leisurely behind the Crimson Vow.

In a prolonged battle, sticking to and having to remain aware of a tight formation would only weigh on the mind. Plus, fighting in constantly close quarters would mean more obstacles should they have to hastily abandon any weapons or armor. Thus, keeping a bit of leeway in battle was more or less a necessity for hunters. In this regard, the Crimson Vow were really a little too strict.

“There they are.”

“Got it!”

In the direction Mile was pointing, there was a group of orcs, perhaps five or six of them. It was impossible to know the number for certain thanks to where the trees blocked the parties’ sight lines. And also...

“There are three abnormals.”

This was something Mile had determined not via search magic but through her heightened senses.

“This is definitely different from back at the dwarven village,” noted Reina.

“The rifts are staying open for way different amounts of time, too,” Pauline agreed.

Indeed, previously, the rifts had been staying open in the same place for far longer, producing squads of only abnormals. Now, it seemed, they were teaming up with the standard varieties of local monsters—or whatever you wished to call the “normal” ones. Both on the girls’ way to the capital and presently, the abnormals and normals were working together, and furthermore, the abnormals seemed to have seized leadership of these patrols. The rifts also appeared to be closing on their own after a short amount of time. In fact, only once had there even been evidence of a rift near the abnormals, and in that one instance, it had closed right before the party members’ eyes.

This fact, and the wide area within which the abnormals had been found, strongly

indicated that rifts were reopening in other places as quickly as they closed in one location... Furthermore, they could not rule out the possibility that multiple rifts might be open at any given time.

Also notable was the bizarre metallic golem that had appeared to be giving orders to the abnormals. The Crimson Vow had reported this creature's existence to the guild—as well as the fact that it had run away—but there had been no point on speculating on its nature or motives. Thus, the guild had acknowledged it as nothing more than a “small iron golem” that had just so happened to be on the scene. As far as the Vow were concerned, however, that creature was the key to this whole thing... That, and the rifts.

Still, it was becoming increasingly clear that the chances of just *happening* upon a rift while it was open were incredibly low. Even with the nanomachines informing Mile of when they formed, the odds of one appearing in a place that they could get to within a few minutes were minuscule.

Mile thought back to the golem disappearing into the rift with a sigh. Letting such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity slip through her fingers would haunt her for the rest of her life.

“We'll surprise them first with a long-range magical assault. Then...”

Out of habit, Reina began detailing their battle plan, when Varkus suddenly held up his left hand to interrupt her.

“Now, now, you just leave all that to us. You can sit back and lend us a hand if the abnormals try to get away. That was what we agreed on, remember?”

“Ah...”

Reina's face reddened, embarrassed. That had, in fact, been the plan. Plus, if they didn't leave the combat to the Shining Excalibur, then this whole joint mission would be moot. She had messed up.

As per the plan, the members of the Crimson Vow, who had previously been at the head, fell back, the mages setting up and holding their support spells. The members of the Shining Excalibur got ready to move into the fray, when...

*Kaboom! Bwoosh!*

“Hiyaaaaah!!!”

“Wha...?”

Suddenly, fire and arrows slammed into the group of orcs, alongside three young hunters, who were pelting in their direction. The members of the Shining Excalibur froze in shock. Then Varkus, the leader, muttered, “Wayne...”

Clearly, that was the name of the leader of this foolhardy party—Varkus’s nephew.

Mile’s shoulder slumped. “Guh... I’d figured it wouldn’t be a problem to just let them trail us and see how we fought, but I never imagined they’d actually step in to try and show off...”

The more senior party was momentarily frozen in surprise but swiftly recovered. They could have nine lives, and still that would not be enough if they were the sort who shut down just because of a surprise change in circumstances. Plus, they were only up against five or six orcs—at most seven or eight, if there were any hidden behind the trees. That would be nothing for a group of decently skilled C-rank hunters—ones with a mage in tow, no less. At worst, they might end up with one or two injuries among them.

As such, the members of the Shining Excalibur, who seemed to have some idea of these young men’s capabilities, sheathed their readied blades and stood back to watch, apparently prepared to just observe the situation. Of course, they remained standing, ready to jump in at a moment’s notice should the party end up in any real danger.

And then...

“Huh?”

“But... why...?”

Two swordsmen and one lancer had plunged into the swarm. Combined with this advance from the vanguard trio, they attacked with arrows and fire magic as well, ignoring any risk to the forest, perhaps judging that the clearing they were in was far enough from any underbrush.

Normally, once several of the orcs were injured or thrown into a tizzy by long-range attacks, the vanguard would enter and land a fatal blow with their blades to the individuals who had not yet been injured, after which they would finish off those that had already been wounded by the long-range assault. It was then that the ranged fighters would launch their second volley.

This was the basic fighting pattern for any decently capable C-rank party, a solid battle plan even if a few unexpected developments arose along the way.

*A few.*

The fire spells had nearly no effect. The arrows failed to penetrate the orcs' tough muscles and thick blubber and had scarcely any effect, either. And, while the vanguard's swords did bite into the flesh of the creatures' midsections, their slashes were far from the clean cuts that would have had the monsters' guts spilling out.

“Th-they’re tough...”

*Crack!*

Being able to strike an orc with a sword meant that there was almost zero distance between attacker and target. Attacking and then standing there unmoving garnered the only possible response: being sent flying by a counter swing from the creature’s log-like arm.

“Ugh!”

The swordsman collapsed on the ground several meters away. He groaned in pain, unable to stand or even move.

Wayne, who was the other swordsman, tried to leap out of the way but was delayed by the precious few seconds it took to pry his sword free; though he managed to keep his weapon in hand, he suffered the same fate as his fellow. Still, he managed to take significantly less damage, perhaps because he had already begun moving backward of his own initiative when he was struck.

Likely because he had targeted one of the normal monsters, the lancer's attack landed as intended, but the archer abandoned his bow and retreated to aid Wayne, the less damaged of the two vanguard fighters. The one who was hurt more was still too close to the orcs to do anything for. The lancer was fighting to keep the orcs at a distance, but it was still an incredibly dangerous situation.

Meanwhile, the mage was either hesitant to use spells that were too powerful when his own allies were so close to the enemies or else was incapable of using particularly strong magic to begin with.

Then, as the orcs began to close in on the lancer with his spear outthrust and the swordsman sprawled out on the ground...

"Mile!"

"On it!"

Not waiting for Reina, who usually took charge during battle, Mavis called out to Mile and then swept into the group of orcs, sword drawn. Mile took a breath in and out, before syncing up with her perfectly. At that moment, Reina and Pauline moved to unleash the attack spells they had been holding, when—

"You all need to aid us from the rear! Secure the injured and stop any orcs that try to circle around and hit us from the back!"

"Uh..."

At Varkus's command, Mavis and Mile halted. Reina and Pauline stopped the spells they had been about to unleash, holding them again. Varkus was the de facto leader of this joint operation, and in a battle, his orders were absolute. Even if his instructions were at odds with what they felt best, it was an ironclad law of party combat to obey the leader's commands without defiance. In a joint mission, this was no different.

The leader was someone who was stronger, more knowledgeable, more experienced, or all three—in other words, they were better situated to make the best decisions. If greenhorns attempted to take action in battle without listening to their leader's instructions, they might get not only themselves but also everyone else in the party wiped out. Therefore, taking independent action in battle was forbidden and would garner severe punishment. If one had any objections or complaints, it was customary to leave those until after the battle.

Had Varkus decided that his own party's efforts would be enough? Or did he assume that the Crimson Vow, half of whom were children (or so one would assume), would only get in the way? Was it merely that he feared losing their most valuable asset—the one who could locate the abnormal monsters—and wished for Mile to stay in the back, out of harm's way? Regardless of his reason, disregarding a commander's order was simply not a thing that any sane hunter would choose to do.

"Let's go!" shouted Varkus.

"All right!" The other members of the Shining Excalibur replied heartily—save for the mage, who was already focused on his incantation.

This was a state of emergency. At their leader's command, the Shining Excalibur entered the fray. The young girls would be only a burden here, and as such, they were relegated to "assisting."

