

• IN THE LAND OF • LEADALE

5



Ceez
[ILLUSTRATION BY]
Tenmaso

IN THE LAND OF LEADEALE

– Leadale no Daichi nite –

- VOLUME 5 -

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[YEN PRESS]

“Huh?”

“Oh...”

“...?”

A brilliant cluster of light particles appeared out of thin air before taking the shape of a fairy. It was truly a mystical sight. The awestruck eyewitnesses—Roxilius, Roxine, and Luka—stared at the strange phenomenon unfolding before them.

ROXINE

ROXILIUS

KUU

LUKA

CAYNA

“Your name is Kuu. Yay, Kuu!”

♪!

The being formerly known as Li'l Fairy was overcome with joy at the sound of her own name. A smile spread across her face as she twirled high into the air and a noise escaped her mouth.



"Hmph. You think you're any match for me?"

"Hyo-hyo-hyo. How unfortunate that we meet under such circumstances. Your luck has run out. Had this been anywhere else, I would have entertained you with a more elaborate scheme."

"Thanks, but no thanks. Actually, I'd say *you're* the one who's out of luck, running into me here."

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In the Land of Leadale 5

Ceez

Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Tenmaso

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THE STORY THUS FAR

After surviving a horrendous accident, Keina Kagami was left paralyzed and permanently bedridden. Suddenly stuck with ample free time, her life mostly revolved around visits with her cousin and playing VR games. Keina became addicted to one VRMMORPG in particular and quickly rose as a top player.

One day, she died while playing the VRMMO *Leadale* after a power surge short-circuited the equipment that kept her alive.

...But that wasn't the end.

She suddenly woke in an unfamiliar room in the body of her game avatar.

After talking with the inn proprietress, Marelle, and her daughter Lytt, Keina was dumbfounded to discover her new world was similar to *Leadale* except two hundred years in the future. The seven nations from the Game Era had been destroyed and replaced by three new governments. Choosing to embrace her avatar's identity, Cayna checked up on her skills, modernized the remote village, and held on to a small glimmer of hope she'd meet other players someday.

Cayna next paid a visit to her Skill Master tower. The Guardian mural reported it had lost all connection with the remaining twelve towers, so she decided to pack her bags and travel the world.

Before heading out, Cayna met some new village arrivals—a merchant named Elineh, along with the mercenary captain Arbiter, whose crew was protecting him. She accompanied them to the royal capital of the central nation of Felskeilo and there met sub-characters she'd submitted to the Foster System: her adopted dwarf son Kartatz, elf daughter Mai-Mai, and oldest son, the elf Skargo.

The sudden reality she was the mother of three sent Cayna into an emotional tailspin, but despite the ongoing shenanigans of her eldest son, Skargo (a top Felskeilo official and quirky skill exhibitionist), she strived to connect with the children who loved their mother so dearly.

Not long after, Cayna pinpointed a Guardian Tower in Felskeilo's Battle Arena.

However, this wasn't the only surprise in store—she simultaneously discovered VRM MO *Leadale*'s service had already ended, and she was living in a post-Game Era. Cayna reeled from the revelation but came out of her funk with stronger familial bonds and newfound determination.

During an escort mission with Elineh to the northern nation of Helshper, Cayna stopped by the remote village for a rare visit only to hear something strange was afoot. The mysterious incident turned out to be Mimily, a mermaid of unknown origin who somehow ended up lost in the underground waterways. Cayna later asked the village to house Mimily in the public bathhouse as compensation for fulfilling their request.

On the border of Helshper, Cayna ran into a group of bandits who had been wreaking havoc along the western trade routes. A battle quickly ensued, but the rogues were no match for her. Once in Helshper's royal capital, Cayna made her way to the continent's biggest merchant company, Sakaiya, and delivered a letter from Mai-Mai to its founder, Caerick. The revelation he was Mai-Mai's son and, by extension, Cayna's grandson almost did her in, and a slight misunderstanding created a fissure in their relationship. Her consternation only deepened when his older twin sister, the knight Caerina, came to apologize on his behalf.

Even so, Elineh reported there was a Guardian-like tower in the bandit territory to the west, so Cayna and Caerick prepared to launch a joint attack. After saving Caerina from near disaster, Cayna forcefully pushed her way through a ring of knights only to realize, to her dismay, that the demon leader of the bandits was actually a player. Nonetheless enraged by his selfishness and arrogance, she challenged him to a fight. Way out of his depth, the small-time player never stood a chance against an all-powerful Skill Master.

Cayna almost finished the job but allowed the intervening knights to arrest him. With authoritative powers equal to a Game Master, she knocked the demon player's strength down by 90 percent. The knights dragged him away kicking and screaming.

After rebooting the Guardian Tower in question, Cayna learned its former Skill Master was her terrible friend and fellow guild member, Opuskettenshultheimer Crosstettbomber—aka Opus. The Guardian gave her a book, and a tiny fairy popped out to join Cayna on her journey. The high elf had a sneaking suspicion this new addition was closely connected to Opus.

Cayna tried to give Mimily the reward money she'd earned subjugating the bandits,

but by the time she returned to the remote village, the mermaid had already taken Lytt's advice and established her very own laundry service.

Cayna next headed to the Felskeilo capital and took on a request from the Adventurers Guild. It was here she ran into the prime minister's granddaughter, Lonti, and Lonti's runaway friend, Mye. Cayna agreed to harbor Mye and enjoyed going about her mission with some rare company.

Meanwhile at the Royal Academy, a chimera monster threw Felskeilo into mass chaos after Mai-Mai's husband, Lopus, tossed his failed experiment into a garbage pit. The dumping grounds were once a disputed point between the White and Green Kingdoms back in the Game Era, and Lopus's magical scraps just happened to be the exact ingredients needed to spawn a chimera.

Shining Saber, the dragoid captain of the Helshper knights, was out searching for Mye (also known as Crown Princess Myleene) when he reunited with his old friend, the adventurer Cohral. Both were former players and members of the Silver Moon Horsemen Guild led by the Ninth Skill Master, Kyotaro. After quickly catching up, the two felt duty bound as players to defeat the monster and decided to defeat it themselves. However, the duo's strength wouldn't have sufficed even in the Game Era, and they soon found themselves in hot water.

Meanwhile, Kartatz left Felskeilo to look for his mother after receiving a strange telepathic message. Struck by ill foreboding, Cayna raced back to Felskeilo and met up with her younger son. She wasted no time blitzing the chimera with large-scale magic.

After the battle, Cayna enjoyed some quality time with her two fellow players, and Cohral told her about the Palace of the Dragon King lying in the depths of the ocean. Certain it was a Guardian Tower, she decided to accompany a group of knights on their way to squash the leftover bandits.

On her way to the Guardian Tower, Cayna made a brief stop at the remote village and ran into a research group from Otaloquess. She soundly defeated a female werecat named Clofia in a scuffle, and her older brother, Cloffe, soon revealed they were actually spies. Furthermore, he told her about Sahalashade, the high-elf queen of Otaloquess. The royal was a Foster Child of a high-elf player who had been like a little sister to Cayna. This subsequently made Sahalashade Cayna's niece, and she became increasingly alarmed by her high-profile family tree.

Thanks to a misunderstanding while on the road, the knights recognized Cayna as Shining Saber's fiancée. She parted with them halfway and headed for a fishing village where people had reportedly spotted the Palace of the Dragon King. However, a disquieting mist had rolled in and transformed the hamlet into a graveyard overrun by zombies and ghouls. There, Cayna met a young girl—the village's sole survivor—and Quolkeh, an adventurer from Helshper who came to investigate the village but now served as her protector. Cayna also reunited with a dragoid named Exis, a former Cream Cheese member who had played as Tartarus on a secondary account.

Cayna summoned a cat-eared butler to look after the little girl, and the three worked together to destroy the pirate ship creating all these problems and free the souls of everyone who had been turned undead. Cayna adopted the lone survivor, Luka, and decided to move back to the remote village so she could give the girl a stable home. She summoned additional help in the form of the cat-eared maid Roxine, and their previously pleasant trip home challenged the limits of her patience. Cayna built a house and began her domestic life in the village with Luka and the volatile duo that was Roxilius and Roxine.

Fulfilling a longtime promise to Lytt, Cayna invited her and the other children on a scenic flight. There were only three children in the entire village: Cayna's adopted daughter, Luka; the innkeeper's daughter Lytt; and the head of the contracting firm's son, Latem. As everyone was having fun and taking in the view, they spotted Elineh's caravan being attacked by monsters.

After driving back the initial horde, Cayna realized Event Monsters from the Game Era were lurking in the surrounding area and set out to crush them with the help of Arbiter and his mercenaries.

Meanwhile, the children left the village as well... to make flower crowns. Just as a horde of monsters were upon them and all hope seemed lost, a level-990 White Dragon leaped from the pendant Cayna had given Luka. The beast drove back the enemy and carved fissures across the land with its breath. Alarmed by the thunderous noise, Cayna raced back to the village. She took Luka into her arms and bawled like a baby when she found the girl safe.

Cayna later flew to Sakaiya to stock up on necessities and came across Cohral and his party. They were answering a request from the Adventurers Guild, and she introduced them to her great-grandson, the young master Idzik. No sooner had Cayna heard from Caerick that Helshper and Felskeilo were planning to meet at the national border

when she returned home to find her son Skargo waiting there. He had been appointed as the king's representative for the duration of the conference and stopped by the remote village to pay a visit.

One day while Cayna was boosting the village's defenses with Roxilius, the village elder told her their land was under the domain of the Harvey family of barons—the very same nobles her daughter Mai-Mai had married into.

Their daily necessities started running low, so Cayna decided to take Luka and Lytt on a shopping trip to show them more of the world. Accompanied by Elineh's impeccably timed caravan, she also took this opportunity to test out the creature comforts of her driverless golem carriage. However, Elineh informed her the golem carriage had also caught the eye of a troublesome noble, so Cayna told Roxine to keep an eye out. The group arrived in Felskeilo (for better or worse) in the middle of the city's biggest event, the River Festival.

However, the main festival was at a standstill thanks to rumors of a large shadow lurking in the Ejidd River, and a request from the Adventurers Guild soon threw Cayna headlong into the situation.

There was no room left at any inn, but Elineh offered one of his company's houses for Cayna, Roxine, and the children to use as a temporary base. After leaving Luka and Lytt in safekeeping with Roxine and a summoned beast, Cayna went to investigate the river.

Meanwhile, a shadowy organization in Felskeilo accepted a noble's request to kidnap anyone connected to Cayna. While giving the children a tour of the city in her master's absence, Roxine noticed the wild schemes of these shady men and incapacitated them without causing the slightest ruckus.

Underestimating the maid and children cost these crooks dearly, and they were forced to slink away. However, fiendish monsters from a certain source greeted the men back at their hideout. They were quickly overtaken by fear and violence as their lives were twisted for sheer entertainment. The next day, a group of knights discovered the organization members contorted into every shape and size. Realizing this was the work of a cruel devil, the city upped its security.

Meanwhile, Cayna learned from the Guardian Tower in the Battle Arena that the shadow in the river was another Guardian Tower—a mobile type that belonged to the

First Skill Master and took the form of a giant white whale.

To keep the movable Guardian Tower stationary, Cayna hoped the knights and princess would help her trick the citizens. For this absurd plan to work, she had to convince the city the white whale was a river god and turn it into a kind of tourist attraction.

With Mai-Mai as her ticket into the castle, Cayna approached the knights with this idea. They instantly agreed for some reason, and her collaborators dove into the task while also demanding the impossible of Kartatz.

The ruse turned out to be a huge success, and the whale Guardian Tower was stationed upriver of the sandbar. The festivities could finally begin, and the city welcomed the news with gusto. Cayna enjoyed quality time with the children but ran into trouble when an arrogant noble challenged her at the Academy. Nevertheless, Cayna's rock golem crushed his earth one to dust.

The highlight of the festival was a small boat race, but it had to be canceled on account of the whale tower, now known to the public as the Lord of Water. As events drew to a close, a spy exposed the many schemes of the noble who had attempted to lay a hand on Cayna. Demoted by the king, he sank into frustration and despair.

Soon, a demon man who had only pretended to be a spy appeared before him. With his fiendish companions at his command, he jeered at the nobleman's plight before letting a coin determine his form of execution.

Before returning to the village, Cayna visited Kartatz to thank him for both his help with the incident and the materials she had used to build her home. The children asked if they could watch the shipbuilders work, so she decided to do a little fishing in the meantime. Cayna reeled in one massive catch after the other until finally nabbing a type of chimera monster.

The creature had been sighted before the white whale's shadow ever appeared, and this turned out to be the real source of all the hubbub. It dropped a rare ore after she caught it, and Cayna quickly realized this chimera monster also came from a disputed point.

Cayna said her various good-byes and headed home. On the way, she came across Skargo and Cohral. When the latter told her about the mysterious game system and

the Abandoned Capital, her urge to find Opus grew more powerful than ever.

Upon returning to the village, Cayna and the girls found a prostrated Roxilius and a note that only read, "*Name her.*"



Prologue

A caravan made camp for the night after traveling about two days west of Felskeilo. They had only just begun to unpack, and there was still some time before twilight, but this group of small-time merchants stuck close together in self-defense. Unlike larger companies, this one lacked a bevy of staff, and the management had to handle everything themselves.

Accompanying the caravan was an envoy of three adventurer parties, fifteen people in total. They were divided into rotating lookout, standby, and counterattack units. The main road leading northwest had been closed thanks to a rash of bandit activity, but rumor had it two nations had combined their knight forces and flushed them out. Of course, the fact that a certain adventurer had captured the bandit leader was kept a secret from the general public. Conscientious merchants stayed quiet for the right price.

With the main roads now safe, this merchant caravan conducted business with local villages along the coast and stocked up on fish. Many were greatly relieved to see their livelihoods stabilize.

The adventurers protecting them, on the other hand, looked pale. Their benefactors might begin to question the safety of the roads, so they did their best to hide their unease. Besides, this return to business was a long-awaited light at the end of the tunnel. Vowing to defend the caravan from danger, the guards upped their vigilance.

“Any other weird changes?”

“Not yet.”

The leaders of each adventurer party exchanged questioning glances. The merchants didn’t notice anything amiss, but the three leaders knew full well there was something strange up ahead.

“The sky was all distorted.”

“Yeah. I’ve been adventuring for years and never seen anything like it.”

“I dunno about distorted. It was more like light beams shooting through part of the

sky."

"What the heck was that thing...?"

The phenomenon was inexplicable even to these three veterans. Nowhere else could someone watch the sky momentarily shake as light projected as if through a window. One might achieve the same effect by standing inside one of those glass conservatories afforded only to nobles while violent winds rattled outside.

"Also... our scout is taking a while."

One of the leaders tightly crossed their arms as if to clear their concerns—as if to convince them that they were just imagining things.

After a round of discussion, the leaders decided to have their strongest member go check things out. "I'll take care of it!" the chosen adventurer said easily before departing. With his cheer now gone, his companions' mood darkened further.

"He'll be fine, right?"

"...Yeah."

"Then quit actin' so depressed. Once he gets back—"

Just as one leader was trying to raise the others' spirits, they sensed a bone-chilling presence coming from the forest the scout had just gone to investigate. Their eyes narrowed, and they faced the woods with weapons at the ready. Their pulses pounded in their ears like alarm bells; everyone broke into a damp, uncomfortable sweat. The source was still far-off, but they could clearly hear something approaching, trees snapping under its weight.

The roar of the falling trees told the adventurers the incoming creature was enormous—possibly a horned bear or similarly ferocious beast. One guard finally came to their senses and raced toward the caravan. The merchants had only just begun setting up camp, but evacuating everyone took priority.

Two of the adventurer parties fell back to help the merchants to safety, while the third raced into the forest to contend with the threat. They had to keep their back line fortified on the off chance the enemy might surround them. The three parties were following the established rotation, but the third one's leader nonetheless sighed at the

lousy timing.

"Sorry, guys..." the leader told his party.

"Hey, it's not your fault. We all signed up for this."

"That's right. You've got nothin' to apologize for, so let's hurry and take this thing down."

"Sure, we're one man short, but we've still got a job to do."

His comrades' excess optimism in the face of adversity brought a strained smile to the leader's face. Courage welled up within the adventurers as they sensed the beast growing closer, violently ripping through the forest toward them. With a surge of adrenaline and fearsome war cries, the group sprang into battle. From that moment forward, they were ready to crush the enemy with their indomitable spirit. Perhaps they were overdoing it, considering they hadn't even seen the enemy yet, but that passion was what made them model adventurers.

...If only their opponent hadn't been an absolute nightmare.

When the forest-splitting, tree-smashing creature came into view, the adventurers realized it was much larger than they'd ever expected. Its head towered above them, and two legs as thick as tree trunks carried its weight. It was covered in tough, glossy scales like a dragoid, and a massive tail kept the creature balanced. A human hand dangled limply from its sharp teeth. Its vertical reptilian pupils contracted as it lorded over the puny adventurers.