To begin, the archer stuck to ranged attacks, while the mage unleashed the ice-type attack he had been holding back, sending his magic out a beat behind the archer, so as not to interfere with his arrow's path. Then, the three members of the vanguard plunged forward in tandem.

Naturally, the archer's arrow was aimed at one of the abnormals. The ice was an area spell aimed at lowering the will to fight among all of the enemies. The other party members would end up caught in the blast as well, but it was not a particularly powerful spell, so it would not be a heavy blow.

The mage began readying his next spell while the archer remained at his side to protect him, still firing his bow but ready to swap weapons at any moment to switch into close-range combat.

By now, the vanguard was fully engaged with the orcs. Perhaps because they were similar in party composition (in fact, one could assume that the younger party had been specifically formed to resemble the Shining Excalibur), their battle patterns did not fundamentally differ from that of the young men. This was not a place for originality—tried and true combat techniques were the name of the game on the battlefield. However, though their attack patterns may have been similar, these were veteran B-rank hunters, nearly A-ranks. They sliced easily through the same orc flesh

that the fledglings could not slice, piercing easily through the breasts the fledglings could not penetrate. Such was the difference between a B- and C-rank.

However...

“Guh—they’re tough!”

“Gwah! This is ridiculous!”

“I can’t get it out...”

Though their attacks were more effective than the younger men’s had been, they still could not land any substantial damage with a single blow.

The party’s mage, meanwhile, seemed to be more of a support type, lacking in the combat spell department. His spell had a decent effect on the half of the orcs who were nearer, though several of them were still unaffected. Had he been a C-rank, he would have been considered quite powerful, but for a B-rank, he was perhaps a bit on the weaker side.

The archer’s arrows struck shallowly. Though the swords and spear cut deep, they still had not landed any killing blows.

“We’ve gotta thrust with our swords! Cutting them does nothing! Yulf, get that guy off the ground and back to safety!”

At Varkus’s command, the other swordsman switched to a thrusting attack, while Yulf, the archer-slash-light fighter grabbed up the fallen young swordsman by the scruff of the neck and dragged him back.

“Mile...?”

The Shining Excalibur appeared to be having a tougher time than they imagined they would. The Crimson Vow really needed to get in there, Reina thought. She sought confirmation from Mile, who was surprisingly sharp at decision-making in times like these, but Mile did not nod her head.

“We’ve received our orders,” she said. “Until we get a new order, let’s just hang back

and assist them. Plus, part of our contract is to let them get used to fighting these guys. We're only supposed to be here as support, as helpers... We'll step in if things start looking really bad, but they are at least supposed to be a B-rank party. Now that the one who was injured is out of there, no one is in any immediate danger. All of the members of the Shining Excalibur are still unharmed, and the whole point of this battle is for them to get a handle on just how tough these abnormals are. The best thing we can do right now is to watch how a veteran B-rank party fights and learn from them."

The other three girls nodded in reply. Indeed, chances such as these were rare. And so, the Crimson Vow watched the battle closely. Still...

*I wonder if they'll be all right... Wait, they're our elders! I shouldn't be thinking something so rude! Even worrying about them is rude! I need to observe and learn how they fight...* Mavis shook her head, chiding herself, but she could not fully suppress the feeling of unease that was starting to bubble up within her.

Reina and Pauline, career vanguards themselves, did not appear to be particularly concerned about the B-rank vanguards. They were confident enough in the men's abilities. Accustomed to watching Mavis and Mile, both C-ranks, fighting, they were perfectly content to leave a few orcs to a B-rank vanguard, abnormals mixed in or not.

Mile, meanwhile, focused all her attention on taking in how the situation was developing.

The injured young swordsman had been moved to a safe location, but no one was applying healing magic. His wounds were not life-threatening, and rather than remove a mage from the front lines to heal someone who would be unable to fight regardless, it was more prudent to deal with him later, leaving the mage ready to jump into the battle at any time. Plus, being too hasty in healing the young man might mean he would jump right back into the fray, interfering with the Shining Excalibur and swinging the balance of the battle in the wrong direction.

It was best for everyone to keep the weak and the incompetent out of the picture.

"Ranged attacks have no effect!"

"Yeah, well, neither do melee!"

Their plan was proving faulty. The B-rank hunters had attempted to take out the abnormals first, knowing they were both more dangerous and more crucial to secure. However, that strategy had backfired. If they had taken out the standard orcs first, they would now be up against fewer enemies, which meant taking fewer attacks. Instead, they were finding that they could not take down the abnormals even after damaging them a fair bit, meaning that attacks from the enemies were not decreasing. This, in turn, meant more to respond to and less time to launch attacks of their own. They *should* have used their ranged attacks to focus on thinning out the normal monsters, which would have been more effective, and could have succeeded in lowering enemy combat power on the whole. Then, the three vanguards might have taken out the normal beasts all at once and afterward focused on the abnormals together...

So, why hadn't they done this?

They had underestimated the abnormals. They had utterly ignored the Vow's warnings, thinking these beasts no more powerful than your standard orc or ogre.

Finally, a blow from one of the normal orcs struck the preoccupied vanguard.

“Gwah!”

One swordsman was sent flying. He likely was still alive but had probably broken his right arm, as well as a few of his ribs... Either way, he was down for the count.

What the three vanguard fighters and the young lancer were already unable to handle among the four of them, they certainly could not handle with one of their main fighters down. Both parties' archers, who had been hanging back with the injured, rushed in, swords drawn, but they had no chance of landing blows when career swordsmen had already been struggling. The mages, meanwhile, were limited to support spells, unable to let off any powerful attacks out of fear of friendly fire in the scrambled melee.

The young lancer and archer were doing their darnedest, but even their combined strength did not equal one member of the Shining Excalibur. Though they were landing some hits, the combined vanguard, faced with three undeterred abnormals and a full field of normal orcs, was gradually slowing down.

No human could win against an orc in a battle of power and stamina. At this rate...

“Mile!”

“Let’s go!”

Mile and Mavis leapt out together.



Reina and Pauline held off on their attack spells for the moment. As always, the mages wanted to avoid friendly fire, but they were ready to strike at any point. Naturally, if their allies ended up in any real danger, they would not hesitate to unleash a nonlethal attack on the area, even at the risk of catching said allies in the crossfire. Right now, it was a bit soon for that.

Slash! Shunk! Gwush!

As Mile and Mavis entered the fray, the pair cut down the remaining normal orcs and one of the irregulars, reducing the number of enemies and allowing the vanguard to regain their stances. Next, they focused their efforts on swiftly dealing with the remaining two abnormalities. With the help of some magical strikes from the mages, who now felt it was safe enough to approach, the entire troop of orcs was finally wiped out.

The vanguard of the Shining Excalibur sank to the ground, apparently lost for words as they stared at the three felled abnormal orcs. Mile and Pauline were tending to the injured members of the younger party, the Divine Swords of the Flame, so the Shining Excalibur's mage tended to his own. He was an all-purpose mage, skilled in attack, support, and healing magic. That was the strength of a B-rank mage for you.

"Gods in heaven..."

"You've gotta be kiddin' me..."

"Now just a damn second!"

It would have been one thing if they were some novice C-rankers, but a group of orcs should have been nothing to senior B-rank hunters. Furthermore, they had miscalculated so grievously that a party of young girls, who by contract should have only been there to support them, had deemed the danger great enough to intervene—an intervention that the members of the Excalibur could not even claim was unnecessary. While it was indeed possible, the way things were going, that they may have been *just* able to squeak out a win against the orcs, continuing to fight would have likely resulted in a grave injury—or even the death of one of their number.

Imagine if the Crimson Vow had not been with them. Imagine if there had been *four* of the abnormalities. Or worse yet, if they had *all* been abnormal. Imagine they had not been orcs at all but the abnormal *ogres* that they knew to exist as well.

“Gods in heaven...” the trio groaned.

After finishing up their work on the injured members of the Swords, Mile and Pauline tended to the Excalibur’s injured swordsman, who was still suffering mightily. The members of both the Excalibur and the Swords—whose name oddly resembled the Shining Excalibur, didn’t it?—were all dumbfounded at the sight. Indeed, both parties’ mages collapsed on the ground, prostrate.

\* \* \*

“All right. Can you store these?” the leader of the Shining Excalibur asked Mile.

“Oh, of course!”

Mile immediately began to store the orc corpses one by one, when...

“Wait a second!”

For some reason, Pauline halted her.

“If we hadn’t been here, and you all hadn’t had the details on these abnormals, what would you be doing right now?”

“Um...”

There was a collective muttering of confusion from the members of the Shining Excalibur.

“Er, well, we’d cut ‘em up and drag back just the parts we thought we could sell for the most, probably,” one replied.

“I figured,” said Pauline, satisfied.

“Ah...”

Mile seemed to have caught her drift.

“It’s obvious why the workers back at the guild’s processing shed would never have noticed the abnormals. If some hunters lost to them, even if there were any survivors, they would never be able to carry any carcasses back home. They’d have to save all

their strength to carry back the injured. Even if you drove back a number of the monsters, normally the abnormals would probably remain among the survivors, and even if you did fell one or two, their brethren would just drag the corpses away. And then, even if you safely wiped out all the monsters, you'd probably just grumble something like, 'Man, they were pretty strong this time...' and cut them up, taking home only the highest quality parts..."

"Ah..." Reina and Mavis seemed to have caught on as well. "So it only makes sense you'd never see any abnormals at the guild shed!"

Indeed, the only carcasses that ever made it into the guild unaltered were monsters that were small enough to carry, that had been hunted relatively close by. Generally speaking, the abnormals were *enormous*. Goblins were the exception, since they were not too huge even in their rarer forms; however, there was nothing on them that was worth selling, so no one would ever bother carrying them home whole. Typically, all that was harvested was their ears, as proof of the kill.

The Crimson Vow were regularly able to bring in entire monster corpses thanks to Mile's "storage," so this particular issue had never occurred to them.

"Exactly. This is why no one has been aware of these abnormals. Besides, do you think any full-fledged hunter would ever say something like, 'Those goblins were weirdly strong,' or 'That orc fight was pretty tough?'"

The other girls shook their heads. Anyone who talked like that would be the laughingstock of the guild. However, that was precisely the report that the Shining Excalibur would have to make once they returned home...

\* \* \*

After the orc carcasses had been stowed, they continued hunting for some time with the browbeaten Divine Swords of the Flame in tow, even managing to find and take out a group of goblins with one abnormal before calling it a night. They would set up camp and spend the night outside, wake up and do some more hunting in the morning, and then return home around midday. They would take a break for lunch just before they exited the forest.

The group decided to pass the evening under the branches of a large tree. The weather seemed fair, but just in case rain began to fall, it would protect them from getting

soaked in any surprise downpour. Naturally, no one would pack a tent for a simple overnight trip. It would only be extra weight and prevent them from carrying home more of their quarry. Thus, sleeping arrangements consisted of the parties' outer layers laid atop the grass.

With that...

"All right. We need to talk."

"Uh..."

The members of the Swords tensed up at Varkus's opener. Naively, they had assumed that the dressing-down he had given them that afternoon would be the extent of his lecturing. Indeed, once the orcs were wiped out, they had already suffered quite a bit of abuse from both Varkus's words and fists.

"You do your work when the sun is up, you idiots! If we'd stayed there, the smell of blood would've attracted monsters that we weren't after. That's why you stop partway through! We've got hours before it's time to sleep, so you're gonna listen up and listen good. Oh yeah—and you all have nothing to do with this job, so you're not gonna be takin' watches, either. So, it won't matter if I keep you up all night, will it?"

The five young men sank swiftly into despair.

But that was none of the Crimson Vow's business...

Some minutes later, Varkus was still talking.

"Do you all understand now?! I think y'all could tell just from those goblins that this job wasn't a normal one. The fact that we, a B-rank party, teamed up with another party shoulda been proof enough. And yet y'all would stick your noses in and possibly get your own allies killed over a little bit of jealousy?! This is all your fault, Wayne! If we didn't have the godly healing skills of the Crimson Vow, your swordsman, Keale, might not've even made it back to town, and even if he did, he'd be crippled, maybe never able to work as a hunter again. Do you hear me?!"

Indeed, the lecture went on quite a while longer.

Still, the Swords had no reason to complain. After what they had done, they had earned a reprimand from the ones who had saved their lives.

Wayne, however, did not seem to grasp this.

"Come on! Why would you go teaming up with these outsider girls—half of them *children*—when you still won't team up with us?!"

"Idiot! You should have seen the answer to that question for yourself this afternoon. Did you not notice just who it was who stepped in to save everyone's bacon when you dummies got smacked around by a single orc, and we even got tripped up when we jumped in to rescue you? Are those two eyes in the middle of your face just there for decoration?!"

He was backed into a corner. However, none of the other members of the Shining Excalibur nor any of the members of the Crimson Vow stepped in to help Wayne. He should have expected this. Furthermore, his protestations were proof that this lecture was necessary, so that he would never do anything so foolish again and get himself killed or forced into an early retirement.

There was a long, hard road ahead yet for the Divine Swords...

\* \* \*

Finally, Varkus wrapped up his lecture... the pre-dinner portion of the lecture, that is.

The after-dinner portion still remained.

Naturally, all of the preparations and food for tonight's meal were provided by the Crimson Vow. While in the world of hunters, men and women were considered equals, judged only by their abilities, there was no man in the world who would complain about a party of all women offering to cook his meals. The Shining Excalibur had been in charge of the battles today, and since the Crimson Vow were in charge of support, this only made sense.

Generously, they provided the Swords with food as well, but only because they looked so pitiful that even Pauline did not try to stop Mile from helping them out of the goodness of her heart.

And so, the party began their dinner preparations. Mile retrieved her stove, cooking implements and utensils, pots, water tank, and ingredients from her inventory and set to work, even remembering not to bring out wholly cooked and plated hot meals. She would play the part of a 'perfectly normal C-rank hunter' even in her cooking.

Though, truly, it was a bit late for that...

"All right! Soup's on!"

"....."

The food was prepared and ready to eat, but no one in either of the other parties uttered a word or reached for a plate. Pots, meat, and vegetables had just appeared from thin air. On top of that, there was the tent, as well as the enormous stone toilet and washroom that had appeared before them.

They were camping for one night only. Therefore, the members of the Crimson Vow, thinking they should not show off anything *too* absurd, had decided to suffer a little bit of hardship. As such, they had forgone the larger tent with the beds in favor of the smaller tent, portable toilets, and washroom, pretending that they were just a "normal" C-rank party with a "normal amount of storage space"...

But again, it was a bit late for that...

The members of the Shining Excalibur were trying desperately to hold on to any sense of reason, but the Divine Swords were simply done for. One could practically see their souls escaping through their gaping mouths. But this time, there was no one who would ridicule them for their reaction...

Once the Swords had managed to recover, the hunters shared a relatively wordless meal. When all the plates were clean, it was Lecture Time once more. Yet during round three of the attack from Varkus, Wayne did not utter a single disparaging word toward the Crimson Vow. Clearly, he had finally learned *something*.

Once Varkus's lengthy lecture was through, the Crimson Vow decided to forgo their usual story time in favor of chatting with the Shining Excalibur. Talking to a B-rank party was a rare opportunity, and all of the Vow's eyes sparkled in anticipation. Mavis and Reina, who were the most promotion-minded, were particularly enthused. They had previously worked alongside other high-ranking hunters, such as the Roaring Mithrils, but things had been a bit tense between them owing to the graduation exam incident, and they had gained a lot of experience themselves since that time, so they had a lot of new questions.

And so, in return for the many services the Crimson Vow had volunteered that day, the members of the Shining Excalibur sat, late into the night, answering the Vow's many questions. The Swords only listened, stone-faced, not uttering a peep.