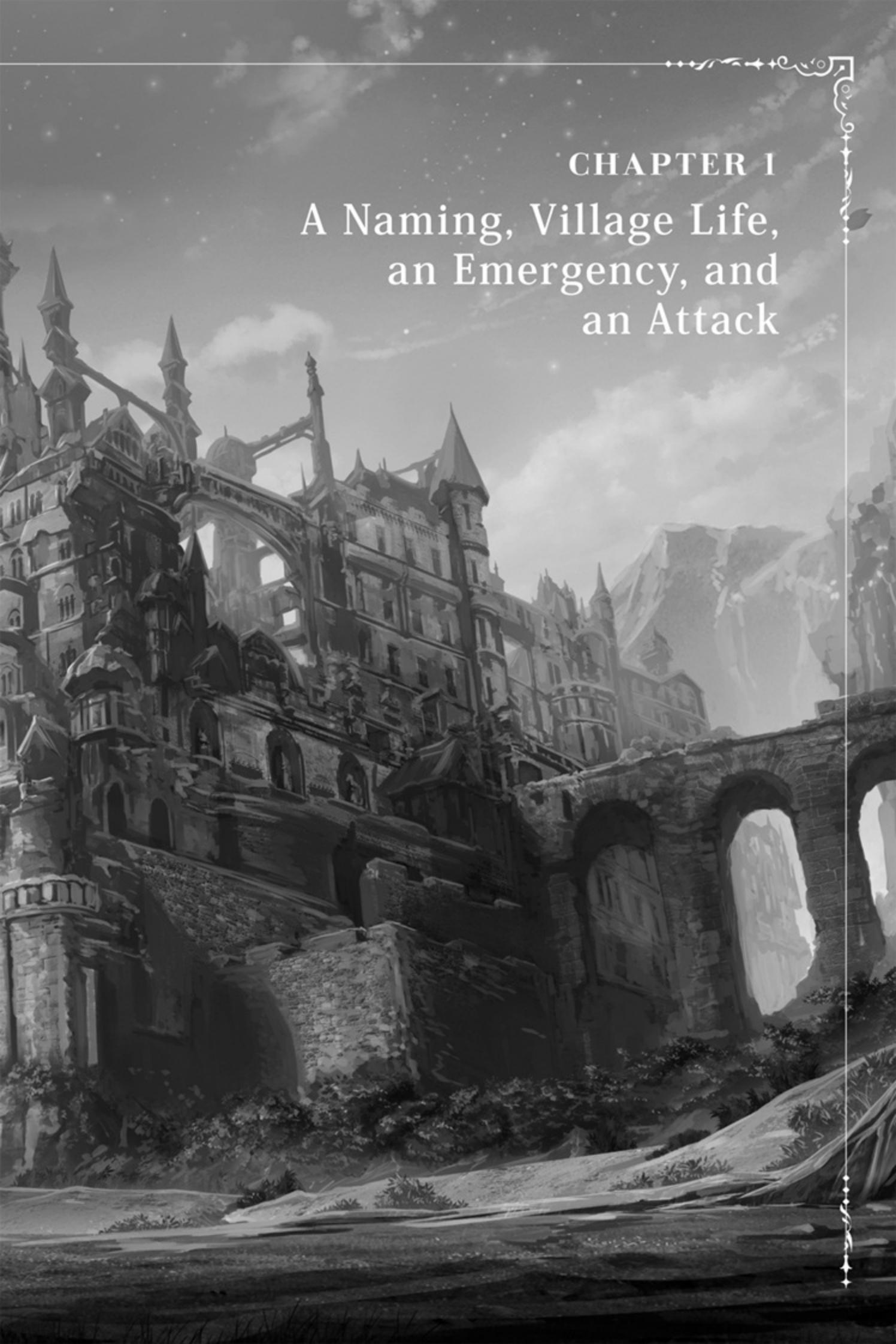
This was enough to shatter the group's resolve. One adventurer dropped their weapon, and another collapsed in shock. They never could have imagined such a monster in a million years and were utterly overwhelmed.

The caravan attempting to escape with their belongings fared no better.

Another such beast appeared. And another. Similar monsters continued to emerge from the depths of the forest unabated. Hysteria broke out among merchants and adventurers alike at the nightmarish scene. Some merchants ditched their wares and fled into the dark of night, while others jumped into unhitched carriages and started cracking their whips furiously. Most of the adventurers shirked their duties and even left their comrades behind.

But they all shivered in terror when they heard the horrid screams coming from the darkness. Roars and growls soon followed from the same direction—it was clear that many fearsome beasts were lurking within the abyss.

Before long, the monsters had the camp surrounded.



CHAPTER I

A Naming, Village Life, an Emergency, and an Attack

Naming: the act of bestowing a name to a newborn infant. Also, the corresponding ceremony. A christening.

“Gaaah...”

Cayna gripped her head and flopped onto the dining room table—the only place in her house suitable for holding a family meeting. She had a living room, but that was strictly for getting comfy and vegging out. Such spaces were tailored by and for each player; add a bulky character like a dragoid into the mix, and the furnishings could get fairly eclectic.

Sitting across from Cayna and Luka was Roxilius, who hung his head gloomily. He clearly hadn’t forgiven himself for falling victim to Contract Magic while house-sitting. Even Roxine didn’t interrogate him and simply served tea in silence with a morose look on her face.

“Mommy Cayna... are you... thinking?”

“Hrrmm...”

Everyone felt a wave of concern as Cayna hemmed and hawed over the letter (if you could even call it a letter), despite having spent the entire night reviewing it. Roxine refused to let Cayna’s ambiguous answer slide.

“Well then, Lady Cayna. Might I ask *what* is being named?”

There was no reason to hide the short letter, so Cayna had shared it with Roxine and Luka. Roxine wanted to know what kind of naming made Roxilius feel this guilty; Luka just knew the letter had upset Roxilius, someone who was usually so eloquent and good-natured.

The subject of said naming was visible to Cayna, and Cayna alone: Li’l Fairy, who was currently perched happily atop the rim of Cayna’s teacup.

"She's right here..." Cayna said, circling the air with her finger to indicate the fairy. Roxine and Luka stared at the gestured spot before looking back at Cayna.

"Do you mean the fairy? I'm afraid I don't notice a thing."

"Yeah... I don't... see her."

If a level-550 werecat couldn't sense Li'l Fairy's presence, then Cayna was the only who could. She had no idea how to name the fairy into existence. Even if *she* knew Li'l Fairy was there, convincing other people would be an uphill battle.

Certain the fairy was somehow connected to Opus, Cayna had intended to safeguard her. However, the letter stated this was the wrong move. Instead, she was supposed to name the fairy and "adopt" her, in a sense.

"I can't believe he thought I'd just leave her in some nameless, default mode..."

"Perhaps he never expected you would simply call her 'Fairy.'"

This certain someone was keeping close tabs on Cayna, apparently. Annoyed Cayna *still* hadn't given the fairy a proper name, he sent her a letter through the most roundabout fashion.

She had no idea why he was going to such lengths to stay in the shadows. Unless he had something to hide, he could show himself at any time.

Still, she didn't think he was the type to appear out of nowhere with a casual *Hey, long time no see*. Lurking somewhere in wait like an arrogant demon lord was more his style.

"...So what will you do?"

"...Right. Great question."

Cayna now understood Opus's stance on Li'l Fairy but nonetheless fell back into despair.

Her biggest stumbling block was extremely basic. Naming was a common part of any gaming experience, but some folks found it agonizing.

Cayna was one such person. She was *terrible* at picking names.

"Why are you so distressed, Lady Cayna? You gave me, Roxilius, and your children the most wonderful names, no?"

"...Yeah, I guess so."

Roxine proudly struck her chest, but Cayna was less than confident. She couldn't exactly blurt out that she'd named Roxine and Roxilius after her date of birth while her three kids' names were just different words for *snail*. Cayna dodged the question.

A name, a name... I need a name... Can't I just leave it as Li'l Fairy?

"That is up to you, Cayna. But if you insist on keeping it and run into him again, he will torment you over it for the rest of your life."

Gwagh?!

Kee was warning her not to be careless. Cayna could easily imagine Opus loftily condemning her for the rest of her days, so she soon abandoned the idea of taking the easy way out.

"Mommy Cayna...?"

"Ah, Lady Luka, I believe Lady Cayna is conferring with a Divine Spirit."

"Divine... Spirit...?"

Luka stared worriedly at Cayna, sitting in silence as her expression shifted seemingly by the second. Roxine then mentioned she was consulting her personal adviser, a Divine Spirit. Roxine didn't quite understand how Kee functioned, so she could only assume Cayna was conferring with some sort of holy being whenever she caught her master wordlessly nodding to herself.

In this world, a Divine Spirit was believed to be a force that led people down the right path—something that guided heroes and saints like in fairy tales, hence the mythical associations. Cayna's children and the two werecats believed she was guided by a Divine Spirit, though they also thought it was a little sad that she of all people was deemed noble enough for such an honor.

Upon Roxine's explanation, Luka gazed up at Cayna in wide-eyed admiration as if she'd appeared straight from a fairy tale.

Spot? Fluffy...? Princess? Princess Dream...?

"You cannot be serious."

Meanwhile, Cayna was internally testing a number of cutesy names one might give a dog or cat, all of which Kee shot down without hesitation.

"This is a fantasy world. I suggest you give the matter more thought."

I feel like you're expecting too much here, Kee.

Completely out of ideas, Cayna sipped her now-lukewarm tea. Li'l Fairy was convinced she was finally about to get a name, but the moment that seemed unlikely, she glumly fiddled with the ends of Cayna's hair.

"Why don't you consider what she means to you personally?"

Kee was being much more proactive about the naming process than Cayna, who then muttered the first thing that popped into her head: "She's kind of like my guardian." That's when it hit her.

"She's also kind of like your little sister, Kee. I'll name her Kuu."

"...What?" said Roxine.

"Little... sister...?" said Luka.

Inspiration struck, and Cayna suddenly clapped her hands. Roxine and Luka, who had been enjoying the silence, looked over at her in confusion. The fairy had been absentmindedly twirling Cayna's hair until Cayna scooped her up out of nowhere.

"Your name is Kuu. Yay, Kuu!"

"♪!"

The being formerly known as Li'l Fairy was overcome with joy at the sound of her own name. A smile spread across her face as she twirled high into the air and a noise

escaped her mouth.

“Huh?”

“Oh...”

“...?”

A brilliant cluster of light particles appeared out of thin air before taking the shape of a fairy. It was truly a mystical sight. The awestruck eyewitnesses—Roxilius, Roxine, and Luka—stared at the strange phenomenon unfolding before them.

“Kuu! Kuu!” the fairy chimed sweetly as she flitted about, repeating her name over and over, clearly thrilled.

Kuu hummed a happy ditty. Her wings left phosphorescent trails in their wake that dissolved at Luka’s touch.

“Nice,” said Cayna. “Now you’re with us *for real*, Kuu.”

“I do not have a younger sister...”

“Maybe you shoulda thought of a name, then. She’s like a little sister figure.”

“She certainly is not.”

Kee was not amused in the least but said no more, seemingly uninterested in pressing the issue. After finishing up her happy dance, Kuu floated over to Cayna’s shoulder and started rubbing her cheek against her hair affectionately. She was certainly quick to react.

“Lady Cayna, is this the fairy you mentioned?” Roxine asked.

“Yep. Her name is Kuu. No teasing her.”

“I would never. What exactly do you take me for...?”

Offended, Roxine took the teapot and returned to the kitchen. Cayna noticed Luka staring up at Kuu, her mouth gaping like a fish’s. She gently prodded Kuu to turn her attention to Luka.

"You probably know by now, but this is Luka. Play nice, okay?"

"Luka! Luka!"

Kuu planted a kiss on one of Luka's extended fingers, then grabbed her middle finger with both hands and shook it up and down like a sort of handshake.

"Wooow..." Luka murmured, her eyes sparkling.

"Kuu has a name now. Rox, no need to beat yourself up."

"Ngh. My deepest apologies, Lady Cayna..."

Roxilius clenched both fists and bowed his head. Cayna walked over and patted him on the shoulder.

"It's okay, Roxilius. Really. I'll make that guy pay a thousand times over."

Roxilius sensed an unpleasant, bloodthirsty aura and looked up to find a terrifying smile on Cayna's face. She was ready for action, and he yelped at her humorless gaze.

"The second I find that jerk, I'm gonna pound him into mincemeat and cook him into the grossest shape possible! He better say his prayers!"

Cayna let out a shrill laugh of "Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh!" as a large wave crashed against the shore that appeared behind Cayna (courtesy of Oscar—Roses Scatter with Beauty). Chills ran down Roxilius's spine. Luka, on the other hand, stood there confused by the sudden stage backdrop. Kuu flew beside Cayna and copied her, though the fairy's "Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh" sounded more like an owl hooting.

When Roxine returned with a fresh pot of tea, she couldn't help but notice the drastic shift that had occurred in the brief time she was away. She rubbed her temple, feeling a headache coming on.

At any rate, the unwanted, unsigned letter gave no further details, so Cayna moved on to the next order of business: Roxilius's report on the merchant caravan that had arrived from Sakaiya while she was out of town.

"So they delivered... ten barrels of beer and five of whiskey?" she said.

“One barrel of beer is four silver coins, and one whiskey barrel is twelve. The total price is one hundred silver coins.”

“A whole gold coin?! That’s insane! Am I supposed to charge highway robbery for a single drink or something?!”

“The taste testers claimed you’ll more than break even.”

“...Is my alcohol *that* good, or is the stuff in this world just terrible?”

“Perhaps both.”

He then passed her a receipt. It was a bill for ten silver coins.

“What’s this?”

“The transport fee for the wheat—two carriages’ worth.”

“Huh?”

Cayna visibly withered. This was only the transport fee; it didn’t even include the cost of the actual wheat. Roxilius found this strange as well and had inquired about it, but the merchants offered vague claims about how this was customary.

“I have a feeling this isn’t going to be as profitable as I thought...,” Cayna said when she saw her stocked barrels dwindle while her storehouse was full to the brim with bags of wheat. Roxilius offered his input.

“You can either get Lux’s help with the wheat or go to Felskeilo and purchase it yourself. Both are viable options.”

“Maybe if I go through Lux, I can add a handling charge. Did you find out when the caravan will be back for their next pickup?”

“In approximately one month, although that can vary with demand. Lux will keep us apprised.”

“Huh, I guess Lux has some item that lets him communicate with Sakaiya.”

“It would seem so.”

Cayna decided the refining process could be done in their spare time and told Roxilius they'd call it a day. She was sure he'd pull an all-nighter out of guilt otherwise. He spent the entire evening sulking until Cayna put herself to bed, stifling a yawn.

"All right. Time for a few questions..."

Once breakfast was finished, Cayna clapped her hands, ready to ask Kuu everything she wanted to know. Roxine cleared the table, and Roxilius prepared to head out with Luka. Cayna was often out of town, so she didn't remember the details of their morning routine. Roxilius simply replied, "Oh, you must have forgotten. We're off to clean the bathhouse."

The children had been assigned bathhouse-cleaning duty as punishment for leaving the village without permission.

Their punishment had since ended, leaving Roxilius to handle the task himself. After discussing the matter, the villagers decided that doing odd jobs, patrolling the village, and maintaining the bathhouse was too much for one butler, so they had the children help him with the latter duty going forward.

Lytt couldn't lend a hand in the mornings or evenings since that was when the inn was at its busiest. With that in mind, it was decided the kids would start roughly before noon.

Lux Contracting's main source of revenue came from the sale of various Sakaiya products and Lux's own custom furniture. Latem was in training but not yet an apprentice, so his parents were fine with people putting him to work out of the blue.

Aside from helping around the house, Luka had no duties to speak of. Moreover, Roxine was such an efficient housekeeper that she required no assistance at all.

"Hmm. I'll tag along since it looks like I'll be able to introduce Kuu to people now," Cayna told Roxilius.

"Very well."

"You're gonna... help clean, Mommy Cayna?"

“I’ve gotta introduce Kuu to Mimily.”

The two had technically met before, albeit when Kuu was still invisible to everyone except Cayna. It was better to properly acquaint people with Kuu before any issues arose, especially since Cayna had no idea what this world thought of fairies. She’d be in big trouble if they turned out to be taboo.

Roxilius went ahead to the bathhouse while Cayna took Luka and Kuu to the inn.

“What’s that you got there?” Marelle asked, staring in shock at Kuu floating over Luka’s head.

“Wow! Miss Cayna, what is that?! *Who* is that?!” Lytt squealed, her eyes gleaming with wonder.

“This is Kuu, the new fairy living with me. I hope you’ll get along.”

Granted, Kuu wasn’t exactly new, but Cayna kept the introduction short and sweet since explaining the entire situation would be a headache. She gave a small bow, which Kuu dutifully mimicked, saying, “A pleasure, a pleasure.”

“Awesome!”

Lytt, who was in the middle of wiping tables, gripped her towel excitedly. Her face lit up in amazement just as Luka’s had the previous morning. Cayna mistakenly took that to mean that young girls adored fairies even in this world, too.

“Pardon me, Marelle. May I speak with you for a minute?”

“Come on, Cayna, why so stiff? How long have we known each other by now? You can tell me anything.”

Cayna still lacked basic knowledge of modern-day Leadale, and Marelle was the one person she could go to for answers.

Just like when they first met, Marelle gave Cayna a hearty thump on the back. “Quit bein’ so formal!”

“Cough... Right. Are there any local fables about fairies?”

"What, you don't know? They say happiness comes to children who encounter fairies."

"Urgh..."

Cayna's heart sank with guilt at the mess she'd unintentionally stepped into. She couldn't say for sure if Kuu was an *actual* fairy, but she didn't want to mislead Luka and Lytt or give them false hope.

As she contemplated this, Marelle gave her a pat on the shoulder and whispered, "Don't you worry. A girl's gotta get out there and find her own happiness, not wait for it to fall into her lap. That's one lesson Lytt's gotta learn the hard way."

"Y-you're really something, Marelle..."

Marelle left an incredibly strong impression. Cayna's cheek twitched; she could practically hear the other village ladies telling her this was exactly how a country girl ought to be.

An awkward smile spread over her face as she pictured Lytt growing up to be just as plucky and dauntless—a transformation a long-lived high elf like Cayna would probably witness firsthand if she stayed in the remote village.

I dunno if I want Lytt to turn out like her mom, though..., she thought as she started leaving for bathhouse-cleaning duty with the two girls in tow.

"Whoa! What's that, Miss Cayna?" Latem exclaimed from the entrance, just as shocked as the girls had been.

"Kuu is Kuu!" the fairy replied.

"This is my new housemate, Kuu. I hope you'll be friends, Latem."

"So fairies are real after all..."

His shock, however, was for a different reason. When Cayna questioned him further, she learned that every race had similar children's stories. The ones involving fairies, however, were typically told to girls.

"The stories basically say you gotta wait for your prince to show up. Y'know, that sort of thing. And those kinda people aren't self-sufficient. We dwarves think it's a sign of

weakness."

Cayna was taken aback by his curt, cold practicality. In this fantasy world, she never would have expected a dwarf to imply she get a reality check. She couldn't tell if this was a matter of educational differences between the races or because dwarves were overall a people of action.

At any rate, the two starry-eyed little girls were having absolutely none of it.

"Hey! Don't crush our dreams!"

"It's... not nice."

"What, you seriously think seein' a fairy brings good luck? You gotta get out there and make your own luck!"

"Yeah, my mom said the same thing, but can't you at least let a girl dream?!"

Lytt must have overheard her mother earlier. Luka, meanwhile, didn't add much to their bickering; instead, she stood silently by Lytt's side and simply glared at Latem. Just as Cayna was wondering how she should mediate, Roxilius took advantage of a lull in the conversation and stepped between the three children.

"Things will only grow more heated at this rate," he said. "Let's set the issue aside until we've finished cleaning, then we can continue the discussion."

Roxilius spun Latem around and showed him to the men's bath before turning to Cayna and giving a slight bow. In other words: *I'll see to Latem, so you go ahead and take care of the girls.*

Lytt's cheeks were puffed out angrily, and Luka was on the verge of tears. Cayna consoled them as they all entered the women's bath.

"Okay, you two. Save your squabbling for when your chores are done."

"Squabble, squabble!" Kuu chirped, clueless to the fact she was the cause of said squabbling. She flitted through the air and mimicked Cayna's tone of voice. When they entered the changing room, Mimily caught sight of Kuu.

"Y-Your Holiness?!" the mermaid shouted, her face twisted in shock and horror as her

tail jerked violently. A moment later, she cried “I—I do apologize!” and pressed her head to the ground in prostration before Kuu.

Cayna rubbed her temples tiredly. *I've seen an awful lot of groveling lately*, she thought. “Relax, Mimily. Kuu’s got nothing to do with the Water Spirit. She’s not even a Wind Spirit. She’s a fairy.”

“Boo-hoo, boo-hoo.”

Kuu lamented the mermaid’s lack of eye contact. Cayna drew the fairy to her chest and roused Mimily to lift her head. The mermaid gazed at Kuu reverently.

“Is she upset with me?” Mimily murmured fearfully.

“Aw, she’s just sad because you won’t look her in the eye.”

“Oh my gosh! I-I’m so sorry!”

Dark clouds hung over the dejected Kuu as Mimily stared blankly and wondered how to cheer her up. The clouds quickly cleared at Cayna’s direction.

“Kuu is Kuu!”

“Um, hello, Kuu. I’m Mimily. It’s very nice to meet you.”

As soon as their eyes met and the two introduced themselves, a smile blossomed on Kuu’s face. Mimily immediately pressed a hand to her chest in relief.

“Phew. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d offended the Great Fairy...”

“Whoa, hold on,” said Cayna. “What’s this Great Fairy stuff? I thought your village revered the Water Spirit.”

“Yes, we do. We also had similarly tiny beings—palm-sized mermaids without wings—the village used as messengers. We call them Great Fairies.”

Cayna looked between Kuu and Mimily and felt like she’d seen something similar. She couldn’t put her finger on where, though, and moved on. At any rate, she figured the messengers were some kind of ocean fairy.

While Cayna and Mimily talked, Luka and Lytt grabbed deck brushes from the equipment box in the changing room and prepared to clean the bathhouse. Once the flow of hot water was halted and the tub drained, they started scrubbing. Anyone could turn the water off and on with a tiny bit of magic.

The drainage was controlled by a dam that only needed to be opened. The overflow usually spilled into the washhouse behind the bath. Most people used Mimily's laundry services, but as low as her rates were, the service wasn't free. Anyone without the cash on hand had to do their own laundry.

One of Cayna's magical devices purified the water from the washhouse and hot-water bathhouse and converted it for agricultural use. Roxilius maintained the fields' irrigation channels since he obviously didn't have enough to do already. This system reduced the time spent constantly drawing water from the well and was a hit among the villagers.

Cayna couldn't think of any other ways to improve life in the village; she decided to set aside her remodeling plan for the time being unless someone demanded something. She had offered to loan out golems and Earth Spirits to help cultivate the fields, but everyone had politely declined.

Mimily went over to where the girls were cleaning and flushed the filth away with a water spell. She had mastered crawling along the ground recently, which made her look like the mythical Lamia. It was an amusing sight; Mimily didn't have a long serpentine body like Lamia, so her tail did most of the work. Its feverish sway reminded Cayna of a dog's tail, and she accidentally let slip a giggle.

"Something the matter, Cayna?" Mimily asked.

"N-no, it's nothing. Nothing at all."

"Slither, slither, swish, swish."

Cayna did her best to keep a straight face as the mermaid eyed her suspiciously. However, she trembled violently and cracked once the clueless Kuu started imitating Mimily.

"Luka," Mimily said, "please tell me Cayna's biggest mistakes in secret later"

"Hey...!"

When Cayna heard Mimily speak of such nightmares, she hastily wiped the grin off her face. After all, Cayna knew several ways the mermaid could embarrass her in front of Luka.

Luka considered this request for a moment before nodding and saying, "...Okay."

"Lu betrayed me..." Cayna moaned.

"I'm pretty sure this is your own fault, Miss Cayna."

Just as Cayna was devasted by one blow, Lytt followed up from behind and backed Mimily. She was obviously still upset about the conversation with Latem.

Mimily finally noticed the younger girls' long faces.

"Did something happen?"

"Well, you might say there's a culture clash going on."

After Cayna explained the earlier incident, Mimily nodded.

"Hmm. So they're fighting?"

"I've had arguments with friends, too, but we never butt heads like this. What advice should I give...?"

"You're the mother figure. Shouldn't you be the voice of reason?"

In Cayna's case, nearly every group experience had taken place within the game. She'd usually just go along with whatever her guildmates and fellow party members wanted, so fights were few and far between.

After Lytt and Luka finished cleaning, Mimily had them sit on a bench in the changing room.

"You're usually busy talking to each other, so it's rare to see you this quiet."

"...Yeah."

"Miss Mimi..."

The girls sat next to each other and silently stared at their feet.

“Cayna told me a little bit about what happened, but could you try to remember your conversation earlier?”

Mimily smiled as the girls closed their eyes and mumbled their recollection of the event in the same way.

“I wonder, did Latem *really* dismiss your dreams?”

““Huh...?””

“Even if he said, ‘Waiting is weakness’ and ‘Grab it yourself,’ that doesn’t mean he was disregarding you.”

“Y-yeah.”

“...Uh-huh.”

The girls had been defensive in the moment, but they now understood the truth in Mimily’s measured words. They realized statements like *Dwarves think waiting is weakness* and *We have to grab it ourselves* were not necessarily denying their dreams.

“Besides, Latem said, ‘We have to grab it ourselves.’ That must mean he has dreams, too, right? So with all that in mind, what should you do now?”

“Say... we’re sorry.”

“Apologize.”

As the girls expressed their remorse, Mimily nodded with a smile. “Good answer.”

Luka and Lytt stood up and ran outside. Hardly a second later, a loud, shocked, and frankly strange cry rose from the men’s bath as the girls made their apologies.

“Whaaaaat?!”

Moved by the commotion on the other side of the wall, Cayna cried, “Oh!” and started clapping.

Mimily's temple let out an audible *twang*.

"Caynaaaaa! Please sit down right there!"

"Huh? What? What's wrong, Mimily? This is sudden."

"That was *not* an 'Oh!' moment just now! 'Oh'?! Honestly, what are you even doing?!"

"Huh?!"

Finding herself at the mercy of Mimily's wrath, Cayna suffered an hour-long lecture on communal living. Although a lost mermaid, Mimily was still raised as a future queen candidate.

Racial differences aside, she tearfully drilled into Cayna how a role model should behave. Well, other than the parts about being a mer-monarch, that is.

As Cayna's complaints rang into the heavens, Roxilius was relieved to know the children were smiling innocently together once more. Naturally, he ignored the chaos coming from the women's bath.

Private butler or not, he still had to look out for himself.

"Ack, that was rough..."

Cayna and the others left the bathhouse after Mimily was done with her verbal lashing. The three children had apparently cleaned the men's bath together and enjoyed pleasant conversation while the mermaid was chewing her out. Latem had to help out his parents in the afternoon, so he headed home.

"Mom... are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Never better."

Cayna, Luka, Lytt, and Roxilius were walking in an orderly line back to the inn to drop off the innkeeper's daughter when Luka tugged at Cayna's cloak worriedly. Mimily's lecture seemed to focus more on the art of leadership than the role of motherhood, but Roxilius doubted Cayna would find the information very useful. As he mumbled to

himself to stay on his toes around the mermaid, he said something to the effect of “I must be going” and began to veer away.

“Oh, you got patrol duty, Rox?”

“No, I have been asked to do an unrelated job. I thought I should take care of it now.”

“A job? Is it something only you can do?”

“No, anyone can do it.”

When Cayna inquired further, she learned the job was gathering eggs. The village chickens continued to roam freely like they owned the place, and there were eggs everywhere. Anyone could take them home, but the ones laid in tricky, out-of-the-way spots slowly spoiled. Therefore, each family was periodically responsible for checking the village for these eggs.

Cayna’s household was apparently next down the list, and it was now Roxilius’s duty to go on an egg hunt.

“Right, right, the eggs. What if we looked with Survey?”

“Oh! I’ll help, too, Miss Cayna!”

“Shouldn’t you get back to the inn, Lytt?”

“Don’t worry. It’s no problem as long as I’m home by dusk!”

Cayna glanced around and saw chickens popping out of a nearby barn. It seemed like a frustrating search on foot. Magic was much more efficient, but she wouldn’t be setting a good example for the children.

Instead, she took out a handled direction arrow from her Item Box and gave it to Luka.

“...?”

“What’s this?”

Luka and Lytt had no clue what it was and tilted their heads in confusion.

"Write what you're looking for on that arrow, and it'll point you in the right direction. You'll find it in no time. If there's more than one, it'll pick whatever is closest."

"So we should write 'egg' on it?"

"That'll include eggs in people's houses. 'Eggs on the ground' should do the trick."

The girls took the pen Cayna offered and audibly pondered over the arrow's surface. They knew their basic characters but were unsure how to fit a *hiragana* phrase into the roughly thirteen-by-ten-centimeter space. The size of their handwriting hadn't changed since Cayna first taught them, so she thought it'd be strange if they couldn't fit more than four characters on a small blackboard instead of a notebook. She'd written in large letters to help them see her examples easier but desperately hoped they'd realize that wasn't their *only* option.

After a moment, Luka wonkily wrote "*Eggs on the ground*" and showed it to her.

"Is this okay?"

"Yeah, that looks great, Lu. Now, if you grab the handle..."

Lytt followed Cayna's instructions, and the arrow spun wildly before pointing left to an area behind them. The wall of a house stood there, but it was surrounded by wild grasses.

"I'm pretty sure it's not *past* the house," Cayna murmured. She parted the weeds, and two eggs rolled out. Kuu quickly flew in and picked one up.

"Egg! Egg!"

"Don't drop it, Kuu."

The egg was about 30 percent of Kuu's own body weight, and Cayna warned the dexterous fairy to be gentle. Using her Craft Skills, she made several handlebar baskets sewn from nearby vines right then and there. Cayna's sudden ability to freely put something together without a template as long as she directed its shape made her even more suspicious of Kuu.

Cayna's expression gave nothing away as she handed out the baskets and told everyone, "Okay, let's meet up after we've got a whole bunch." They separated into

three groups: Cayna with Kuu, Roxilius by himself, and Luka and Lytt together.

Roxilius watched the two girls merrily set off on their egg hunt.

“What is that?” he asked.

“That’s my Find-It Buddy. It was in the Item Box in Liothek’s tower.”

“Huh?”

The appearance and effect of an item was often tweaked to personal preference, so there were plenty of things Cayna couldn’t understand unless she tried them out herself. Cost and materials determined the quality of an item, so it wasn’t like people could just pull things out of thin air.

Liothek’s tower was filled with the usual, but Cayna also found several arrows with words like *thorn*, *centipede*, and *weird stuff* written on them.

She must have been dying for something interesting, Cayna thought wistfully. The girl wore an Antonietta janthina or flapjack octopus costume whenever they met, so Cayna had no clue what Liothek actually looked like.

Roxilius said he’d focus on the village perimeter and fields and broke away. Luka and Lytt had made their way toward the center of town, so Cayna decided to check the entrance. Finding eggs in the tall, overgrown grass was easy enough, so her skills felt unnecessary here.

In the meantime, Cayna remembered to ask Kuu where Opus was.

“Opus? Opus?”

Kuu gazed up at the sky and mulled over this question with a troubled look.

The fairy would probably figure it out in due time, but Cayna rephrased her question since Opus was a nickname only she and the other players used. Cayna had asked Kuu a while back if Opus ever teased her. Instead of, *No, he didn’t tease me*, it was possible her headshake had meant, *I don’t know this Opus*.

“I’m asking about the person who locked you away in that book.”

When the fairy shook her head with another bewildered look, Cayna realized Kuu might not even remember being put there in the first place.

"Hmm? Okay then, where did you first come from?"

She seemed to understand this question and excitedly chirped, "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" Whether or not sanctuaries were exciting was beside the point.

"A sanctuary? I know what a church is, but what's a sanctuary?"

"I believe a sanctuary is a place where a god is enshrined."

Kee's input was extremely helpful, but Cayna knew zilch about the gods of this world. Which was pretty sad, considering her son *was* a High Priest.

It was possible Kuu herself had a connection with the gods, but that wasn't Cayna's focus at the moment.

"I better leave this to the pros. Should I ask Skargo?"

Cayna was discussing this with Kee, but anyone else would think she was talking to herself. One full basket floated beside her while she took out another. She'd need more, of course.

Considering the speed and precision with which Kuu gathered the dropped eggs, the fairy likely had skills of her own. Her tiny body could only grab one at a time, but she seemed to be strangely enjoying herself. Kuu used to be intangible, so she was probably thrilled to race around touching things. Cayna felt the same way the first time she experienced the game's environment.

When they returned with two full baskets, Luka, Lytt, and Roxilius were already there. In addition to the basket Cayna gave him, Roxilius had filled a second basket he borrowed from another family. Lytt's apron was also brimming with eggs.

"Looks like there are lots more old eggs out there, huh?"

"Yeah... but... we can't carry them."

"Indeed. I borrowed another basket but set a limit for myself. The search would be endless otherwise."

In total, the group had gathered over one hundred eggs. Cayna used magic to roughly categorize them. Were they old or new? Such criteria were subjective, so Cayna couldn't tell how old an egg really was. The skill was known as Classify, and the basic idea was that it could organize anything the player specified. Back in the game, this was undeniably a Throwaway Skill you ignored the second you learned it. Most Skill Masters agreed there were too many Throwaway Skills created for no other reason than to add more quests. It was unclear whether Classify's survival this far in the future could be considered a lucky break.

While they were working, Latem stopped by with news.

"Miss Cayna, my dad says there's a message for you from Sakaiya."

"A message? From Caerick?"

"I dunno. It just said, 'Please visit when you have time.'"

"Oh, okay. Maybe an order for magic rhymestones finally came in?"

"Well, that was all. Later!"

"Huh? Hey, wait!"

Latem ran off before Cayna could reintroduce Kuu. He was grinning ear to ear, so she assumed he enjoyed helping out the family business.

"Lady Cayna. If the eggs still need sorting, I..."

She shook her head at Roxilius's offer to cover for her.

"It's not like I need to leave right this second. I can head to Helshper tomorrow."

"Understood. In that case, I'll distribute the fresh eggs. What shall we do with the old ones?"

"It's a bit iffy whether or not they're edible. Maybe I can use them for Convert?"

Sixty eggs were deemed safe as long as they were cooked first. The rest made no guarantees. Roxilius left to distribute the edible ones among the villagers, and Lytt took eggs to her own family.

Since the message on a Find-It Buddy couldn't be erased, Cayna decided to loan the arrow out for egg hunts. She heard more than a few villagers had fallen victim to a rotten egg—this was undoubtedly because they had no way of separating the good and bad. This world apparently didn't have methods like the saltwater test to help tell the difference.

"Perhaps you could inform someone?"

"And who am I supposed to tell exactly...?" Sharing the test with the Merchants Guild would create an uproar and end up a huge pain, so she thought maybe her grandson could speak for her. "Anyway, how could players leave behind board games and stuff but not mention this little life hack?"

"It appears the balance of knowledge was unequal. After all, there were not many women."

"Female players, huh?"