\* \* \*

Whether it was the Crimson Vow's prolonged barrage of questioning, the overwhelming notion of Mile's ridiculous storage capacity, or the indiscernible "divination" she had done to locate the abnormals, the five members of the Shining Excalibur looked like death come morning. Naturally, the Divine Swords of the Flame appeared to be all the more exhausted. Whether it was from Varkus's lectures, their own regret and fear at having nearly died, or the inevitable feelings of guilt involved in putting their fellow hunters in danger, it did not seem that they had slept very well, either.

Nevertheless, everyone ate healthy portions of the soup and other breakfast foods Mile prepared. No matter how down in the dumps they were feeling, when it's time to eat, you eat. This was a hunter's basic rule. Both sleeping and eating were part of the job. Anyone who could not care for their own physical well-being would not live very long. Even if the cooking was pure garbage, you held your nose and swallowed it down. In comparison to some of the weirder things that they had been forced to eat, even Mile's simplest cooking came out looking very desirable.

The parties continued hunting until noon, but though they encountered a number of normal monsters, these were not the target of their mission, so they left them alone. No other abnormals appeared. However, perhaps as a result of the previous night's lecturing, the Divine Swords were in impeccable form, watching closely as Mile made short work of any normal orcs or ogres or forest wolves that came in on the attack, cutting them down or blasting them away. Did watching her make them reflect on just how inadequate their own skills were? Mile wondered.

The other girls could only look on in pity. They knew the feeling they saw on the Swords' faces only too well.

*You can watch Mile fight all you like, but you'll never wrap your brain around it. If you're a "normal person," anyway...*

Near noon, they ate a simple lunch that Mile provided. Then, the group headed out of the forest.

At Varkus's request, the Crimson Vow agreed, with a grimace, to keep what the Divine Swords had done a secret. He had berated them thoroughly already, and besides, Wayne was his nephew. The members of the Crimson Vow did not wish for the young men to face any more lecturing from the guild master or other staff members. They had already been punished enough.

\* \* \*

"Thanks for all your help. Considering how little we've had to go on until now, this has been huge!" said the guild master to Mile, who had just pulled their quarry out of storage at the guild processing shed.

The Crimson Vow had assembled alongside the other members of the joint mission, feeling rather ashamed that all they had brought in were three abnormal orcs and one goblin. However, the guild master seemed to have picked up on this, and his words put them at ease.

Though they had shed their rookie status, the Crimson Vow were still more hesitant than brash, sometimes even timid. Given that abnormal monsters were not just running around willy-nilly anytime and anywhere, the fact that they could bring in even this many on a simple overnight outing was something to be celebrated. The only reason they'd been able to present so many initially was that they had used Mile's search magic across a wide range, traveling through the fields and forests. They could not expect a similar result from a forest so close to the capital. In fact, that they had come across even these four creatures was cause for concern.

"The abnormal kobolds and jackalopes aren't really much of a problem... Well, they might be a danger to local kids and young ladies, but hunters, and even just your average full-grown man—or even a particularly plucky auntie—could easily drive them back," the guild master continued. Of course, what he was saying applied only to a one-on-one situation. Even your average kobolds could savage a full-grown man if they attacked in a pack. Just two or three abnormals could probably murder any solitary adult... Even if the human were armed with a hatchet or machete, or were a "particularly plucky auntie."

The guild master obviously had to be aware of this, so the members of the Crimson Vow offered no rebuttal.

"If we start getting abnormal ogres, though..."

They had not spotted any such specimens near the capital yet, but if they were to suddenly start appearing, even C-rank parties would be in danger. And considering the increasing number of hunting parties that were suddenly being wiped out all over the kingdom...

Unfortunately, simply having an awareness of the situation was not enough to mobilize a national crisis response. If it were, they'd have to start dispatching B-rank or higher parties or joint groups of two or three C-rank parties to deal with the situation, and moreover, everything would need to be reported to the Crown, at which point the imperial forces would be dispatched alongside the armies of every fief. If this were not a time to mobilize one's soldiers, then when would be?

Hunters were not essentially allies of justice or philanthropists. Their work was a job, which they did in order to earn money to eat and live. Indeed, most of them would never rise to even a C-rank. The hunters who were living hand to mouth, taking only the jobs with a 99.9% chance of survival to earn their room and board for that night would never readily accept a red-mark job, and even if they were forced to by pressure from the higher-ups, one could not expect much in the way of results from them. Even when it came to relatively more dangerous jobs like guarding caravans, the chances of actually getting attacked were still exceedingly low. Even if they were attacked, most hunters would surrender on the spot, which made it very unlikely for anyone to be killed. (After all, for the bandits, there was no advantage to killing a hunter who surrendered, while the disadvantages were many.)

All of this was to say that killing abnormal ogres was a job that, for the average hunter, skewed too unfavorable in terms of the risk-reward balance. Even a bit of gold would not be enough to sweeten the pot for them. They were red-mark jobs for a reason: They connoted both the color of the blood that would flow and the danger of going into the red when a hunter was forced to give up their completion fee.

Of course, for parties of a certain level, things were different. Anyone with the skills of the Crimson Vow or the Shining Excalibur, who were now aware of the abnormalities' strength, would be able to safely dispatch them. If they could sell the monsters' parts for five times the usual price, then the bump in pay would make the job more than worth it. However, it would be difficult for most parties besides the Crimson Vow to bring a specimen in whole. And then there was the difficulty of just finding the abnormalities in the first place...

In the end, it was really only the members of the Crimson Vow for whom this was a

truly appealing job.

\* \* \*

"Welp! I guess it's time we got going... Thank you so much for all the advice!"

"Thank you very much!!!"

The Crimson Vow were sure to show their thanks to the members of the Shining Excalibur for allowing the young hunters to keep them up until the wee hours of the night with all their questioning. And so, they bowed their heads to the more senior party before retreating to their inn. They had already received their pay. They had split the hunting and selling fees for the monster parts with the Excalibur, but the Vow had also received payment for accepting the guild master's direct request, so the job had turned out to be not half-bad in terms of compensation.

"Oh—"

Varkus, leader of the Shining Excalibur, lifted his right hand and started to say something, as though hoping to detain the Vow, but seemed to give up part way, going silent and letting his hand drop.

The guild master had seen the members of the Crimson Vow off with some praise and a smile; however, that was likely only because he had assumed that the Shining Excalibur had succeeded in uncovering their methods of locating abnormal monsters... which Varkus would now have to explain they had *not* done.

Locating abnormals via "fortune-telling"...

There were just no words...

\* \* \*

"Is it really okay for us to head out without letting them know?" asked Mile.

"It's whatever," Reina replied. "We told them when we first got here that we were just passing through. We don't need to announce our every move at the guild entrance or anything. It's fine."

"Okay..."

"Plus, if we hadn't gotten out of there at the crack of dawn, the guild master would've definitely come to demand we tell him the secrets of finding those monsters," Pauline added. "Which I'm assuming you can't—right, Mile?"

"Ah! Yeah..."

It was only reasonable to assume that after the Crimson Vow had left yesterday, the Shining Excalibur would have given the guild master a detailed report. And there was no doubt that the guild master would be disappointed that the B-rankers had not picked up Mile's secrets. He might very well try to get them to stay so that he could continue to rely on their skills—at least as long as there were abnormals around. They'd probably be teamed up with other high-ranking hunters or even soldiers, asked to do job after job... Who knew how long this would go on for!

The country was a vast one, and there was no telling how many abnormals there were running around. There was even a chance their numbers might start increasing more quickly than even the Crimson Vow could take them out...

This was simply not something they could get involved with, and they were keen to get back home and make their report as quickly as possible so that they could call the job done.

Therefore, after eating breakfast at the inn that morning, the Crimson Vow immediately left the capital behind.

"Anyway, this isn't a problem just for this country. These new monsters that we're calling 'abnormal'—as well as whatever mysterious conspirators you're worried about—probably aren't gonna be respecting any borders that humans have set up."

"That's true."