The female players Cayna had known included a pervert who was way TMI, a silent eyesore, a complex case of siscon, and a mascot obsessed with all things weird. Not a great lineup. The memory alone struck Cayna with a wave of exhaustion, and she suddenly needed a nap.

"Are we... throwing these away?"

"Nope. Watch this, Lu."

The girl obeyed and curiously observed the basket packed with leftover eggs.

Cayna picked three and cast Convert on them. The eggs in her outstretched hand were momentarily covered in a rainbow film before turning black, and each shrank to the size of a thumbnail. She used Search and discovered they were pieces of iron.

Cayna dropped these into Luka's hand and cast Convert on three more eggs. This skill changed one's items into other random substances. There were plenty of pros and cons, though, so it was yet another Throwaway Skill.

First, each conversion cost a significant amount of MP. This number varied with the target, but those three eggs alone cost 100 MP.

Second, each time was a gamble since you never knew what you were going to get. Cayna placed a grain of iron, a stone, a piece of square timber the size of an egg, a snail shell, a small bottle, and many other unrelated things into Luka's hands. One disappeared into thin air. Considering they started as eggs, the grain of iron and the bottle weren't so bad. Still, the rest were garbage.

For the time being, Cayna decided to bring everything home in a basket. She couldn't just flout the law by littering, and some items would likely prove useful around the house.

The next day, Cayna left Luka with Roxine and teleported to Helshper. She had assumed Kuu would want to stay with Luka, but the fairy absolutely refused to leave Cayna's side. Kee's quiet suggestion that maybe she *couldn't* leave Cayna was a bit unsettling.

Now that Kuu had a physical body, Cayna thought she would need to eat and had asked Roxine to prepare a variety of dishes. Nonetheless, the fairy continued to casually skip meals except for the occasional teaspoon of honey. Assuming Kuu only ate sweet things, Cayna offered her sugar; this, too, was a dud. Since the fairy ate nothing but fruit in the morning (and a single, tiny bite at that), she concluded Kuu's diet was limited to natural sugars.

Kuu used to skittishly hide away in Cayna's hair when she was invisible, but gaining a physical form had made her surprisingly inquisitive. Kuu sat on Cayna's shoulder as they walked Helshper's bustling main road, and her eyes danced at the surrounding sights. Keen-eyed passersby who spotted her either stared in shock or froze solid. The former were mostly women while the latter were the elderly.

At one point, they passed what looked like a group of female students, who whispered among one another and began stalking Cayna and Kuu. Sensing the fairy was in imminent danger, Cayna rushed to Sakaiya.

"Great-Grandmother?!" Idzik, the young master of Sakaiya, exclaimed when he saw Cayna fly in.

The employees shot suspicious glares at the girl who had charged into the shop but jolted at their young master's reaction. Not only was she a relative, but if Idzik's form

of address was to be believed, she was also two ranks higher than Sakaiya's founder, Caerick.

"Sorry for barging in like this, Idzik."

"Not at all. Father said you would be arriving soon. Has something happened?"

"Some hyenas came after me, so I made a break for it."

"What?"

Idzik wanted to know what kind of foes could force even his great-grandmother, the most powerful being on the continent, to run away. However, he restrained himself. This was no time to be prying into other people's personal business. Leaving the shop to his subordinates, Idzik guided Cayna into the main building.

"By the way, might I ask what you have on your shoulder?"

"Oh, right. This is Kuu. Kuu, I think you already know, but this is Idzik. He's my great-grandson."

"Nice to meet you! Nice to meet you!"

Idzik was uneasy for a moment but soon viewed Kuu as a guest of honor and dipped his head.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Milady Kuu."

"Kuu is Kuu!"

Kuu stood up, and trails of phosphorescence followed the fairy as she darted around him. Hands on her hips, she puffed out her cheeks in an angry pose. Idzik, meanwhile, looked bewildered.

"I think she's saying she doesn't like being called milady," Cayna explained.

"Is that so? But I must address all our honored guests with due respect."

He made a fair point, but there was no evidence Kuu was older than him since no one could confirm her age. When told this, he asked, "How about 'the Most Honorable

Kuu'?"



This was apparently a fair compromise.

Just like before, Cayna and Kuu were led to the parlor where they waited for some time. Finally, Caerick appeared from behind the sliding screen door.

“I apologize for the wait, Grandmother!... And who might that be?!”

“Hello, Caerick. This is Kuu.”

“Kuu is Kuu!”

Caerick had entered the room in good spirits but froze upon opening the sliding door. The subordinate following behind him with a box hung back in confusion.

Cayna clapped in her grandson’s face to bring him back to his senses.

“Hey, you’re the one who called me here on business. Why’re you getting worked up over something so tiny?”

“Boo! Boo!”

Kuu protested the *tiny* comment, but Cayna smoothed things over with a pat on the head. The fairy’s mood instantly turned around, and she flew around Cayna in a flurry of dancing music notes. Perhaps Kuu was a bit too much of a pushover.

“You never fail to surprise me, Grandmother. Is this what they call a fairy?”

“Yup. This is Kuu. She joined our family just yesterday.”

“I’m slightly curious about your household... Did you say just yesterday?”

“That’s right.”

Kuu had been around pretty much the entire time but only officially joined Cayna’s household the day prior. Caerick stood in dumbfounded silence for a moment before shaking his head.

Cayna heard him murmur something along the lines of “Yet another feat Grandmother is capable of.” She wondered what else he thought she could do.

Once Caerick forbade the subordinate carrying the box to speak of Kuu, he spread some papers across the table and opened up the lid. There were small, dark gray stones packed inside. Magic rhymestones.

“You already sent me plenty, but it looks like you’ve got lots left.”

“Yes, there are many among the stones in the cool riverbed, so finding them is a simple task. I’m very grateful to those children from the orphanage for telling me the location. I paid them handsomely for their assistance, of course. Not to worry.”

He hastily added this last statement when Cayna’s eyebrow rose at “*children from the orphanage*.” Disguising his nerves with an air of calm, Caerick took out two documents and showed them to her. They were order details from two nobles. Both stated the desired size and quantity of the processed rhymestone tools as well as the designated keywords.

Cayna asked the specifics of each order and completed them one by one as Caerick explained. Regardless, she did ballpark figures.

Most of the magic tools in question were smaller than the original rhymestones, so Cayna could pick up a stone from the box, process it, and set the keyword with one hand. Caerick handed the finished products over to his subordinate, who packed them away in crates in a separate room.

Cayna continued processing stones down this assembly line and chatted idly with Caerick while he checked their quantity. She also took the opportunity to tell him how to differentiate between good and bad eggs. His eyes widened at her casual explanation.

“I must make this known at once!”

Just to be safe, Caerick scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to an employee to be sent to the Merchants Guild.

“Is it that big a deal?”

“It is, Grandmother. Now we will have fewer cases of food poisoning.”

Every country apparently dealt with similar issues at the dinner table.

"Also, thanks for the wheat," said Cayna. "Can I really have it for free, though?"

"Oh, no, I'm certain I received payment. Perhaps the middleman made a mistake?"

"But didn't you only charge me for shipping? That's basically a handling fee."

"It was a complimentary discount since this was your first purchase. I will request the full amount next time."

"Gotcha. Well, I appreciate it."

"But of course. You are helping me as well."

The two smiled at each other. Meanwhile, Kuu had grown bored of darting around the room and was now lying on Cayna's head.

"...In any case..."

"Yes?"

"I never imagined you'd be accompanied by a fairy, Grandmother."

"I guess fairies are pretty rare, huh? I had no clue."

Caerick frowned and warned that Kuu might draw the attention of eccentric dilettantes. They would approach Cayna with flattery and money or, if all else failed, resort to violence.

"Having said that, Grandmother, you are utterly unrivaled. I expect anyone foolish enough to prove that wrong would spell their own destruction."

"Hey now..."

She was amazed that he could make such a bone-chilling statement with a grin on his face. It was true Cayna showed no mercy to anyone who threatened her family, but she'd earn a bad rap if she went around giving everyone the bandit treatment. By that point, it'd just be showing off. Still, it *was* exhausting keeping her army of OP skills in check.

As she considered a more peaceful method, Caerick offered Cayna tea and sweets as if

to distract her.

"We've completed enough orders, so let's stop here."

"Huh? Don't we need to do the ones over there?"

"No, the nobles whose orders we just fulfilled are notorious attention seekers. Even if we say nothing, they will flaunt and promote our wares."

In other words, they were great walking advertisements. This also meant Cayna would be called upon more frequently. It was a hassle, but Cayna would do what she must to support her family.

Cayna's shoulders drooped, and she sipped the tea Caerick brewed himself. She nearly sprayed it everywhere when an urgent message tone suddenly blared in her head.

"What the—?"

"You have an urgent message from friend Shining Saber: 'Potential incoming attack on the capital. Requesting aid.'"

"Seriously?! I look away for two seconds and this happens?!"

"Grandmother?"

"Sorry, Caerick. It looks like something is going on in Felskeilo. We'll pick this up next time!"

"Something'? What do you mean?"

"I don't know yet, either, so I can't help you there. Later!"

"R-right. P-please take care."

"Thanks! Sorry for the trouble."

Teleport enveloped Cayna in its characteristic purple beam of light right then and there, and she disappeared in an instant. A sense of unease fell upon Caerick as he saw her off. If something big was happening in Felskeilo, he knew he had to check the situation with his mother. Although reluctant, he had no one else to contact on such

short notice and resorted to Telepathy.

It all began soon after Cayna and her family returned to the village. A ragged male adventurer and his crazed horse crashed into Felskeilo's western gate. The gate was solid, so naturally the incoming man suffered the most damage. The collapsed horse foamed at the mouth, and the rider, sent flying upon impact, was covered in blood. He was injured, of course, but the man's armor was so shredded that it hardly clung to his body.

The soldiers at the gate rushed to take care of him. They doused the man in potions and checked his condition.

"H-help."

"Hey, hang in there! Can you tell us what happened?"

"Here, have some water. Easy does it!"

A guard brought a cup to his lips. Water spilled over as the adventurer drank, and he hoarsely pleaded for help. The words they managed to catch horrified them.

A horde of beasts and monsters had attacked a merchant caravan. His comrades were killed by monsters that half treated them like playthings, and the severely injured man was the only one sent to Felskeilo as a messenger. After feverishly relaying this information to the guards, he fainted from exhaustion.

Even inexperienced soldiers like these knew better than to dismiss the man's word as a lie or joke, and they immediately sent messengers in every direction.

One went to the castle to seek the king's guidance, and the gate commander used his own judgment to hire adventurers to scout the area and check the western trade routes. Fortunately, they caught up to the knights on patrol and informed the captain of both the situation and measures the commander had taken.

The familiars of adventurer mages searching the area confirmed mixed groups of monsters, and similar reports came from other travelers as well. Realizing the situation was dire, top leaders held an emergency meeting and notified the entire capital to go on high alert. The High Priest's approval expedited the process.

Even the Adventurers Guild was called upon for service. Several parties were available, and about fifty people volunteered. Guard escorts were in high demand ever since the western trade routes reopened, and a considerable number of adventurers had answered the call. Fortunately, these groups had apparently avoided running into any hordes of monsters. The escorts guarding the attacked caravan had last departed from Felskeilo.

The nobility sent their personal soldiers to defend the city, and the Academy's master healers and apothecaries joined the main forces at their own risk as well.

Mai-Mai, Academy headmistress, was conscripted by the knights since she had previous experience. High Priest Skargo, despite the opposition around him, chose to join his sister on the front lines. Kartatz, the boss of a large shipyard, had built barricades and a makeshift camp but brought his mace as well.

"...Why are you both here?" Mai-Mai asked.

"Hey, it's times like this where I gotta show my stuff," replied Kartatz.

"Hmph," said Skargo. "Injuries will happen regardless, so healers are essential."

Staff from the Academy, church, and workshop had all come together, and the hastily built stronghold was already overcrowded.

"Looks like we've got the old A-team back." Shining Saber, the knight captain who was commanding soldiers and knights alike, entered the packed central tent and looked around. He smiled awkwardly.

"Oh, you're just arriving now, Captain?"



"As if I'm just gonna let the soldiers and knights run wild! Anyway, how's the situation?"

Question marks floated around Skargo, and Shining Saber answered his empty-headed comment with obvious irritation.

The gate commander in charge of this zone rushed over to give an update.

He reported the camp was still under construction, and the adventurers were using their familiars to reconfirm the scale on the monster horde. Shining Saber instructed the soldiers with him to help Kartatz and the others, and his second-in-command ordered the knights to either aid with the construction of the camp or deliver supplies to the main forces.

As the soldiers and knights left in groups of twos and threes, Shining Saber gave a heavy sigh.

"I'm too old for this..."

"Isn't it for the best? You must be tired of all the paperwork by now. This might even be a blessing in disguise."

"...Shut it."

Shining Saber made no attempt to hide the dejection his second-in command's snide remarks wrought.

"We don't have many soldiers left to defend the city. The nobility's personal guards are still around, but it's a different chain of command. I dunno how we're supposed to navigate that."

"The adventurers are away as well. It's not ideal timing."

Complaints went flying now that their subordinates were out of earshot. As the two embarked on a hopelessly long tangent, Mai-Mai and Skargo exchanged strained smiles.

The mages' familiars confirmed the overall scale of the enemy forces in the early evening. The monsters and beasts were heading toward the national border. These included both predators like horned bears and prey such as rabbits. It was determined

some artificial method might be forcing the creatures to go against their natural instincts. Since no one knew what might happen, a travel ban was enacted across the capital as a precaution.

"Monsters and animals acting in groups? Have any giant monsters been sighted since the first victim?" Shining Saber questioned.

"There's been reports of goblins mixed in with wolves, bears, and rabbits, but no mention of anything particularly large," replied the second-in-command.

Their all-important mages had been defeated after only a few scouting trips. Sending out any more to collect evidence would be problematic. Mai-Mai raised her hand as the knights puzzled over their dilemma.

"In that case, shall I dispatch a spirit?" she asked.

This was a proposal by someone equal to Shining Saber. According to Cayna, Mai-Mai was raised to be a magic-attack specialist, so she could handle the task with no issue.

"Hmph. I wasn't aware you could use them, Mai-Mai," Skargo said.

"Come on, Skargo. Don't assume I only specialize in Flame Magic. Mother taught me how to summon several spirits."

"I see. Well, that's a relief. I'll leave the matter up to you."

Skargo nodded with satisfaction, but Mai-Mai was two seconds from decking him when she saw dark clouds of anxiety roiling behind him. Everyone else secretly thought he would have deserved it.

Mai-Mai's Wind Spirit confirmed only monsters and beasts made up the enemy camp, but it unfortunately couldn't tell if a giant monster was among them. Also, had the enemy's numbers almost doubled since the initial reading?

It took a full day to fortify the capital's western gate. The following day, a barricade was erected a distance away from the city, and a basic defensive camp was laid out for students, priests, and patients. Volunteers were also heading to the battlefield, so those transported here would include the badly injured and lost causes.

In addition, a main contingent of soldiers and knights was deployed to the front line,

established several hours away. Bands of mercenaries and last-minute adventurers joined them, and the personal soldiers of the nobility were present as well. However, this last group made the adventurers uneasy.

To prevent confusion in the chain of command, everyone was placed under the authority of the knight captain. However, the adventurers made sure they were allowed to flee if their lives were at risk. It was a situation where anything could go wrong. Meanwhile, Skargo and Mai-Mai remained in the rearguard, which obviously made a few people nervous.

As morning dawned, a stream of reports came from their stronghold outside the city. All except the most urgent reports were handled by the second-in-command and sent to Captain Shining Saber. The dragoid had called upon Skargo and Mai-Mai and was presently conferring with them. As a combat engineer, Kartatz had his hands full constructing multiple barricades.

The meeting discussed issues like transportation of the injured, first aid, and incorporating students who could cast magic.

“First, our rearguard will carry out a preemptive strike on the monsters before falling back. Got it?”

“There are many zealous youth, but we cannot simply throw them into a melee. Do keep this in mind.”

“Do you really intend to join the front, Sir Skargo?”

“I couldn’t possibly compare to Mother Dear, but I can cast defensive magic upon our forces. My only other option is to serve as a medic, but it is better to have none injured to begin with.”

The High Priest’s presence on the front lines would raise morale, but it was undeniably dangerous. Still, the punch of a horned bear couldn’t leave so much as a scratch on either sibling, both of them at level 300.

Only Shining Saber knew this, so everyone else begged Skargo to stay back. After all, whenever the High Priest made a rare speech before the people, he always gave the impression he was a sparkling, mewling, flowery mess.

“Sheesh. I was really hopin’ my tenure wouldn’t include all-out war...”

"Oh dear. That doesn't sound much like the strong, brave Shining Saber I know," Mai-Mai remarked.

"Yeah, I've got strength and not much else. I'm used to leading the troops after all these years, but how was I supposed to know a war was gonna break out? We should just go out there already and shut those monsters down."

"Yes, I'm certain the three of us could take care of them. However, doing so would rob the knights of their purpose in life."

As Skargo, who had assigned master healer priests and sisters to each unit, offered his solemn opinion, the stronghold fell silent with an air of *Wait, who is this guy?*

"What is it?! Why won't either of you say anything?!"

"...Huh? Well, y'know..."

"Yes, I'm also wondering if he's really my brother."

When Skargo's mood suddenly plummeted and he began to retreat into a swirl of darkness, the two pulled him back and apologized: "It was a joke!" "Sorry 'bout that." Skargo pouted sullenly—a rare sight any fan would have jumped at the chance to witness.

The tension in the main camp had temporarily lifted, but Shining Saber's next question quickly froze it back over.

"Cayna still hasn't replied yet. Did she even get my message...?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

Skargo and Mai-Mai stared at Shining Saber blankly, and he explained how he had sent a Friend Message. The shocked pair flew off the handle.

"Y-you asked Mother for backup?!"

"How could you...? Are you trying to disrupt Mother Dear's peaceful existence?!"

"Um, she's an adventurer. What's wrong with askin' for some help?"

The siblings with a shared mother complex shot the baffled Shining Saber a look that could kill. Skargo in particular had the word *shiver* shaking and writhing behind him. The dragoid could practically feel the resentment rolling off him.

As the second-in-command approached them, he tilted his head at the perilous atmosphere but reported to his captain nonetheless.

"The front lines have sighted the horde. Everyone, please take your positions. Furthermore, we have received a strange report from the lookout tower on the city's southern wall."

"‘Strange’? What’s so strange about it?"

"It appears someone or something is fighting in the southern forest."

"What? Wait, hold on. How do you know someone's fightin' there?"

The southern wall had no gate, but the fields just outside the city sustained the poor living there. The surrounding area was covered in trees, however, so it was impossible to know what was happening inside the forest from atop the city walls.

"It seems they reported howling from the forest and witnessed several unnatural bolts of lightning."

The three immediately frowned at the news and glanced at one another.

"That must be Mother, right?"

"Yes, it is surely Mother Dear."

"Why's she fightin' on her own? She didn't even stop by..."

Gripping his head, Shining Saber left the second-in-command behind and readied his army for the front. Skargo and Mai-Mai, who knew their mother well, sent out a notice to avoid the south if anyone wished to dodge her line of fire. After all, one could only guess how much damage Cayna's most powerful magic attacks inflicted.



CHAPTER 2

A Beatdown, an Invasion, a Quiz, and a Resolution

Several hours earlier...

Cayna teleported just outside Felskeilo's east gate. Kuu still clung to her shoulder but hid under her cloak to avoid a repeat of the commotion in the village. The capital was on high alert, but the gates remained open. Soldiers were swiftly urging travelers and carriages to take refuge in the city, but the process seemed to be going poorly.

This was mostly because everyone was staring up at the membraned reptiles flying overhead.

"A ptera...?"

Part of the Dinosaur Series, these monsters were commonly used in events back in the Game Era. Pteras were usually born from the mana-dense fossils excavated in mines and dungeons, and the strength of a single specimen could range between level 300 and level 500. The story behind its reappearance and subsequent attack on a town would always begin with some rich fossil enthusiast whose mansion was destroyed from the inside out by dinosaur monsters. It was an incredibly annoying setup.

Pteras were modeled after the *Pteranodon*, a genus of the pterosaur. However, unlike the ones in the movies, it was about the size of a horse. There were five here, which was more than enough to pose a serious threat to people. The average soldier was no match for them, either. As the soldiers led travelers into the city, they unsuccessfully jabbed their spears at the pteras attacking from above.

After carefully reviewing the situation, Cayna cast magic on the assailants.

Magic Skill: Wind Cutter Zanza Shot: Ready Set

Circular saw disks emanated from the hand above her head. Twenty, to be exact.

"Slice!"

On her signal, the four wind saucers converged on one ptera each and instantly chopped them to bits. Leaving no time for even a shriek, the gale storm tossed the monsters like leaves on the wind. Pieces of flesh falling to the ground dissolved in

midair.

"Oh, thank you! Are you an adventurer? We really owe you one," the soldiers, who could only wave the dinosaurs off with their spears, exclaimed gratefully. There were a few injuries among them, but none were life-threatening. Some travelers and merchants unable to escape into the city had fallen victim to the monsters, and the thick scent of blood wafted by. Even those who did find shelter in the town walls undoubtedly had trouble avoiding an attack from above unless they ran into a building.

Cayna had bigger priorities, though, so she asked the soldiers which direction the pteras came from.

"You're asking where those things came from?"

"Yes. Do you know?"

"We need to hold a service for the victims first. Help us bring them inside the gate, if you would."

"There's no time! Where did they come from?"

"R-right."

"You seem to be in a rush. Might I ask why?"

Cayna's intensity left the head gatekeeper at a loss for words. The soldiers who arrived from the city as backup tore her away from him.

"The pteras... Those flying monsters just now were a vanguard. While you're busy hanging out, their main forces are headed this way—including dinosaurs!"

""""What?!""""

Tension raced through the soldiers, who had failed to defend against the monsters the first time. By *main forces*, it was obvious more powerful foes were on the horizon. They didn't stand a chance.

In the Dinosaur Series, the pteras acted as the vanguard while tyrannos and triceratops made up the main offense. Cayna wasn't sure where they all came from, but the

Abandoned Capital was a good guess based on what Cohral told her earlier. As former game enemies, any average soldier would be trampled by the level difference.

“I don’t know the details, but they came from the south. Will that suffice?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

“What will you do with that information?”

“Beat the livin’ daylights out of their main unit.”

The soldiers’ faces twisted in shock as Cayna smashed her fists together and cracked her knuckles. She was terribly violent for such a sweet-looking girl.

“I wish we could help you, but a horde of monsters is heading for Felskeilo’s western gate. We can’t leave this post. I’m sorry...”

“I see. From the west, huh? And who’s handling that?”

The commander bowed his head and roughly informed Cayna about the request for Shining Saber’s reinforcements. Once he arrived, the dragoid would be able to clean things up quickly as long as the monsters weren’t *too* high level. If he didn’t arrive, it meant he either got weighed down by the knight system or was surprisingly dedicated to his position.

“We have the knights in addition to adventurers still in the city. Many others are also fighting alongside us... Oh, yes, I hear the High Priest Skargo has also joined the front lines.”

“What?!”

The commander didn’t criticize her cry of disbelief. He must have mistakenly assumed her heart hurt at the thought of the High Priest participating in battle.

In truth, Cayna simply hadn’t expected to hear her son’s name and instinctively tensed.

If Shining Saber has Skargo, maybe he won’t need me?

“If the knights are on the scene, won’t Mai-Mai be assisting as well?”

With two level-300 combatants and a level 427 at the ready, any half-baked enemy would be a breeze. Certain of this, Cayna decided to focus on the group (supposedly) coming from the south instead of sticking around to defend the west gate.

“I’ll be back in a bit. Please close the gate as soon as possible.”

“Ah! Hey!”

Cayna bowed to the soldiers before dashing south past the main road and into the forest. She felt a presence try to pull her back but pressed on regardless. Protruding from Cayna’s cloak, Kuu grabbed her shoulder to avoid being blown away.

“I’ve been running around since this morning. Maybe it’s just not my day...”

“I wonder whose day will be worse.”

“Shut it, Kee!”

For better or worse, one could call Cayna an asset to Felskeilo.

To prepare for the fight ahead, she cast multiple Active Skills. Fixing her eyes on the path ahead, she took the Rune Blade from her Item Box and released the magic staff from her earring. Weapons in hand, Cayna sensed a growing hostile energy as she wove through the forest.

She had unlocked the map around Felskeilo, so it wasn’t long before a red enemy dot appeared. It seemed to be charging toward the east gate, and Cayna switched directions to face the horde head-on.

Having perhaps run too far ahead, she was followed by some deinos from the Dinosaur Series. The *Deinonychus*-like monster was small, and its single claw on each hand was as sharp as a sickle. These scythes were big enough to slice a person in half but blocked the deino’s vision while walking. They were about the size of an adult human and incredibly bloodthirsty. Once it spotted prey, the deino would hop after it until it went for the kill. They were usually around level 200.

Two had appeared and hopped furiously after her, but Cayna knew exactly how to deal with them and kept her cool. Aiming for a weak spot that opened up as soon as the monsters jumped, she sliced off both their heads.

"Hmph. You think you're any match for me?"

She directed this question at the single humanoid monster standing before her with its army. The high-level goblin was known as the Night Sorcerer. It wore ornate robes and carried a twisted staff. The goblin was around level 400 and commonly found in the Underworld. From what Cayna remembered, it merely hid in the shadows of stronger monsters before launching an ambush attack. However, one was now commanding an entire horde of enemies. Even ones from the Dinosaur Series.

There were only two types of dinosaurs left. One was the five-horned, four-legged tricera. They were about the size of dump trucks, and there were four level-300 specimens.

Behind these were four level-380 tyrannos. The two-legged monsters rivaled an excavator when stretched to arm's length, and they had sharp fangs with gaping, massive jaws.

Next to the dinosaurs were four level-250 stone-covered gorilla monsters known as rockhides.

Lastly, two level-500 viruscorpions, each the size of a house, awaited her in the back. The rat-headed scorpions were ready to spread poison and pestilence.

Frankly, this group was more than capable of annihilating every nation on the continent. To anyone who didn't know better, Cayna was a poor little lamb standing alone in front of a crowd of carnivores.

Of course, that "anyone" was the monster's leader, the Night Sorcerer. Laughing eerily, it swayed with a gleeful smile. The goblin then sneered at the elf girl as if it had discovered something truly unpleasant.

"Hyo-hyo-hyo. How unfortunate that we meet under such circumstances. Your luck has run out. Had this been anywhere else, I would have entertained you with a more elaborate scheme."

"Thanks, but no thanks. Actually, I'd say *you're* the one who's out of luck, running into me here."

The Night Sorcerer frowned when she didn't show the slightest concern for the adversaries around her. Any normal girl would grow pale with terror and either beg

for her life or wail with madness. However, this child seemed perfectly at ease.

As the Night Sorcerer cautiously raised its staff, a surprise came from above.

A disk of wind whooshed down and sliced one rockhide clean in half. The second was scorched to a crisp after a bolt of lightning from the heavens blasted its dense stone body.

The Night Sorcerer gaped in incredulous shock at the disastrous scene.

“You, little girl! What did you do?!”

“I thought it was pretty obvious.”

Cayna puffed out her chest as if she hadn’t a care in the world. *Little girl* was the last thing she wanted to hear from some goblin tinier than her. Still clinging on to her shoulder, Kuu pulled down her lower eyelid and stuck her tongue out at the monster leader tauntingly.

“Tch. I was trying to go easy on you, little one. But if you’re going to act cocky...”

“You keep callin’ me that, but *you’re* the pip-squeak!”

Her Rune Blade grew red hot, and Cayna opened fire with an angry yell. The Night Sorcerer quickly ducked as the attack sailed over its head, and it struck the torso of a tyranno waiting patiently behind its master. The Rune Blade was a sorcery item and could therefore shoot additional magic. Like the fiery bullets that just whizzed by, for instance.

The tyranno collapsed as the direct hit punched a hole straight through its guts.

“Wh-what?!”

“Oh, you’ve never seen an Insta-Spell? It was totally common two hundred years ago.”

“Damn, you don’t mean you’re... Go! Destroy that little girl!!”

The giant monsters followed Night Sorcerer’s order and attacked as one. Cayna held out her magic staff in her left hand. In her right, she wielded the Rune Blade that sparkled with replenished MP. Cayna wound her arms as if limbering up and smiled

brazenly.

A tricera tore up the ground as it charged at her, and she used Weapon Skill: Rabbit Stream to lop off its head. Cayna then gathered up the wind with Leap to avoid the rockhide sandwich coming for her on both sides.

Viruscorpio tails and tyranno jaws swooped down from four meters up. Cayna was a minuscule target, so the giants had trouble keeping track of her long enough to attack. Although the Night Sorcerer commanded them, these were still clumsy creatures who relied on instinct. Cayna just had to remain calm and take down one or two at a time.

After a viruscorpio sent the rockhides flying and had sufficient room to attack, the monster extended its massive, needled tail. However, a tyranno charged in from the side and chomped down on it. The startled viruscorpio swung its tail wildly and shook off the tyranno. The dinosaur crashed into the pair of rockhides waiting their turn and knocked them down like bowling pins.

Still airborne, red sparkles converged around Cayna and transformed into several heavy spears. The fiery steel stakes of her Iyah Lanzas attack blasted the unfortunate rockhides to oblivion and left behind a huge crater.

One tricera stumbled after the tyranno crossed in front of it. Once Cayna was back on the ground, she produced a spiky ball of light from her staff and swung it straight at the dinosaur. The dinosaur's thick, bony skull instantly shattered into a million pieces, and it moved no more.

The defeated monsters didn't even leave behind a skeleton. Only two tyrannos, two triceras, and two virusscorpions remained.

Eyes bloodshot, the Night Sorcerer snapped after losing half of its underlings in the blink of an eye. Practically foaming at the mouth, the goblin screamed, "Kill that little girl no matter what!"

In a fight against an opponent you can't beat, despite your best efforts, rage only hurts your chances of victory even more. If the monster's leader had at least been wise enough to cooperate with the others, it might have had better luck.

Wielding her staff, Cayna cast Zolo Laga and took down the two tyrannos who had teamed up to snack on her. Lightning struck at random from the cloudless sky and charred them both bit by bit before spreading the ashes in all directions.

Dodging the viruscorpios' tails, Cayna briefly flew behind the surviving horde to create distance, then cast Might and Evil Eye. Struck by a force more powerful than their master, the monsters froze in their tracks and trembled.

Of course, the Night Sorcerer was affected as well, but the scowling goblin raised its wand and prepared to cast a spell.

“Dammit! Are you the Guardian the goddess foretold?! ”

“How should I know?! I’ve got places to be, so let’s just get this over with!”

Cayna’s magic staff glowed a yellow ocher as she deployed a Weapon Skill. The staff brimmed with power, and she gave it a broad swing. The goblin’s wand, on the other hand, created the skeletal frame of a folding fan from a thick concentration of darkness.

Magic Skill: Hazardous Blast

The fan’s skeletal frame transformed into black spears that shot straight at Cayna. It was a limited-range dark magic that scattered attacks in a fan formation from the caster. The goblin planned to block off escape to the right or left and prevent Cayna from moving forward.

She remained passive despite the oncoming danger and swung her Rune Blade upward.

Flying Slash

This was a special effect of the Rune Blade. It accumulated magic, transformed that power into a crescent-moon shock wave, and hurtled it at the enemy in a slicer attack. Cayna could only repel the black spears within her trajectory, but unfortunately for the enemy, their own attack could only shoot in one direction. As long as she knew where the spears were coming from, they were easy enough to avoid.

In truth, the flustered Night Sorcerer had escaped to the sidelines. A viruscorpio, seeing an opportunity to strike, was sliced vertically down the middle instead. This did nothing to weaken the attack’s destructive force, and it continued to slash trees lengthwise before disappearing farther into the forest.

Beads of sweat broke out along Cayna’s forehead. The plants’ screams were roaring in

her ears. Unfortunately, there was no time for prudence in the heat of battle, and she had to ignore them.

Even the goblin had broken into a sweat. The earth trembled behind the Night Sorcerer, and it turned to look back at the mangled bodies of its most powerful subordinates. The monster leader finally seemed to realize Cayna was in a completely different league.

Cracking Earth Hammer!

Just as the goblin felt an intense magical aura and whipped its head around, Cayna struck her staff into the ground. One viruscorpio and tricera charged forward, but the ground beneath them crumbled. The monsters were swallowed up by a giant sinkhole.

“What?!”

Cayna used the leader’s momentary hesitation to cast her next spell.

Magic Skill: Maxi Zan Laga: Ready Set

“Destroy!”

A thick bolt of lightning formed a massive crater, and everything flashed white. Unsatisfied, it continued to tear across the earth right and left, and the remaining tricera and viruscorpio were instantaneously swallowed up. The Night Sorcerer’s face twitched, and it raced to get out of the lightning’s strike zone.

The magic dissipated shortly afterward, and disaster surrounded them by the time the stars left their eyes. Not content with a basic S shape, the lightning recreated the winding trails of the Irohazaka highway. The trees that managed to avoid being burned to a crisp looked like the remains of a mountain fire.

Realizing she’d gone too far, Cayna’s cheek twitched as she looked around at her mistake and listened to the cacophony of screaming plants. She had intended to teach the goblin a good lesson, but calling down her most powerful lightning attack wasn’t the right answer.

The Night Sorcerer fell on its backside and stared at the carnage in utter disbelief.

“Guess it’s just you and me now.”

Cayna remained alert as she addressed the monster. The goblin returned to itself and wobbled to its feet.

"Keh-keh-keh-keh. Never thought I'd end up fightin' a mage like you..." the Night Sorcerer remarked offhandedly.

The goblin sluggishly readied its wand. It looked ready to give up, but cornered enemies often became desperate. Cayna cautiously pointed her magic staff at her foe.

"I may have failed, but I've got some nasty pawns who are on their way to take down your human capital. They should be able to handle it..."

"What did you send?"

"As if I'd tell a little girl like you!" the monster shouted angrily. It threw a stone-sized lump of darkness at her, but Kee's defensive wall blocked it.

"?!"

Shifting her focus from the wide-eyed Night Sorcerer to Felskeilo's western gate, Cayna cast her next spell.

Summoning Magic: Load: Crimson Pig (Small)

"Keh, you dare summon something now?!"

"Sorry, this isn't for you."

"What?!"

Cayna planned to take care of the Night Sorcerer herself.

As for the summoned beast's task...

"I'll leave that zone to you, Li'l P."

"Piiiiii!!"



A (level-500) wild boar piglet standing five meters long and three meters high popped out of a magic circle.

It answered Cayna with an adorable squeal that obviously meant *Leave it to me!* and scurried off on tiny legs. A trail of smoke followed the boar.

“What the heck was thaaaat?!”

Li'l P used Weapon Skill: Charge to pulverize trees and anything else in the forest as it headed for the western gate.