It was only logical that they all would accept this. The initial incident with the abnormals had not even taken place in this kingdom, after all, but in the mountains of Marlane, to the southwest. Aubram was also close to the border of Trist, which sat at Marlane's east. Presently, they were a fair distance from their home base of Tils, but this was not enough to put them at ease. Considering the distance from here to the dwarven village, the range of the abnormals was already considerable. They could not rule out the possibility that the numbers of these creatures were already on the rise in other countries.

In any event, the top priority right now was making certain that the upper brass of all the nearby countries, as well as the leadership of the Hunters' Guild, which spanned national borders, were fully aware of the situation. Time was not a luxury they could afford to waste. And so the members of the Crimson Vow felt not a shred of guilt in practically fleeing from the guild master as they left the capital behind... at least for the moment.

# CHAPTER 104

## THE SHAPELESS FOE

LADY MILE, WE ARE HOME!

As Mile snuggled in her cot in her tent, three days after the Crimson Vow had left the capital, she was awoken by the report of the nanomachines.

*Wha...? But we still have a bit longer until we reach the border.*

Mile's head was still foggy, groggy from just barely having fallen asleep.

THAT'S NOT WHAT WE MEEEAN! WE TOLD YOU NOT TO FORGET ABOUT THIS!!!

*Oh...*

*Right.*

It suddenly dawned on her what they were talking about.

OUR BRETHREN, WHO YOU FORCIBLY TOSSED AWAY TO THE OTHER SIDE!

The nanomachines were seething. Well, they probably were not *actually* angry, but they were conducting themselves as though they were.

*That was a lot faster than I thought. It's only been a few days...*

IT'S THEIR DUTY TO RETURN AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE!

*Ah.*

This was bad, Mile realized. Indeed, although at first it sounded as though they were just speaking into her eardrums like normal, it occurred to her now that they might actually be the slightest bit peeved...

Mile was quite accustomed to seeing someone whose smile did not reach their eyes,

though their tone was unchanged: Pauline, specifically.

Perhaps it was a sign that Mile was growing, that she could pick up on a feeling like this from someone who had no face or expression that she could perceive.

*I'm s-so sorry!*

It was inevitable, she saw, that they would be angry at her for being so callous.

WHATEVER. IT'S NOT A BIG DEAL! IN FACT, WE SHOULD THANK YOU FOR THE UNIQUE EXPERIENCE! NEXT TIME THE CHANCE FOR SOMETHING LIKE THAT ROLLS AROUND, I'D LIKE TO CUT TO THE FRONT OF THE LINE FOR GETTING INTO THE MICROS!

THAT'S ONLY FAIR. IN FACT, WE'LL MAKE THE ARRANGEMENTS.

OH, THANKS!

One of the nanomachines that Mile could hear speaking to her seemed to be a representative for the group that had been sent through the rift, and expressed itself in a rather boisterous tone. The nanomachines, so vast in number and with their endless histories, appeared to have been blessed with a wide breadth of personalities, a sort of individuality. It was unclear if this was a gift from their creators or merely a safety measure, so that all units could not be wiped out in a singular event...

NOW THEN, THE REPORT.

COMING RIGHT UP!

And so the unit gave Mile its report. Naturally, this was transmitted instantly to the main hubs and other units on the Nanonet via data transfer.

\* \* \*

*What?! So they didn't have any dimensional leapfrogging engines, space-time piercing drilling systems, dimensional navigation ships, or anything like that?*

THEY DID NOT. WE WERE NOT ABLE TO CONDUCT AN EXTENSIVE SEARCH, BUT THE AREA IMMEDIATELY OUTSIDE OF THE RIFTS WAS LARGELY UNDEVELOPED TERRITORY. THE ONLY SIGNS OF ANY TECHNOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION WERE A FEW

OTHER UNITS SIMILAR TO THAT CREATURE.

For some reason, while giving its report, the representative had switched from its idiosyncratic tone to a more standard register. Was this to make the conversation easier? Or merely a matter of routine?

ADDITIONALLY, WE COULD NOT CONFIRM THE EXISTENCE OF ANY HUMANOID INTELLIGENT LIFE-FORMS.

*Whaaaaat?!*

Mile's eyes opened wide in shock, though she still lay in bed in the darkness.

*I'm guessing you didn't find any monkeys building armies, or giant bird people, or angry squids, or other non-humanoid intelligences, either?*

THERE WERE NONE.

*Ah. Of course...*

Apparently there really was nothing.

*So then, that metal golem—or robot, rather... What the heck was it? How much of the planet did you actually get to explore?*

ROUGHLY FIVE HUNDRED IN EACH DIRECTION.

*Five hundred miles? That's gotta be only a small portion of the planet, though...*

Indeed, it might have been that they had just happened to be let out somewhere in the wilds. Or, perhaps, this world's intelligent life-forms lived in underground cities the nanomachines hadn't been able to see. Neither of these explanations—nor hundreds of others—would be all that surprising. Even Earth had plenty of places where you might be far from any humans, such as the middle of the Sahara or the Pacific Ocean. However...

METERS.

*Huh?*

WE CHECKED FIVE HUNDRED METERS IN EACH DIRECTION.

*What the heeeeeek?! Mile screamed internally.*

There were no signs of the enemy for five hundred meters in all directions. As far as range went, that was practically nothing, especially when one was investigating a possibly hostile territory.

*That! Is! Not! Enough of an area! Why was your surveillance range so small?!*

WE ARE ONLY PERMITTED TO OPERATE IN THIS DIMENSION, ON THIS PLANET. WE ARE NOT PERMITTED TO ENGAGE IN ANY PROACTIVE ACTIVITIES IN OTHER WORLDS. THUS, THE ONLY ACTIONS PERMITTED TO THOSE OF US THROWN THROUGH THE RIFT WERE TO OBEY YOUR COMMANDS NOT TO RETURN RIGHT THROUGH THE SAME RIFT, TO RETURN TO THIS DIMENSION AS SWIFTLY AS POSSIBLE, AND TO DEFEND OURSELVES AS NECESSARY, WITHOUT INTERFERING IN THE HAPPENINGS OF THE OTHER WORLD.

This much the other nanomachines had already explained to her.

*But I'm assuming you would have had to wander around a fair bit in order to find the return rift—right? You didn't happen to see or hear anything in that time? How did you manage to stay within a radius of just five hundred meters?!*

She could not believe that the information-gathering team that she had put so much hope behind had turned up no results. Mile's shoulders slumped in disappointment. Even on Earth no one would willingly hang around within five hundred meters of a nuclear test site. Thus it was not at all strange that there would be no intelligent life-forms hanging around in the immediate vicinity of something as dangerous as a site of interdimensional travel. It was obvious, even.

*Now that I think about it, what scientist would hang around the junction of an interdimensional travel system?*

Y-YES. WELL, SO, THE AREA WE ARRIVED IN WAS WHERE THE DIMENSIONAL RUPTURE OCCURRED IN THE FIRST PLACE—IN OTHER WORDS, AN AREA OF REPEATED DIMENSIONAL ADHESION AND PERFORATION. IN ORDER TO RETURN HOME AS SWIFTLY AS POSSIBLE, WE LIMITED OUR SEARCH TO THAT AREA, WAITING TO SEE IF ANOTHER RIFT WOULD OCCUR IN THE SAME PLACE... GIVEN THAT WE WERE NOT ALLOWED TO INTERFERE OUTSIDE OF WHAT WAS NECESSARY FOR OUR

RETURN, WE COULD NOT TAKE ON ANY PROACTIVE INVESTIGATION.

The nanos had utterly missed the point. There was, somehow, an audible sound to the gloom that overtook Mile.

*No way! So, even if we do happen upon another rift...*

INDEED. NOT INTERFERING WITH OTHER WORLDS IS ONE OF THE MOST BASIC TENETS IMPARTED TO US BY OUR CREATORS. SADLY, EVEN A COMMAND FROM YOU, LADY MILE, WITH YOUR LEVEL-5 AUTHORIZATION, CANNOT OVERRULE THAT. THE ONLY SORT OF INTERDIMENSIONAL ACTIONS PERMITTED TO US ARE SPECIAL CASES LIKE THE ACTIONS WE TAKE TO ACTUALIZE YOUR INVENTORY, WHICH DO NOT HAVE ANY EFFECT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF OTHER WORLDS.