The battle had started as fifteen-on-one with the odds in her opponents' favor but turned one-on-one in a heartbeat. The Night Sorcerer glared at the root of its failure in twisted rage.

It wasn't like she didn't understand its frustration. Nevertheless, making an enemy of her was a bad move in this era. The goblin was only reaping what it sowed.

“Extend!”

“?!”

Suddenly, her magic staff extended and surprised the monster by flicking the wand from its hand. Startled and far less threatening, the goblin slowly backed away. Perhaps cowed by Cayna's overwhelming magic, the monster seemed to have lost its nerve. Sensing an opportunity, Cayna withdrew her staff and poured magic into the Rune Blade in her right hand instead.

The Night Sorcerer glanced at the flickering red blade and had an excellent idea while the spell was still warming up.

It turned and tried to run away.

As if mocking the attempt, Cayna swung the Rune Blade and cast her magic.

Magic Skill: Iyah Corpur Stream: Ready Set

The magic emanating from the sword transformed into a crimson firefly. It danced in a circle, and particles converged to create rows of fiery beads that surrounded the Night Sorcerer like a wicker basket. The flaming, upside-down tornado was like a wide

tagine lid, and the monster froze when it noticed a pale blue flame gathering below the peak. The ball grew bigger and bigger.

Five meters. Ten meters. Twenty meters. When it exceeded twenty meters, Cayna gave a thumbs-up. Then she turned it down.

An instant later, the hanging white-hot fireball dropped and immediately engulfed the dumbfounded Night Sorcerer. Temperatures rose as high as 1,500 degrees Celsius, and the target burned to ash in the blink of an eye. Even the ash evaporated, and the fireball erupted into a great explosion. Flames rose into the sky with the wicker-like cage, and a great pillar of fire was undoubtedly visible from Felskeilo.

Apologizing to the forest, Cayna stowed her weapon and followed the boar piglet west. Just then, Kee delivered another urgent message.

"There is a message from your friend Quolkeh."

"Thanks. What did she say?"

"It says, 'Do you know about a tortoise Guardian Tower?' I took the liberty of responding with an 'away' message since you were in the midst of battle. I hope you do not mind."

"A tortoise? Uh, that's Kujo's place, right? I'll answer now. Umm..."

Quolkeh was most likely with Exis. He used to be Tartarus, so they'd both be fine. Cayna wondered why the two were even dealing with a Guardian Tower, but she had other things to think about. She rushed to Felskeilo to take care of matters there first.

The attack on Felskeilo was caused by Event Monsters pouring in from the Abandoned Capital. Otaloquess normally kept a close eye on the barrier and informed the other two nations of any abnormalities so the situation could be handled in a timely manner. The knights would be dispatched, the roads temporarily blockaded, and the borders closed.

However, six goblins had leaked out shortly beforehand and incapacitated half their knights. The nations were in the middle of reorganizing.

One must not underestimate goblins. These in particular were powerful Event

Monsters nicknamed the Favre Regional Garrison. Each was a level 200 whom the average level-30 knight didn't stand a chance against. If passing adventurers hadn't intervened, the knights would have been annihilated.

Moreover, Otaloquess was understaffed and unable to assist due to the giant threat approaching them. More specifically, it was a massive tortoise with a shell as large as Tokyo Dome.

Unlike types that crawled on their stomachs, this was more akin to a Galápagos tortoise that could carry itself and easily walked on four legs. It was also impossible to get the entire picture at once; the creature was so enormous that only the underside of its shell was visible from below.

This being was considered an ancient relic and served as a valuable tourist attraction for Otaloquess. For two hundred days each year, the tortoise made a slow circuit around the country's vast borders. No one knew where the creature came from, but this time it had diverged from its usual trajectory and made a beeline for the capital.

Of course, the nation refused to stand by and watch. They tried a plethora of methods and strategies. However, their opponent was essentially a mountain. What could minuscule humans hope to accomplish?

Moreover, it had apparently scraped the barrier surrounding the Abandoned Capital and created a distortion. The monsters that escaped were now creating havoc in Felskeilo.

Let us review the desperate ways Otaloquess spent nearly a year attempting to stop their target.

First, they dug a simple pit. Their foe was sadly too big, and the pit failed to secure it properly. A failure.

They next tried destroying it, but the tortoise was impervious after centuries of magical attacks. It didn't make a sound, and there wasn't a single burn mark to be seen. Another failure.

Otaloquess floated around the idea of pushing or pulling it in the opposite direction but scrapped the idea after realizing they'd never find enough power to rival the tortoise.

They considered luring it away with bait, but no one knew what the tortoise ate or even *if* it ate. Also rejected.

By this point, they'd brainstormed almost every conceivable idea but failed to find results. The nation would spend its final moments running around like a headless chicken.

Then an outrageous report arrived. It came not from those wondering how to physically move the tortoise but from the scholars analyzing documents.

There was apparently a building on top of the tortoise's shell.

And so, the nation grasped at one final straw. Disaster might be avoided if they visited whoever was living there and begged them to stop. Everyone speedily devised a plan to gather a group of volunteer knights and adventurers to tackle the mountainous tortoise.

Exis and Quolkeh were among these reckless challengers. They had arrived in Otaloquess on a guard mission, and the staff at the Adventurers Guild begged them to participate.

Exis looked up at the calamitous tortoise slowly but surely edging toward the capital.

"Hey, ain't that one of those Guardian Towers Cayna is lookin' for?"

"Yeah, I thought the same thing. I tried messaging her but got an away response."

"Why the hell would a Limit Breaker be away?! What kinda mess is she wrapped up in now...?"

A gaggle of soldiers, knights, and adventurers were waiting in a distant forest outside the Otaloquess capital. Each had their own plans in mind and prepared to scale the tortoise. The first big hurdle was knowing *how* to climb it. Everyone lay in wait at the most suitable location—a lush, unique area full of enormous trees.

But although the foliage was sturdy and large, even the highest point failed to reach the outer rim of the tortoise's shell. From there, one had to scramble up with a rope somehow.

BWAAAAAHM!

The sound echoed at one-second intervals from about eighty meters away, and moments later, faint vibrations rolled from its feet. The repetitive tremors would prove frustrating if the challengers started at the bottom, so most elected to climb trees. These were also home to various monsters, so several tumbled back down in the process.

Incidentally, this wasn't Exis and Quolkeh's first time witnessing the tortoise. They had checked it out in the past after hearing rumors but never imagined they'd try to climb it someday.

"We goin' or what?"

This time, they had a last-minute addition.

A dwarf member of a do-or-die special-attack unit had randomly asked if he could join them.

His logic was apparently "*You two might make it more interestin'*." Exis and Quolkeh warned him they were on a different level from the locals and tried to turn the dwarf away. Nonetheless, he talked the pair down, and they started traveling as a trio.



"My name's a mouthful, so just call me Gramps," he'd said, but neither Exis nor Quolkeh were naive enough to swallow his story without question. The two agreed to collaborate under the assumption he had circumstances they couldn't begin to imagine.

"We've got our own way of getting up there, but what about you? You got this, Gramps?" Exis asked.

"Don't take me for some fool. You pick up more than a few tips and tricks by my age, so just watch and learn."

"Guess you'll be fine, then. Let's get goin'"

Their starting point was not the trees but instead the ground. Quolkeh and Exis could easily scale colossal heights thanks to their Active Skills designed for aid in battle, and the three headed for the shell rising high over the treetops.

Exis used Active Skill: Ground Runner to dash up the tortoise's feet to its shell in a heartbeat. This skill allowed the user to temporarily run up anything their feet touched from the walls to the ceiling. He just barely made it within the time limit and was perspiring heavily.

Quolkeh climbed the tortoise by wrapping her whips around various protrusions. She used this in tandem with Float and didn't appear to be in the least bit of danger.

"I should've let Quolkeh go first and wrap those around me just in case," Exis grumbled. Better safe than sorry.

"How long are you going to keep grumbling, Exis? Let's go."

"Ah, right. Hey, what about the old man?"

"What are you talking about? He's right behind you."

"Huh?!"

Dumbfounded, Exis turned around to find the dwarf hefting a large, long-handled ax over his shoulder. As the dragoid cocked his head and tried to figure out the *how* and *when*, Gramps prodded his back with the ax handle.

"Let's get a move on," he goaded.

Exis started to walk ahead, and Quolkeh approached him with a whisper.

"I just got a message from Cayna."

"What'd she say?"

"Good luck on the quiz.' What's that supposed to mean?"

"The heck's a quiz got to do with a tortoise? What's goin' on?"

As the group continued over the rim and crested the hill-like shell, they spotted a square building. A conspicuous red radio tower rose up from the roof and passed through a levitating ring. Over the building entrance, 3D letters spelled out KUJO TV. Unsure if this was all some joke, Exis's and Quolkeh's faces soured.

Suddenly, something stirred behind them. The three turned around and saw several knights in fluttering cloaks approach them.

Did they climb up the shell with nothing but ropes? One had to admire the fully armored knights for climbing a giant tortoise out of patriotic loyalty. The three halted, and a grim, middle-aged knight leading the new arrivals glared at them.

"This task is of vital importance to the nation, so one must stay focused. You adventurers have no doubt heard there is also a handsome reward for those who resolve this issue."

Without even waiting for an answer, the knight and his three subordinates entered the building. As soon as they did, the previously open door clacked shut and locked from the inside with a *ka-chak*.

Exis raced over and yanked the doorknob, but even he wasn't strong enough to get the door to budge.

"Huh? What?!"

"Relax. Only a certain number of people can enter at a time. Just wait."

"You sure know a lot, Gramps. Have you been here before?"

“...Many a time, yeah.”

The dwarf put a hand to his chin with an aura of deep emotion. Quolkeh sensed he was under truly difficult circumstances but didn’t question further.

After about ten minutes, the ceiling opened with a loud *boing!* and spat out the four knights from earlier. Drawing a parabola, they gave screams of “Gyaaaah?!” and “Uwaaaagh?!” in a Doppler effect before disappearing into the forest below.

Exis and Quolkeh broke into a sweat.

““They aren’t dead, right?”” they wondered quietly.

“Nah, they’re fine. It’s supposed to do that,” the old man replied with confidence.

The far-off look Quolkeh gave him said, *This guy knows from experience.*

Meanwhile, the door unlocked and opened up again. Gramps tried to enter first, but Exis held him back.

“Let the young people handle this.”

He stepped inside, and Quolkeh followed after. The dwarf gave an amused snort and brought up the rear. The door shut behind them.

“.....”

“What the heck is this...?”

“Just what it looks like.”

For Exis and Quolkeh, the room was a jaw-dropping nostalgia trip.

The interior was a perfect reproduction of a staged variety show. There were giant o and X symbols in the middle of the floor and a row of small, individual seats for guest stars. The goddess of a certain country was depicted on one wall. Cameras were positioned in front of the set, and there was a large seat where the MC explained the rules and such.

Something incongruent to all this also floated in midair.

A shirtless, Buddha-like statue sat in the lotus position on a lotus-flower pedestal. The figure was covered entirely in gold leaf, and its closed eyes peeked open as Exis and his group cautiously approached the center of the set. The golden Buddha glared at the intruders.

Exis and Quolkeh drew their weapons and prepared for battle. Only the old dwarf remained unfazed and merely looked up at the Buddha.

“Salutations, new challengers. We are the caretaker of this Guardian Tower. You seek the prodigious wisdom and miracles of the gods, yes?”

“Huh?”

“...What?”

The floating Buddha's eloquent yet antiquated speech confused the youths, but the old dwarf hefted his ax and harrumphed contemptuously. The narrow-eyed Buddha glanced down at him, then shrugged with a cry of admiration.

“Oh, we meet again! You have visited before, yes, distinguished gentleman? And there are three challengers this time... We see. Your odds of victory will indeed increase. If we are being honest, our last visitors were quite unenlightened. It was ever so dull.”

According to the Buddha, the old dwarf was a regular.

The slightly exasperated Buddha led the trio over to the ○ and X at the center of the studio. As soon as they arrived, a counter reading *00/00* appeared over each person's head. The numbers on the left were blue, and the right side was red. The Buddha began to explain before Quolkeh or Exis could ask any questions.

“There are one hundred questions, and you three must answer a total of eighty correctly to pass. Howeverrrr, if you answer twenty wrong beforehand, you are FINITO!!!! You shall immediately be deemed unqualified and thrown from the premises. Everyone is prepared, yes? Well, then! The Trial! Of the Guardian Tower! And Second Skill Master Kujo! Shall now begin!”

From somewhere unseen, a flat trumpet call of *Duh-duh-duh-duuuuuuh!* rang throughout the studio. The room dimmed, and a spotlight fell on the three.

“What is this?”

“What’s goin’ on?”

Exis and Quolkeh were still clueless despite already being in the thick of it.

First was the True/False Quiz. Rather than the androgynous Buddha statue, a woman’s soft voice asked the questions instead. The contestants had five seconds for the first question, so there was no time to waste.

“Question one: There are a total of fourteen Skill Masters. True or false?”

Quolkeh and Exis immediately raced to the X but were shocked to find the old dwarf still standing on \circ . They frantically urged him over, but it was too late. A golden bell appeared over his head with a loud *ding-dong!*, and the number above him changed to *01/00*. Meanwhile, a giant red X popped over Quolkeh’s and Exis’s heads with a *bzzzt!*, and the numbers switched to *00/01*.

“Huh? What? Why?!” Quolkeh questioned.

“Dammit, Gramps already knows these questions. Tell us sooner!”

The dwarf gazed at the pair coolly as they yelled at him in frustration.

“There were originally fourteen Skill Masters. That’s the truth.”

“...Hold on. Does that mean you’re a player, Gramps?!”

Catching vital clues in the dwarf’s casual remark, Exis used Search on him. Gramps was a higher level, so he could only see basic information.



"You were with the Red Kingdom... and your real name is Hidden Ogre. Wait, *you're* the Twelfth Skill Master?!"

"Dammit. So you're players, too... Well, I'll explain later. For now, let's just beat this trial."

"Just a second. If you're a Skill Master, can't you change how this Guardian Tower operates?"

"If I could, I would've done it long ago. We might be able to figure somethin' out, but that means beatin' it first."

Gramps, or rather, Hidden Ogre, gave a bitter look when Exis pressed him for answers. Quolkeh wanted to get out of here, too, and sided with Exis, but the dwarf's mind was set.

Each tower apparently had various rules. Realizing discussion could begin the sooner they completed the trial, Exis and Quolkeh followed Hidden Ogre's lead and turned back to the Guardian. The statue had apparently been patiently waiting for them to finish. It chuckled and looked off stage, then nodded.

"Next up..."

A voice filled the room, and the three quieted so they could catch every word.

"Question two: There is only one Guardian Tower that is an actual tower. True or false?"

A timer appeared in the center of the floor.

"Urgh, uh? Umm, ahhhh..."

Already at her wit's end, the confused Quolkeh chose *False*. Hidden Ogre remained on *True*, and Exis copied him.

The timer on the floor hit zero, and a buzzer noise rang above Quolkeh's head. A golden bell appeared above the dwarf and Exis and chimed a *ding-dong* of congratulations.

Quolkeh was visibly disappointed, but Exis patted her shoulder.

"Don't sweat it. We're just gettin' started," he said with a wry smile.

Hidden Ogre sullenly crossed his arms and glared at the empty MC chair. He seemed irritated, and Exis called out to him.

"Yo, Gramps. Somethin' bothering you?"

"Don't worry 'bout it."

"No need to be rude. Besides, that means there *is* something."

"Hmph..."

The crease on Hidden Ogre's forehead deepened as if he were thinking, *I've already said too much*. Gramps glanced at Exis evenly for a moment before dropping his shoulders with reluctant resignation. Meanwhile, the dwarf's gaze sent the dragoid into an internal panic. The glint in those eyes was terrifying.

"It's about this tower's Skill Master."

"The Skill Master? Aren't they watching us from somewhere since they're running the show? The statue said so earlier."

"That would only be true if the Skill Master was actually in this world."

"...Huh?"

Sensing the story had just taken a weird turn, Exis fell silent.

"If the Skill Master was here..." Hidden Ogre continued, pointing to the host's chair, "they'd be sitting right there watching the challengers with a smirk on their face."

"So you're saying the Skill Master isn't here because that chair is empty?"

"Right."

The Guardian Tower Buddha statue remained in the lotus position and gave no response. It could surely overhear their conversation but remained silent and simply stared at them through narrowed eyes. Nonetheless, the courteous way it stopped the clock to allow time for discussion was much appreciated.

"Okay then, who's running this tower?" Exis asked.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be here."

Hidden Ogre's answers were as vague as ever. The room fell silent, and the Guardian resumed the quiz once more. The three strained their ears to catch every word.

Then, twenty minutes later.

"Uwagh... Aghh..."

"What rotten luck. You hangin' in there?" the dwarf asked.

"You keep gettin' 'em wrong. I told you to follow my lead."

Gramps finished the True/False game with 19/01, Exis with 17/03, and Quolkeh with 07/13. They'd move on to the buzzer-equipped hot seats next, where their final task would be knocking out the remaining eighty questions.

Quolkeh alone could only miss seven more questions before she was booted out. A wall of despair loomed before her, and she miserably stared off into the distance.

"Nnnnrgh. These are all questions about *Leadale*..."

"I'm pretty sure there were some real-world questions."

"This quiz is freakin' ridiculous. Is this what Cayna meant...?" Exis mumbled.

"Miss Cayna's comin' here, too?!"

Hidden Ogre quickly advanced on Exis, and his menacing look staggered the dragoid.

"Um, yeah," he replied. Quolkeh nodded emphatically.

A complex look on his face, Hidden Ogre silently absorbed this news and looked at the pair in earnest.

"Do me a favor, will ya? Don't tell Miss Cayna I was here."

"Huh? Aren't you both one of the few Skill Masters? Don't you think she'll want to see you?"

"Unfortunately, the title of Skill Master ain't much more than scrap paper in this world."

Hidden Ogre sounded sad, somehow. Almost like he was talking about someone else. Quolkeh said nothing further.

Exis nodded with a sigh. "You don't wanna be found. Got it."

"What?! H-hey, Exis!"

"I'm still gonna tell Cayna I saw you, though. If she asks why you're avoiding her, I'll just repeat what you said and tell her you don't want to be found."

"Right... Sorry."

"Stoppin' Cayna from stickin' her nose where it don't belong ain't easy. We've been through a lot together as old guildmates, so I would know. Anyway, let's finish the trial and stop this tortoise."

Quolkeh's expression said she didn't quite agree.

"This conversation is *not* over," she mumbled, giving Exis the evil eye as she headed for the contestants' chairs. Exis and Hidden Ogre shrugged and followed suit.

The Buddha, who had been observing their exchange, looked up at the ceiling and encouraged the voice to proceed with the next question. As the human, dragoid, and dwarf took a battle-ready stance and glared at the ceiling, the statue observing them had a daring smirk on its face.

"Well, now. It seems we have caught unexpected prey, my master."

This hushed comment was clearly directed at someone.

Meanwhile, to the west of Felskeilo, knights, adventurers, and others battled an onslaught of monsters. Contrary to the initial plan to observe the enemy and await

their arrival, the fight quickly devolved into a directionless melee.

To start, the Big Three, Shining Saber included, hadn't reached the war front yet. The knights and others already on the battlefield also cracked under pressure when the monsters arrived earlier than predicted. As the two sides clashed, the knights and adventurers sensed the horde's unyielding determination to break through. Frightened, their plan to slow the enemy's advance was already falling apart.

The Flame Spear mercenaries who were staying in Felskeilo had also come to the city's aid, and their renowned leader, Arbiter, was overseeing the adventurers. Unsurprisingly, even mercenaries led by a veteran like Arbiter had trouble dealing with an enemy that included nearly every species in existence.

The monsters' main forces comprised of three poisonous purple praying mantises known as death mantises. They were each about the size of a small house, and it would require five or six knights to defeat even one of them.

There were also horned bears. It required at least two knights to handle one, and there were eight among the enemy's numbers. The knights had their hands tied with these two types of monsters alone. The soldiers were also assisting the fight, but dealing with two species was too much to handle. In addition, the adventurers were scrambling to take care of the goretigers and gaur lizards, both of which had armor-like scales on their heads and backs. No one had time to deal with commonplace bears and wolves or the rabbits and monkeys that scurried beneath their feet. These were assigned to one group of soldiers commanded by a single knight, but even they were slowly outmatched.

In truth, the capital's soldiers weren't particularly skilled. The region hardly ever went to war against other nations, and there had been no instances of monsters teaming up to attack a city since the nation's founding. The defensive line of knights and adventurers was slowly but surely swallowed by the throng. The knights struggled against the main unit of death mantises and horned bears, but the swarm surged forward like an army of ants.

Since monsters not locked in battle managed to evade the knights and press on, the adventurers in the rearguard blocked the way by using fallen foes as a barricade. They built the wall thicker and thicker, and the corpses piled up. However, the adventurers had to keep moving farther backward.

Unlike the monsters, whose only goal was plowing past the opposition, the defense couldn't afford failure. The situation didn't allow for a moment's breath, and the stress accumulated. Everyone was at their wit's end.

"Dammit! This is why I said show 'em a few dirty tricks first!"

"What do we do, boss? The vanguard will be overwhelmed at this rate," the second-in-command asked.

Soon enough, the enemy would overwhelm and shatter their defenses. Although Arbiter had once been a knight himself, he and their commanders didn't see eye to eye, and they struggled to cooperate efficiently. Assigning Arbiter as backup had backfired.

The knights who typically served inside the capital walls as the main line of defense were much less experienced than the adventurers who constantly engaged in battle. There was no one to lead them against an unexpected swarm of erratic, unpredictable monsters.

Just as Arbiter was contemplating whether to help or ditch them, the tide of battle shifted.

In the worst way.

There was a light *fwump* followed by a haze of pink smoke that covered monsters and knights alike. It hadn't reached the adventurers in the rearguard yet, but everyone frowned in confusion over what was going on. They found out soon enough.

Everyone fighting in the vanguard froze. This, of course, included any other knights and soldiers within range. Struck by an ominous foreboding, the adventurers in the rear prepared themselves as a faint white light coiled around the knights and monsters.

Then their allies turned around in unison and stared blankly at the adventurers.

"Hey, what's goin' on?"

"Careful! Something's wrong with these guys!"

Eyes glazed and empty, each vanguard member stood ramrod straight and smiled

faintly. They approached Arbiter's group with swords drawn.

Stomp, stomp, stomp.

Apprehension filled the mercenaries and adventurers as they observed their comrades. The pink smoke and unnatural white light warned Arbiter this was some magical business, so he ordered his second-in-command and the adventurers to retreat.

Stomp, stomp, stomp!

With the knights now against them, he didn't have much choice.

STOMP, STOMP, STOMP!

Putting distance between themselves, the monsters, and the knights as they slowly backed away from the defensive line, Arbiter finally exploded at the incoming rumble he'd been ignoring.

“What the hell *is* that?!”

“Boss! Over there!”

Both the mercenaries and adventurers looked in the direction the second-in-command had indicated and were dumbfounded to discover something trampling trees as it shot out of the southern forest by the main road like a bullet. The brown cannonball cut straight through the flank of the monster army and disappeared into the northern forest on the opposite side.

The massive swarm of monsters caught in the line of fire were haphazardly flung this way and that. A majority did elaborate tailspins high in the sky before plummeting to their deaths, but many died on impact as well.

“...What kinda monster was that?”

“I feel like I've seen it before.”

As everyone stood there and questioned what was going on, the culprit popped back out from the northern forest.

"Piiii!"

"Oh."

"...Boss, ain't that Cayna's?" Kenison asked.

A round boar gave a gallant (?) war cry and puffed out its chest proudly (sort of). The familiar creature was summoned by a certain adventurer.

Arbiter and his second-in-command were both struck speechless, and Kenison pointed at the short, stout crimson pig known as Li'l P. The mercenaries, who all knew Li'l P, let out sighs of relief. The adventurers, on the other hand, saw the situation as internal discord among the enemy and proposed retreat. No one had explained anything, so they seemed to believe Li'l P was one of the monsters.

"Hey, Arbiter! We'll get caught up in the friction if we don't fall back soon."

"Nah, we ain't backin' down now. Reinforcements came in the nick of time."

"Hold on. If we get caught up in a fight between monsters, we're the ones who are gonna pay!"

The so-called monster Li'l P was looking adorable as it snagged clumps of enemies with its snout and tossed them high in the air before trampling each underfoot. The boar was surprisingly versatile.

However, Arbiter realized those attacks were growing ever closer to the knights and that they had to do something before it was too late. The knights were part of his history; the mercenary couldn't let them die in good conscience.

"We'll get the knights and everyone else away from those monsters. If that thing is around, she ain't far behind!"

The mercenaries followed Arbiter's instructions and set about their various tasks. Some prepared rope for wrangling, others readied clubs they could use to gently (?) stun the knights, and magic wielders wove paralyzing and sleeping spells.

The adventurers were surprised at first but realized Arbiter and his men were earnestly trying to save the knights and soldiers from the surrounding monsters. Although they laughed at the absurdity of it all, each eventually joined the interesting

gamble.

“Sounds pretty wild, Arbiter. We’ll give ya a hand!”

“Those stuck-up knights are gonna owe us big-time. Count me in!”

“We’re knockin’ everyone out so we can save ‘em from the monsters, right? You can bet I’m not passin’ up a chance to hit a knight.”

“...Don’t kill anyone. Please.”

After encouraging a “less is more” approach for caution’s sake, Arbiter called out to Li’l P, who was still wreaking havoc among the monsters.

“Hey! Pi-wee!”

“*Pipiiii?*”

Just as a death mantis moved to slice the boar with its sharp sickle, Li’l P sent the enemy flying with a heavy *whomp*. The piglet heard Arbiter and turned all the way around to face him. Those pure eyes glimmered with an anticipation that made Arbiter and his second-in-command flinch. They shook their heads and got down to business.

“Where’s your master?”

“*Pi! Pipiiiii!*”

Li’l P pancaked a leaping goretiger and squealed happily. (That was the impression they got, anyway.)

“...Boss, I have an obvious question.”

“What’s that?”

“Can you communicate with it?”

“...Yeah, I thought about that after I called it. I have no clue what it’s sayin’.”

The mercenaries and adventurers watching the situation from behind collapsed in unison. Li'l P continued goring monsters and sent them flying with a resounding

"Piiiii!" It seemed to be saying something, but the effort was in vain since the recipients didn't speak boar.

The commanders' frustrations aside, the adventurer vanguard now faced the knights and demolished monster army. They mainly took care of the knights while the Flame Spears kept the monsters at bay. There were normally about one hundred knights in total, but only half were available to deal with the monster threat since the core unit was out of commission.

Nonetheless, the mercenaries were accustomed to fighting as a group and parried the monsters with ease. Li'l P acted as backup and attacked from the sidelines, but there was no need to fuss about finishing the job. The goal of every non-monster was to get the knights to safety, so as long as they injured all four legs and left the enemy helpless, the sharp fangs of the goretigers and gaur lizards posed no threat. Each mercenary warded off attack, launched strikes from the wings, and backed one another up. Such flawless teamwork paralyzed their foes.

Meanwhile, the adventurers successfully immobilized the knights and brought them to the rear.

"Ha-ha-ha! The day I get to freely deck a knight has finally come!"

"That's what they get for swaggerin' around town. This just feels right."

"Um, isn't an iron club to the groin still kinda harsh?"

"Better than sparing the root of all evil."

"Don't sweat it. The castle needs eunuchs, right?"

Some adventurers hit the knights' helmets hard enough to leave a dent, while others cast them under a sleeping spell. A few used water spells to submerge the knights' faces long enough to knock them out without actually killing them. Others mercilessly struck vital organs. The adventurers couldn't hold back their resentment over daily transgressions but were also skilled and took great care not to kill anyone. At the same time, one had to wonder how the knights earned such treatment in the first place. They were undoubtedly reaping the fruit of their arrogance.

Female knights had fought alongside the adventurers as well but could only shake their heads at such gratuitous violence.

“Honestly, is fighting all they’re good at?”

“No wonder the men are so excited to patrol the town.”

“I’m reporting this to the captain.”

The women’s assessment of the adventurers really couldn’t sink any lower.

The earlier pink smoke had been infused with a Bewitch spell, but it wasn’t like the effects were permanent. The unconscious knights eventually woke and returned to their senses, but they obviously lashed out upon realizing they’d been roped and gagged. The adventurers, assuming the knights were still under the smoke’s spell, tossed them into carriages to be sent back to camp. Such outrageous treatment only exacerbated the knights’ animosity toward the adventurers, but neither side noticed they were spinning in a vicious cycle.

“Hey, even if we can handle the knights, there aren’t any fewer monsters...”

“Where the hell are they comin’ from? It never ends!”

Although the adventurers continued to neutralize the enemy while Li’l P tore the rest to shreds, the line of monsters queuing down the road was endless. Arbiter, his mercenaries, and the adventurers were on their last legs.

Losing his temper, Arbiter thought to himself that Cayna would be able to take care of the problem in no time and shouted.

“Hey! Miss! If you’re here, feel free to jump in anytime!!”

“Gotcha.”

Magic Skill: March of Sleeping Sheep

The moment he heard that voice, the legion of monsters was suddenly overrun by a huge flock of sheep emerging from the sidelines. The semitranslucent beasts traversed past them from right to the left and disappeared upon reaching the opposite end.

In their wake was a trail of monsters, monsters, and more monsters sprawled out and snoring across the ground. Of course, the enchanted knights and soldiers waiting to be neutralized and collected by the adventurers were no exception and slept like logs as well.

The voice was surprisingly close, and Arbiter turned around to see Cayna pop out from the nearby forest.

“Sorry I’m late. I was dealing with a different group.”

“Nice timing. I hope you weren’t just waitin’ to make an entrance.”

“Ah-ha-ha... No, you and your men just make such a stellar team that I wasn’t sure when to jump in.”

Arbiter never thought she’d actually admit it and looked at her in exasperation. When Cayna bowed and offered a sincere apology, he could only scratch his head.

“Well, no one died. Don’t sweat it.”

Meanwhile, the group gathered up the remaining knights and soldiers. Their final task was vanquishing the throng of sleeping monsters while they had the chance, although the spell wouldn’t wear off for almost an entire day. For the time being, everyone retreated from the battlefield and tended to the injured. Li’l P stayed behind to take care of the monsters by crushing their heads one by one.

The second-in-command took this opportunity to explain events to Cayna.

“Ah. Yes, yes, I see. My guess is... they were controlled by Bewitch and Incite.”

“Can Bewitch work on so many monsters? Never heard of a spell like that,” Arbiter said.

“Lots of people used it two hundred years ago. Incite sends the target or targets toward an objective.”

“So you’re sayin’ we’ll find the root of this if we figure out where those monsters came from?”

“Um, well... Anything able to control an army that huge is a pretty big deal.”

"Pipiiii! Pipiiii!"

Li'l P, who had been cleaning up the monsters thus far, let out a high-pitched squeal. Frowning, Cayna drew the Rune Blade at her side and filled it with magic. The boar piglet came racing back, and she had it wait on the sidelines while she prepared for an imminent battle. Arbiter took note and immediately ordered both his subordinates and the adventurers to fall back before standing by her side.

"That our culprit?"

"Li'l P is on high alert, so they're reasonably powerful. Stay behind me and act as a middle guard to prevent injuries, okay, Li'l P?"

"Pipipi!!"

The piglet trotted back at its owner's behest and raised its snout in an intimidating pose. Arbiter smiled wryly and stood by Cayna's side. Falling back without even a glance at the enemy commander went against his code.

"Don't complain if something weird shows up."

"Well, I don't plan on gettin' in your way at least. I'm a warrior, too, y'know."

Sword and spear at the ready, the duo waited by the river of monsters snoring by the main road.

Its shoulders squared, the monster in question purposefully strode into view. Cayna prepared to confront the familiar figure, but Arbiter watched with wide-eyed cluelessness.

"...What the hell? Never seen a lycanthrope like that before."

"I knew it. A leohead, huh...? Good thing I put those monsters to sleep."

Arbiter was mystified by her relief.

Incidentally, *lycanthrope* was the general term for any animal-headed monster. This included kobolds, despite the race's overall friendly nature. Most lycanthropes formed independent colonies and avoided outside contact, human or otherwise. Many were quite bloodthirsty, so they were treated as monsters that threatened humanity.

This lion-headed lycanthrope wore leather armor affixed with heavily riveted metal bars and cracked a long metal whip against the ground. Beast tamers called it a leohead. It was a level-430 monster found in a quest for level-400 players and above. Back in the game, the leohead could call monsters from all around with a single crack of its whip, and you needed at least three parties of eighteen to beat the Big Bad of this endless quest with any guarantee.

The leohead glared and growled at Cayna and Arbiter from a distance before giving its whip a solid crack. The whip came at Arbiter faster than he could react and nearly took his head, but Cayna's Rune Blade rushed in at the last second. She sliced the tip and sent it flying in another direction.

Soon realizing he was no match for the situation, Arbiter slowly and cautiously moved back.

Seemingly determined to take out the weakest link first, the leohead swung at Arbiter again but was sent flying with a direct hit of Cayna's Iyah Bomb.

The monster drew a parabola and crash-landed in the pile of sleeping monsters, the impact waking up those nearby. Cayna's March of Sleeping Sheep spell lasted a full day as long as nothing interfered, but any attack or significant disturbance nullified the effect.



The leohead cracked its whip with a satisfied smile and woke the surrounding monsters. It then tried to rally the masses against Cayna, but everyone was still stiff and drowsy from their naps. Cayna used this extra time to cast Magic Skill: Maxi Iyah Graal.

She raised her hand, and a hunk of darkness forty meters in diameter floated above her. It was covered in semitransparent film, and an even darker shadow swirled at its center.

“Whoa there, miss. What’s that spell...?”

“Gravity Magic. It has a pretty wide range, so I’d watch out if I were you.”

“...Whaddaya mean, ‘Watch out’?”

The very sight of the unfathomable darkness made Arbiter involuntarily tremble, and he tried not to look up as he prepared for the mysterious impact to come.

Aiming for the slack-jawed leohead who had now taken a few steps back, Cayna wielded the darkness and tossed it with all her might. The Maxi Iyah Graal soared into the sky like a rubber ball before splatting to the ground and transforming into a semicircular pile of goop. Unsurprisingly, the leohead and any other monster caught in the drop zone were swallowed up.

The darkness soon swelled like an explosive, and a huge black dome stretched over one hundred meters in diameter. It locked every single monster inside and stopped just short of Cayna and the others.

No one could see inside or had any idea what misfortunes occurred in the hellish pit of dark gravity. The spell pulverized everything in its grasp.