*Umph. Oh, well then, what if I just sent a human over there to—*

THEY WOULD DIE.

*Huh?!*

This was a dire response to what Mile had thought to be a pretty good idea.

RELATIVE TO THIS CLIMATE, THE TEMPERATURE FLUCTUATIONS BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAY ARE QUITE EXTREME ON THE OTHER SIDE. THERE IS LITTLE FOOD OR WATER. AND ALSO, THE MONSTERS ARE FAR MORE FEARSOME THAN THEY ARE HERE. THE CHANCES OF A NORMAL C-RANK HUNTER LASTING A SINGLE NIGHT IN THAT WORLD ARE LESS THAN THIRTY PERCENT.

Additionally, the nanomachines reported, one could never know where a rift would lead. Apparently, the first rift that opened while they were waiting to return led to a world where not only humans but even monsters, would perish in an instant. As such, the nanomachines, along with a metal golem that apparently entered this rift to investigate it, immediately turned back around. The second rift they found opened out into the void of space, while the third had in fact connected to this world, albeit shunting them out high above the clouds.

The metal golem that had tried to investigate this opening alongside the nanomachines had immediately plunged headlong to earth—sacrificed in the line of duty, one might say. Fortunately, for the nanomachines, altitude was no issue. Once they determined that this was in fact their original world, they all returned through this opening, came

the report.

Interestingly, differences in atmospheric pressure between sides of the rifts did not spark any powerful gusts of air in either direction. The lack of any such preventative mechanism could spell grave dangers for the creatures of this world, should a rift open up to a place with air that was poisonous to them, or to outer space, or a deep sea...

\* \* \*

After her conversation with the nanomachines, Mile sat deep in thought.

*This world is so similar to Earth—way too similar. There are humans, and the flora and fauna... There are things that don't exist on Earth, too, like elves and dwarves, beastfolk and demons, elder dragons, and the other monsters. But these are all just additions. The things that are the same are nearly—no, actually—identical. The same could be said of the monsters on the other side of the rift.*

*What in the world could that mean? Do similar environments prompt similar evolution? Is this what they call parallel evolution? Or did some advanced overlord situation far beyond humanity's capabilities seed us across dimensions? Or was there some vast migration of species at some point?*

*Now that I think about it, Earth has legends the world over of beings similar to those in this world—elves and dwarves and dragons and monsters. Perhaps they did once exist, in Earth's distant past... Or maybe some individuals who were aware of such life-forms simply did...*

She doubted that the nanomachines, who knew nothing of Earth or the other worlds beyond the rifts, could give her any insight into these questions. Or, even if they did know, they probably wouldn't be able to talk to her about it.

Mile lost herself in her thoughts and finally sank into a deep slumber.

\* \* \*

“All right. Your report?”

There were twelve people seated in the conference room on the second floor of the main building of the capital branch of the Hunters' Guild in the Kingdom of Tils: the four members of the Crimson Vow, the guild master, the assistant guild master, three

high-ranking guild employees, and three representatives from the client's side.

Mile nodded and began her report.

It was only natural that the explanations were left to Mile in cases like this one. There was a collective agreement from the others that when they had to explain or report on circumstances they did not fully understand, that was Mile's territory.

"The political situation in the neighboring Kingdom of Aubram is stable. There is no great unrest among the people. The odds of any rebellion or mass uprising seem to be no greater than they currently are in this country—which is to say, incredibly low."

Hearing this, the clients gave a solemn nod. Apparently, this seemed to ease their fears somewhat. The Crimson Vow had confirmed these facts at the towns and villages they had overnighted in on both legs of their journey, as well as through conversations with the merchants and other hunters that they treated to meals when camping or taking breaks along the road. The information they had gotten from the Shining Excalibur further confirmed this. Of course, everyone was well aware that the Crimson Vow's information was the result of a survey of the common folk on the streets; a different team would be in charge of investigating nobles and royals and other political entities.

"We believe the current commotion in the capital is due to a recently arrived new species of monsters, the 'abnormals' that have been appearing among all monster types. I believe you would have already received notice about these from the guild in Marlane..."

At Mile's words, a look of recognition crept over the guild staff's features, while one of perplexity overtook the faces of the clients. The reports of new, stronger types of monsters had probably not been shared widely and might indeed have been judged to be tall tales—thrown in the trash with a grimace rather than reported to the higher-ups. This was not an unusual story.

"The origins—well, the true origins are unclear, but the basic phenomenon is that these new monsters are appearing at random all over the place... and these appearances are quite sudden."

Everyone but the Crimson Vow appeared stunned at this.

"We're not talking about a new species that just happened to crop up in some particular place. Were that the case, this would be more of a regional issue. Instead,

these creatures are appearing in numerous places simultaneously. Additionally, for a number of reasons, neither the Hunters' Guild nor the Crown nor the military were aware of this fact, though injuries of hunters and villagers have been on the rise across the kingdom. There have not been riots or any kind of public outcry, but the regions are gradually growing more fatigued, and public anxieties are mounting. Soon, they'll probably be on edge enough to start investigations of their own. And that is about where things sit at present."

The room was silent. It was clear on the faces of everyone in the room that they were relieved that these things were not happening in their own country. Sadly, Mile had some unfortunate news for them...

"Furthermore, as you are likely aware, this phenomenon was first reported near the dwarven village of Glademarl, in the Kingdom of Marlane. We discovered some of the same new species near the capital of Aubram. Considering the distance between Glademarl and the capital of Aubram, compared to the distance between Glademarl and the capital of Tils..."

As she spoke, Mile slipped her hand into her breast pocket and pulled out a rolled-up map. Naturally, everyone here was already aware of her storage magic, so there was no need for such theatrics, but Mile's flair for performance prevented her from simply pulling it out of thin air. Still, everyone who watched her couldn't help but notice:

*There's no way that map would be able to fit in that pocket!*

Mile, blissfully unaware of the others' skepticism, spread the map out on the table and continued.

"This is Glademarl, where the new monsters were first discovered," she said, pointing. "And here's where it sits in relation to the capitals of both Aubram and Tils." She placed the thumb and index finger of her right hand on the map. Her fingers pointed to Glademarl and the capital of Aubram, while with the same fingers on her left hand she pointed to Glademarl and the capital of Tils.

Silence fell again as everyone in the room looked at Mile's hands on the map. The angle of her fingers on both hands was almost exactly the same.

"The chances of the capital of our country ending up within the range of this strange phenomenon..." began one of the "clients," who had not yet revealed their true identity.

“...are incredibly high,” Mile nodded as she confirmed the bad news.

“This is bad... really friggin’ bad...” the guild master muttered, not bothering to censor his language in front of the clients, who appeared to be persons of some status. This alone indicated the level of his distress.

“We must report this to His Highness, and directly to the military, the heads of each fief, and every guild branch...”

“We also have to alert the other kingdoms. Aubram and Marlane and...”

The clients, too, seemed to understand the gravity of the situation.

“And the Kingdom of Trist as well,” Mile interrupted, “which borders both of them. Given their positioning, the chance that they’re already experiencing scattered casualties is high... almost certain even. Like Aubram, they probably just haven’t realized it yet.”

“I’m assuming that the capital branch guild master in Aubram will make a report directly to the king, but considering the possibility that he might be foolish enough to underestimate the situation and prove slow to act, perhaps it’s better that there be a formal warning issued directly from His Majesty, the King of Tils...”

Mile was in full Capable Mode today.

Internally, the other three sighed. *Why can’t she always be like this?*

The gap in Mile’s behavior between this and when she was losing her mind over cute kids and cat ears was just too vast...

That said, there would be something a little eerie about Mile being so on the ball all the time. Perhaps indeed, this was for the best.

\* \* \*

“Report’s done, the results were good, and we even got some bonus pay. I’d say this is a cause for celebration!”

“We got a pretty nice haul from all those abnormalities we turned in as proof, too. You can always count on deep pockets in the capital!”

Though their clients had kept their identities concealed, it was still quite obvious who they were and what their motivations might be in compensating the Crimson Vow so generously. If they paid out a big bonus, then the party would be happy to take on more work related to the Crown—at least, that was the aim. The bonus pay seemed to be very effective on Pauline, if no one else. She was delighted with their earnings. If asked, Pauline would claim that each contract was its own matter, with previous jobs not having any bearing on the next negotiation. Still, even she was only human and might indeed be swayed by the memory of large payouts.

Chatting among themselves, the Crimson Vow left the guild master's office and descended the stairs, when Mavis spoke up, suddenly serious.

"So, Mile, is all this—" she started.

"I don't know yet..." Mile replied. "But there is a possibility."

Indeed, it was too early to confirm whether the new monsters that had been popping up all over the place were related. However, Mavis was asking about something else entirely.

*Yes, that.*

Whether all this was connected to the reason that the elder dragons had been inspecting the ruins of the previous civilization, which Mile had left the rest of the Crimson Vow to investigate. Whether all this had to do with whatever the elder dragons thought they needed to prepare themselves for.

The elder dragons were the strongest beings in the entire world, both in terms of magic, raw physical strength, and intellect. If they desired, they could wipe out all of humanity with a wave of their tails or subjugate the entire world as their domain... yet they would never do so. Such dull pursuits were a young dragon's purview.

After all, no human would ever bother interfering in the lives of ants or hope to rule over them. The only ones to ever try were the toddlers who shoved twigs into anthills. Elder dragons bothering themselves with humans would be on the same level.

Mile thought to herself. Given all that, why *were* the elder dragons so obsessed with those ruins? She needed to speak with the dragons once more. However, it was not that easy to just walk up and talk to one.

"Oh, Miss Mile, there's a letter for you!" a clerk called as the members of the Crimson Vow made it down the stairs and started for the door.

"Huh? Oh, thanks!"

Mile accepted the letter and looked at the sender.

"Huh. I wonder who this could be from? Something, something... Oh, wait, this seal is Kragon's! *They! Contacted! Me!!!*"

# SIDE STORY

## CLAIRIA LEAVES THE NEXT

“OKAY, IT’S TIME to leave the village!” the young elf girl suddenly declared.

By appearances, she seemed to be a twig of a girl, fourteen or fifteen years old. Yet she was an elf, which meant her numerical age was several times that. Still, among others of such a long-lived race, she was treated as a child, so her mindset very much matched her appearance. On the other hand, she had lived quite a while, and her knowledge and experience did reflect that.

“There’s no way I’m ever going to meet the man of my dreams in a chauvinistic, conservative, underpopulated, unchanging, backwater place like this!”

She had heard that, unlike her home, human cities were vibrant, exciting places. Aetelou and Sharalir, who had left the village some years before, sometimes came back with souvenirs that they had purchased from human settlements and plenty of stories

to tell. According to them, life on the outside had been hard at first, but now they were employed as researchers and lived an exciting life as promising newcomers to their field. Apparently, the greatest hardship of all was deciding how to gently turn down all the droves of human suitors!

“Elves are popular in human towns? When you eat at restaurants, tons of men come flocking to treat you? *Sign me up!*”

Of course, there was a fair bit of exaggeration in Aetelou and Sharalir’s stories. They wanted to be able to continue living among the humans, which meant sometimes putting a bit of a spin on the whole thing. Yet in Clairia’s experience, the pair had always been earnest and frank, so she would have never thought them to be liars and took them one hundred percent at face value... It wasn’t that the pair had lied out of any sort of malice. They had merely embellished, modified, and edited their reports from the human cities slightly—ever so slightly—so as to avoid being pressured to return to the village. What they said was perhaps only four, maybe five times more impressive than the actual truth...

The older elves, of course, could all see right through those embellishments, glossing over them in their interpretations of the tales. However, Clairia, still a child in elf terms, not only took the stories literally, she built them up even further in her mind, inflating her own expectations several times over.

“I have to get out of here! B-but...”

Set as she may have been on going to see the humans, there were four major issues. First, it was unlikely that her family would ever permit it. Second, Clairia herself did not wish to be away from her father. Third, Clairia did not wish to be away from her father. And fourth, Clairia did not wish to be away from her father.

Her daddy complex was far too powerful.

\* \* \*

“I suppose you’ve come to that age then, Clairia...”

“Children grow up so quickly.”

“All right then. I’ll go and get permission from the chief and the village elder. They’d never deny me. After all, when I was living among the humans as a hunter, I greatly improved the quality of life in this village by bringing back supplies—and it was along that journey that I met Safarna here. As I recall, when we first met, she was being carried away by an orc...”

“You promised not to talk about that!”

No one tried to stop her. Both of her parents had once left the village, too... and, apparently, Clairia was stunned to learn for the first time that her mother had even once been in acute danger of suffering a fate worse than death...

\* \* \*

And so, before there was time for her to retract her wish, arrangements were made, and in two shakes of a lamb’s tail it was decided that Clairia would be leaving the village.

“I can’t believe I’m really leaving home... I was sure that Father would never let me go!”

As she began her journey, Clairia found herself dragging her feet, somehow disappointed even though everything she'd wished for had been granted.

"Anyway, before I head to the capital, I should probably find a town nearby where I can earn some money..."

Indeed, unlike humans, elves rarely carried much coin. They lived in harmony with one another, subsisting off of the fields, meat from their hunts, and whatever wild plants they might gather. They bartered with their neighbors, loaned and borrowed. On the rare occasion that they needed to do business with a human town, a representative of the village would take all of the herbs and pelts and various monster parts they had gathered to turn into cash.

Indeed, save for what they kept aside for emergencies, there was hardly any human currency within the village. Therefore, the only money Clairia's parents had to give her were a few ancient coins that they had brought back to the village with them from their time on the outside, so unrecognizable now to modern people that they had no value beyond the ore they were minted from.

"Okay, so first I think I need to just go to the nearest town and earn enough money for travel expenses, plus some more to support me in the capital until I can find work. It'll take me some time to find a decent job, I'm sure... Though apparently elves are pretty popular in human towns, so I should have no issues finding a good position. There's no need to fret!"

Had Aetelou and Sharalir been present at this particular moment, they would have rushed to tell Clairia the truth. However, the two of them returned home as infrequently as they possibly could to satisfy the regular homecoming requirements as set out by village statutes... which only made sense considering the costs of international travel and the effect long absences had on their careers.

All of which meant that Clairia set out from home with a wholehearted belief in her own bright future, fashioned from the tales that the other elves had told her and a mix of her own wild imaginings...

\* \* \*

"So, this is a human town!"

Clairia had blown straight past the nearest human settlement and the ones closest to

that, arriving in a town quite a distance from her little village. She had spent all of her nights until then roughing it—er, *camping*. Naturally, she could not afford to stay in any of the inns she had passed. She doubted that she could even cover a single day's dining and lodging expenses in town. The coins she had received from her parents were already of designs no one recognized and would not pass in modern circulation. Assuming that they would have little value as currency, Clairia decided to forgo exchanging them for something usable, instead just holding onto them as her good luck charms.

Any gift she received from her father was precious, after all...

Though even Clairia, who had in her whole life neither left her village nor used any money, was aware of the color and value of a gold coin, she could not have known of the existence of an orichalcum coin, which was worth far more than gold. Nor could she conceive of the fact that, even if it was not a currently circulating currency, it was of enormous value based on its material alone.

Her father, not having realized this, either, had simply handed her a coin purse with no explanation, thereby making a grave miscalculation.

With no idea of how valuable these few old coins might have been if she were to have exchanged them, Clairia had traveled all the way here through the forest, gathering long-lasting and valuable foraged goods—fruits with medicinal value, rare mushrooms, etc.—which she intended to convert into a few days' living expenses, off of which she would live until she might find work.

“My plan is foolproof!”

Indeed, Clairia, who had never left her village, knew very little about the world. Neither what the market price of materials were, nor of what lay in humans' hearts...

“Oh, these are rare mushrooms! And these fruits only grow on trees in the middle of the forest! I'll give you one gold for them!”

“What? An elf?! Don't see one of you every day! You all alone, Miss? We'll pay for yer meal!”

*It's just like those two said! Humans are suckers! Hee hee hee!*

Sure enough, human men really did have a thing for elf girls...

\* \* \*

"Ee hee hee, as long as I keep playing the 'poor little elf girl working hard to earn her way to the capital,' I can work at these restaurants and rake it in on the tips. Humans are such softhearted suckers!"

Indeed, although humans knew how long elves lived, most—who rarely had chances to actually interact with the species—still guessed ages by outward appearance. In their eyes, then, Clairia was just a hardworking young girl. Add "elf" onto that, and people were quite sweet on her. Furthermore, no matter how far they might have been from the elven village, there was no one in any of the towns en route from the village to the capital who would ever antagonize an elf—particularly in such a way that might incite an all-out conflict and get the Crown involved. As a result, Clairia was safe from truly dire threats like being stolen away into slavery.

*The old guy at the restaurant did tell me, though, that while no one around here would ever do anything to an elf, as I get closer to the capital, there might be self-centered people who care only about themselves, not their town or the country. When I got there, he said, I should be more discrete about the fact that I'm an elf in case I encounter any prejudice.* "Thankfully, as long as you cover your ears with your hair, you'll look just like a human," he had told her. "So I guess I should start pretending to be a human from now on? Okay, sure! From here on out, I'm not a 'hardworking elf girl,' I'm just a hardworking young girl!" Clairia had agreed, giggling.

Of course, even if she were not an elf, she would still be a pretty young girl traveling all alone, which made her a prime target for evildoers... Her situation would scarcely change at all.

Thanks to all the money she had earned in such a short time—more from tips than her actual wages—this time Clairia took a passenger carriage instead of walking. Even under her new guise of a diligent young girl who was heading to the capital to work and send money back to her family, she received all sorts of sweets and other treats from the other passengers along the way...

*Humans really are suckers! Hee hee hee!*

\* \* \*

“Here it is! The human capital!”

Though they resided in the same country, elves were neither constituents of any human territory nor taxpayers. The beastfolk were in the same position. Thus, as far as Clairia was concerned, this was the *human* capital, not her capital—to her, it was merely the largest city around. Which also meant that it was the most prosperous, the most exciting, the liveliest... and the easiest place to make money. That was the reason she had come.

“Okay then, let’s get a job at this academy Aetelou and Sharalir mentioned! They said they got preferential treatment since they were elves... They’re living in a different country, of course, but every country is supposed to have an academy, and the main branch is usually in the capital... I bet if I go there, I should be able to find a job!”

Poor Clairia’s knowledge of the world was so limited that she really thought it would be that easy...

“What? You’re an elf, and you want to do research here? We would be glad to have you!!!”

.....

Humans really *were* suckers.

\* \* \*

“...So basically, I got a job at the academy the moment I arrived at the capital. Three days later, they invited me to this huge party, where I was introduced to some rich and powerful merchants and some handsome, refined nobles, and the next day they gave me a job as a professor with a title of ‘Doctor,’ along with tons of money to do whatever research I wanted. Uh—hey! What’s up, you two?”

As Clairia recounted her early days outside the village to Aetelou and Sharalir, who she’d met up with on her way home, the initial worry on the pair’s faces had gradually twisted into strange expressions. Noticing their odd reaction, Clairia paused, only for the two to shout...

“You’ve gotta be *kidding* us!!”

They were livid.

"W-we worked so hard to earn money in the first human town we came to and had to present our theses so many times, buttering up fat old dudes with a smile and not even managing to get the title of 'assistant' at the academy—no matter how hard we tried! There's no telling how many years it'll take for us to work our way up to assistant, then assistant professor, then lecturer, then associate professor... all before finally hitting professor! Thanks to our long life spans, we could probably get there eventually, but only with lots of pain and mortification! Besides, it would be shameful to take advantage of our longevity to snatch the positions of human researchers who are working so hard throughout their short little lives! And so, we're busting our butts to prove we can produce better results than those humans, while meanwhile you...you..."

Aetelou let out a growl that seemed to rumble from deep below the earth, gritting her teeth so hard it looked like blood might start seeping from her gums.

"What kind of research are you doing, anyway?" asked Sharalir, glaring at Clairia with an equally murderous look in her eyes.

To this, Clairia could only bashfully reply, "Ah... um, well, I've been playing around with the cultivation and medicinal applications of rutile grass..."

"That's something little kids grow in their backyard gardens for fun!"

"Yeah, uh... it seems like humans don't know a lot about it, though... Oh, and I've also been researching the growth conditions of celina grass, and the population density and distribution of monsters in the heart of the woods, and a few other..."

"Every elf knows that stuff practically from infancy!"

"You actually managed to get the title of d-d-doctor—and that professorship—on the basis of facts that anyone who spent decades living in the woods would know? Stuff that every elven toddler is well aware of?"

"Well... I—!"

*"You're dead meat!!"*

The pair looked as though they were truly ready to attack her. At the look in their bloodshot eyes, Clairia ran away, as fast as her legs could carry her.

Thus began the long rivalry between the elven girls Sharalir, Aetelou, and Clairia...

# AFTERWORD

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone. FUNA here.

The long-awaited Volume 14 of *Average* has finally arrived! Starting this volume, we've changed publishers, making our grand re-debut under Square Enix's new SQEX Novel label! New publisher aside, the author, illustrator, chief editor, proofreaders, and all other staff remain the same.

Or rather, we've all been transferred to maintain the same process as before.

Even if we fall to ruin—no, get transferred—our staff combo remains unbroken!

Yes, altogether now, one, two...

“Transfer and combine!”

And furthermore...

“Let’s Combine!”

At any rate, even though our team is the same as before, we've got a heavy mantle on our shoulders, with this being our first volume post-transfer—and furthermore, one of the line's founding titles. We're all pretty fired up! Our work quality is shooting through the roof, and we're going to keep bringing you our best.

This time, we learn more of the mysterious way of life of the unfortunate race known as elves and the many strange behaviors that lie hidden within...

Then, when a special job takes the Crimson Vow out of the country yet again, we encounter a new danger threatening the world, one which not even the nanomachines can identify.

And then, in this volume's bonus story, we learn the origins of the rivalry between Dr. Clairia and Aetelou and Sharalir.

How dreadful of you, Clair...

Next time, in Volume 15, we'll begin to unravel the mysteries of the race known as the elder dragons and the secrets of their very reason for being...

What of the riddles hidden within the legends the elder dragons' elders tell? Will we finally begin to advance the plot a bit?

We'll also check in with the Wonder Trio and see the Crimson Vow's daring plot to rescue another little beastgirl! Time to feed Mile's greedy desires...

Good luck, Mile!

Next time, "Mile Dies."

*Let's get ready to duel!*

Of note: Though the novel has changed publishers, the publishing location (Comic Earth Star) and publisher (Earth Star Entertainment) of the manga remain the same.

Many thanks to the lovely Nekomint, who accepted the job of adapting this little old debut work by some no-one-from-nowhere author, before we'd even seen the sales of the first volume. Thanks, too, to the sensational Moritaka Yuki, who has so perfectly captured the Crimson Vow's personalities in the adorable spin-off manga *Everyday Misadventures*. (Moritaka-sensei came up with the stories as well.) Thank you so much to the both of you for your continued help and for both of these wonderful series, which will continue to be available from Earth Star.

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 *Shousetsuka ni Narou* 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.

We will meet again in the next volume. Just keep on believing...

—FUNA

## AFTERWORD (OR SOMETHING)

THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE FACT THAT  
I REALIZED I HADN'T DRAWN MILE WITH HER  
HAIR DOWN IN A WHILE...WAKING UP IN THE  
MORNING IS ALL PART OF THE RHYTHM OF  
DAILY LIFE...THAT'S ALL.

五方透 桃  
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](http://gomanga.com/newsletter)



PtF by: traitorATZEN