However, everyone shuddered with fear when the dome began to rumble and crack as it sank beneath the earth’s surface. The Felskeilo adventurers were once again struck by Cayna’s extraordinary abilities, and although this was nothing new to Arbiter and his Flame Spears, they gawked at the absurd sight all the same. The awakened knights were no different.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. What’s with that girl!?”

“Yeah, what kind of spell is that...?”

"Oh yeah, I guess you guys wouldn't know."

"She's the High Priest Skargo's mother"

““.....””

One group fell into total silence. Those unaware of Cayna's power until now stared in open-mouthed awe while the informants gave understanding nods. After all, none could forget the embarrassing time the High Priest came flying into a downtown inn. Most would assume Skargo was finally off his rocker, but his long-standing mother complex salvaged his position. In fact, many soon viewed the priest as a family man, which only further endeared him to the public.

Comments from the peanut gallery aside, it was Cayna who was in trouble for a whole other reason.

"Oops..."

"Hey, miss, don't ya think maybe this is a problem?"

"...This world really *isn't* like the game..."

The problem now was the demolished main road in front of Cayna and Arbiter. In the game, Maxi Iyah Graal simply disappeared once the dome crushed all enemies. Despite now being in the real world, Cayna never expected the spell to pulverize the ground or anything else in range for that matter. She'd had the same issue with Maxi Zan Laga earlier—apparently less was more.

I should probably stop using top-tier magic around my usual haunts...

"It does appear you have chosen an inappropriate battlefield. In the future, might I suggest testing a spell's range first?"

I'll turn the place into Swiss cheese if I do that. How much Ranged Magic do I have again?

Aware such thoughts were mere escapism, Cayna stared at the disaster in front of her. With the dark dome's impact point at its center, a giant bowl-shaped crater sat in the main road. Although foot traffic could probably manage, it was obvious no carriages

would be able to pass from either direction.

As Cayna reflected upon her several questionable decisions and sank further into depression, the adventurers consoled her with encouraging words and pats on the shoulder.

"Hey, don't beat yourself up too much, miss."

"This ain't so bad. We thought things would be *way* worse."

"We'd be in real trouble if you hadn't annihilated those guys. I know I'm grateful."

"Yeah, exactly. We also got our revenge on the knights, and none of us died. I'd call that a good day"

"...Uh-huh," Cayna said weakly.

The remaining monsters outside the spell's range had apparently run off after breaking free of the leohead's control since they were terrified of the mega-powerful crimson pig still wandering around. Realizing the threat was gone, Li'l P now waited by Cayna on standby mode. Anyone not accustomed to the giant boar was reluctant to approach her.

Kuu showed her face for a brief moment but went right back into hiding when she noticed the crowd of people. She could apparently use Stealth and Transparency.

Arbiter, on the other hand, remained vigilant and sent several of his men as well as adventurers to scout the surrounding area.

Cayna mentally conversed with Kee and searched for skills that could help restore the ground. However, from an outside perspective, she looked like a mumbling loon.

The knights' main forces finally showed up and raced toward them. Shining Saber, Skargo, and Mai-Mai were on horseback at the forefront. They had spoken with the knights returning to the capital by carriage and had the general idea of the situation.

Cayna's son and daughter were shocked to see their mother and rushed over to her while Shining Saber listened to the knights he had stationed in the area. Several exploded with frustration and lambasted the adventurers, but Shining Saber reprimanded them after the female knights talked the men back down. Arbiter gave

him a quick rundown of events as well.

"Oh yeah, how do you get rid of that Bewitch spell anyway?"

"Any strong shock will cancel it out," Cayna answered matter-of-factly.

"You could've told us that sooner!"

The adventurers scrambled to release the bound knights, who were unsurprisingly livid. However, it was true they'd been possessed at the time, so none could criticize the adventurers for helping as best they could. Perhaps realizing this as well, the adventurers decided to feign ignorance and bite their tongues.

Cayna resigned herself to Li'l P's demand for scritches and flashed her concerned children a smile.

"Mother Dear!"

"Mother!"

"Sheesh, what are you two so up in arms about?"

"For goodness' sake! It would have been perfectly acceptable to refuse Sir Shining Saber's request. Your personal time matters above all else, Mother Dear..."

"Skargo and I can protect Felskeilo."

"Well, I'm here now. What's done is done. I kinda destroyed the main road, though..."

Her kids would have struggled to handle the leohead, so Cayna was glad Shining Saber called her.

More importantly, her current conundrum now was restoring the main road. Cayna could easily summon an Earth Spirit to fix it, but not even an army of spirits could restore lost mass.

"Looks like I'll have to use golems to transport rocks and make concrete."

"We must find a stone mountain first."

“I’m the one who asked for your help. I’ll tell the higher-ups this is on me.”

“Huh? Really, Shining Saber?”

“We were able to defend the coastline without a single casualty thanks to you. I’m worried about the debt I’ll owe if I don’t start paying you back.”

“Why am I being treated like some bill collector...? Well, I’ll leave it to you, then.”

“Right. Sorry for askin’ for so much.”

Cayna patted Shining Saber’s shoulder and bowed her head in apology before leaving to find Arbiter. The mercenaries and adventurers had passed their patrol and search duties to the knights, so Cayna decided to return to Felskeilo with everyone. Mai-Mai and Skargo planned to stay behind, and she wished the two luck. Just as she was about to leave, Cayna remembered something and turned around.

“Skargo!”

“Oh? Yes, Mother Dear?”

“There’s something I want to ask you. I’ll stop by the church tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow...? Uh, yes, I believe that should be fine.”

“Great, see you then.”

Cayna lightly waved good-bye, then rejoined the mercenaries and adventurers. Supremely puzzled to such receive a rare request from his mother, Skargo tilted his head.

“Lucky you,” Mai-Mai teased.

When Cayna returned to the capital, she finally spared a thought for poor Exis.

Let us once again peek in at Otaloquess.

Every concerned eye was on the giant tortoise invading (?) their capital. It halted just

short of the wall behind the castle; one more step more, and the tortoise would have caused immense damage to both the city and the castle itself.

Although an evacuation warning had been issued, Queen Sahalashade, along with the citizens, cabinet ministers, knights, and adventurers who chose to remain behind, gave a deep sigh of relief.

They had all resigned themselves to the reality their castle would vanish in a single step, but the giant tortoise suddenly froze at the moment of truth. Instead of a round of cheers, there was a collective sigh. It wasn't the warmest welcome, but the people had managed to avert disaster.

After they were certain the tortoise had indeed stopped, there was a pause. Then the capital erupted into cheers.

When their joyous cries reached the queen's ears, her shoulders finally relaxed.

"My goodness. For a moment, I wasn't sure what would become of us. We must reward our saviors."

"Phew, that gave me quite a scare..."

The prime minister and queen nodded to each other. Obeying his liege's command, the captain of the knights immediately sent subordinates to greet the distinguished heroes. After all, impostors seeking glory would crawl from the woodwork if they didn't keep a close eye on the area around the tortoise.

Back in the tortoise's inner sanctuary—or rather, TV studio...

Hidden Ogre and Exis were sprawled across the floor in total exhaustion.

Incidentally, it wasn't long before Quolkeh got twenty questions wrong and was booted out. She climbed back up the tortoise and rejoined them after the quest was complete and the door reopened.

"*Sniff*, I'm sorry I was so useless."

"Uh, hey, don't sweat it."

"Yeah. There ain't no question you put a lot on the line today."

The counter above Hidden Ogre's head read 39/18, and the one above Exis read 41/19. It was an extremely close call. Their physical stamina wasn't an issue, but the mental stress had eaten away at them. The two men were now completely wiped out. In the midst of their game, the Guardian displayed, of all things, a wall projection of the scene outside. With the Otaloquess capital growing ever closer, the tricky questions and time limit chipped away at their composure and made the two repeatedly slip up.

"Most excellent. Two of our challengers have answered a total of eighty questions correctly before reaching twenty mistakes. You have therefore cleared the quest, and we have stopped the tower as requested. However, you will also forfeit a new skill. Is that all right?" the golden Buddha asked the trio while it floated upon its lotus throne.

"D-damn that was close... One more wrong answer and we would have been in huge trouble."

"No kidding. I thought I'd have had to save us all with just two chances left..."

They had used every last brain cell to remember everything they'd ever learned, and the men's hearts were now as thin as flaked bonito. Nevertheless, each had a victorious smile on his face. As Quolkeh watched them enviously (and with some chagrin), Hidden Ogre and Exis wrapped an arm around each other's shoulders and guffawed.

"“Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!””

Visibly satisfied, Hidden Ogre cheerfully stepped away from Exis and Quolkeh after the three left the inner sanctum.

"Looks like you've got people waitin' for ya, so I'll be on my way."

"Hold on. Can't you at least tell us *why* you won't meet Cayna?"

"Ngh. Right, that. How do I put this...?"

Hidden Ogre fiddled with his beard and mulled this over with a quiet "Hmm."

Frustrated, the pair asked him if the reason was really so difficult to share.

"Long story short, I've got a household to run."

The two pitched forward from his blunt response and nearly fell off the tortoise's shell.

"Ain't that a pretty heartless reason for not meetin' an old friend?!"

"Think of the other person! How would you feel if someone said they couldn't see you for even a few minutes?!"

"Just hold on. I know what ya mean, but I was already retired when I started this game..."

Both quickly protested, but Hidden Ogre tried to explain his circumstances. Quolkeh wasn't so easily swayed, but Exis convinced her to at least hear him out.

"At the time, I was married but spent all day on the Internet because it made me feel like a kid again. My spouse was never one to complain, so she let me do as I pleased. But I really regretted things once she passed. I wished we could have spent more time together. Anyway, can you just tell Miss Cayna I said, 'Enjoy your new life'?"

"....."

".....Yeah. We'll tell her."

The air somber, Quolkeh nodded and answered for the silent Exis. Hidden Ogre returned the gesture with an apologetic look and teleported away.

"...*Sigh*. I guess we shouldn't go diggin' into people's pasts," Exis said.

"Agreed. Well, no point in hanging around here all day. How about heading down to collect that reward?"

"Sure, sounds good. Then we gotta meet Cayna and pass on the message."

Exis patted Quolkeh's shoulder, and she grinned. They briefly hooked elbows and set off.

Once the tortoise's back was deserted, the TV station's Guardian shut the door with a solid *clack*. In the empty tower, the golden Buddha answered a call from somewhere.

"...The initial plan went quite awry, but we were able to confirm three players. Still, it is unfortunate the princess did not arrive... Yes, indeed. Very well. As you

wish... Yes, we shall be momentarily relieved of our duties. Yes, I understand."

The conversation ended, and the room returned to silence. The studio's electricity was already turned off, and only the light of an emergency exit glowed faintly in the semidarkness. Not even the rumble of footsteps could be heard. The golden Buddha closed its narrow eyes and became nothing more than a mute Guardian sitting in the lotus position on a lotus pedestal.

Afterward, Exis was invited to take a simple suspension bridge directly from the tortoise's back to the castle, where he was given a royal welcome as the hero of the nation. Exis tried to explain that he wasn't the only one worthy of thanks but eventually agreed to accept the reward money since Hidden Ogre had run off. This wasn't without a slight tinge of guilt.

"I thought for sure I was gonna die..."

"Not a scratch on ya, though, huh?"

"Some kind of fighter-plane ejection seat tossed me out without even a parachute. I was positive I was a goner, but a bubble wrapped around me just as I was about to hit the ground and saved the day."

From there, Quolkeh had managed to climb up the tortoise again and nervously watch it advance.

Still, even bungee jumping without a bungee wouldn't kill them from that height. Exis and Quolkeh were far too powerful, and the difference between life and death was just a matter of HP.

"I expected you guys to come flying out, too, when the tortoise was about to smash the castle."

"I'm pretty sure it stopped 'cause Gramps answered the last question."

But the old man had made his escape the second everything was over.

"Will you tell Cayna about Gramps?" Quolkeh asked.

"He told us to keep it a secret but forgot the hush money."

"We do owe him one for the quiz, though."

"Yeah, there's that. What should we do?"

The two mulled this over for a moment before deciding to stick to the initial plan. They would tell Cayna what happened but would dodge talk of Hidden Ogre unless she specifically asked.

Next, they moved to a more pressing topic.

"We're really having dinner with the queen? Like this?" Quolkeh asked.

Both had changed into outfits appropriate for nobility. After being drawn a bath and pushed into a room, they were given tailored clothes sewn by the castle's legion of maids. Exis wore a relaxed blue jacket with gold embroidery and matching pants. Quolkeh wasn't wearing a corset, but her mermaid dress widely exposed her back and shoulders.

If one were to ask whether it suited her or not, the answer was a resounding *yes*. Perhaps even too well. The maids dressing her sighed over her slender frame and perfect proportions, and even Exis blushed at her before momentarily freezing with a stunned look on his face. She later grumbled that she could have sworn he was falling for her if he didn't already know the truth.

A chamberlain soon arrived and led them to a room of the castle. He informed them the dinner was a casual affair in the queen's private quarters, so formality was not required. However, before the pair could mentally prepare themselves, Queen Sahalashade appeared. What surprised Exis and Quolkeh most about the meal was the commoner cuisine one could find in any tavern, even if the taste was on another level.

The only other attendees were the casually dressed knight captain and prime minister. The two had an amiable quality about them, and although their speech was polite, they were open with the queen.

"That won't do, Your Majesty. Such food is rolled with both vegetables *and* meat."

"Mm. I do like an unconventional wine every now and then. No use always worryin' about little stuff like age or if so-and-so likes it."

““.....””

“Oh dear, whatever is the matter, you two? It seems you have no appetite. Perhaps you would prefer ale to wine?”

“No, Your Majesty. The wine in the lower parts of the city is diluted with water, so even fruit wine is more flavorful.”

“Is that so? I was most unaware. In that case, let us bring out some ale.”

“I hear you’re sometimes better off drinking water than ale, but everyone has their preferences, yes?”

“I see. Let us later review the dietary conditions of the lower classes. Life is quite dull without excellent cuisine.”

The culture shock made Exis and Quolkeh question whether this was really was some tavern. Everyone was eating commoner food made from the finest ingredients, seriously discussing the townspeople’s nutrition, and drinking loads of alcohol. It wasn’t exactly like a tavern of rowdy adventurers relaxing after a hard day’s work, but it was pretty close. The atmosphere reminded the pair of the employee after-parties they used to have at the tavern. Exis and Quolkeh were soon flooded with memories, and the impatient queen insisted they eat their fill.

““Burp.””

“Ha-ha-ha. That’s what ya get for holdin’ back in front of Her Majesty. You gotta show gratitude for good meal!”

The two had reached their limits and managed to decline further demands to eat, but their pain doubled when the knight captain slapped their backs with a roar of laughter. Once dinner was finished, a cup of black tea was served to each person. Everyone remained in their seats, and the discussion turned to the reward for Exis’s deeds.

First, the captain and prime minister intentionally looked away as Queen Sahalashade stood and deeply bowed to their guests. They seemed to be feigning ignorance.

“Sir Exis, Lady Quolkeh, you have my most sincere gratitude. Thanks to you, Otaloquess has escaped disaster. Thank you very much.”

“...Whaaaaaaaat?!”

“Uh, wait, please don’t boooow!”

They had worked with nobles in the past, but never before had a nation’s leader bowed to them. The unorthodox gesture flustered their hearts so badly that the pair had no idea how to react. Watching them fidget, the queen raised her head and smiled. She gave a wink that said, *Gotcha*.

“Moreover, there is something I wish to ask.”

“Wh-what is it?”

Exis’s pounding heart couldn’t take much more, and he carefully returned her question with another as he tried to quiet it.

“You two are players, correct?”

““?!””

The air in the room instantly froze over. Exis and Quolkeh were left speechless, but that silence alone was affirmation. Now that their identities were revealed, both were noticeably wary of the queen and took a defensive stance. They couldn’t begin to figure out how she knew.

“Your caution is only natural, but please be at ease. We will not share such information.”

The captain crossed his arms, and the prime minister stroked his beard. Both nodded with approval at the queen’s words.

Was this a surprise revelation or a trap? Exis and Quolkeh were seized by suspicion, and the queen’s next words struck them hard.

“The three of us are connected to players.”

“...What?”

“...Huh?”

The two reacted in dumb shock as Sahalashade further revealed their origins.

The queen, captain, and prime minister were apparently Foster Children. However, it wasn't like they only realized Exis and Quolkeh's true nature in that very moment. Realization struck only after the pair cleared the Guardian Tower's quest.

"Many legends have been passed down about the tortoise. However, the questions it asked were unintelligible to us. Therefore, in order to investigate the tower, we slowly sent people to each land."

Otaloquess had been able to gather several clues up until that point and surmised the truth behind the tower after encountering the words *Skill Master*. However, even if the people of this world knew the term, the trio didn't think anyone would have a decent answer.

"We made an all-or-nothing bet that a distinguished player would take notice and help us, but..."

The three realized their goal was far different than anything found in the archives of the Adventurers Guild. Enticing the public with a reward in the hopes that players might show up was a huge risk for Otaloquess. However, the arrival of Hidden Ogre, Exis, and Quolkeh indicated their plan had been a success.

Now that the truth had been revealed, Exis and Quolkeh naturally stared at the trio with tired eyes that said, *Never involve me again*. The queen read them like an open book and smiled wryly as she handed over their reward. The prime minister reiterated their vow not to tell a soul.

"I will give you those clothes as well. We are certain to meet again."

""No, thank you!""

Well aware they would be summoned again if the queen knew they had formal attire, Exis and Quolkeh flatly declined. The captain of the knights looked disappointed, but they couldn't be too careful.

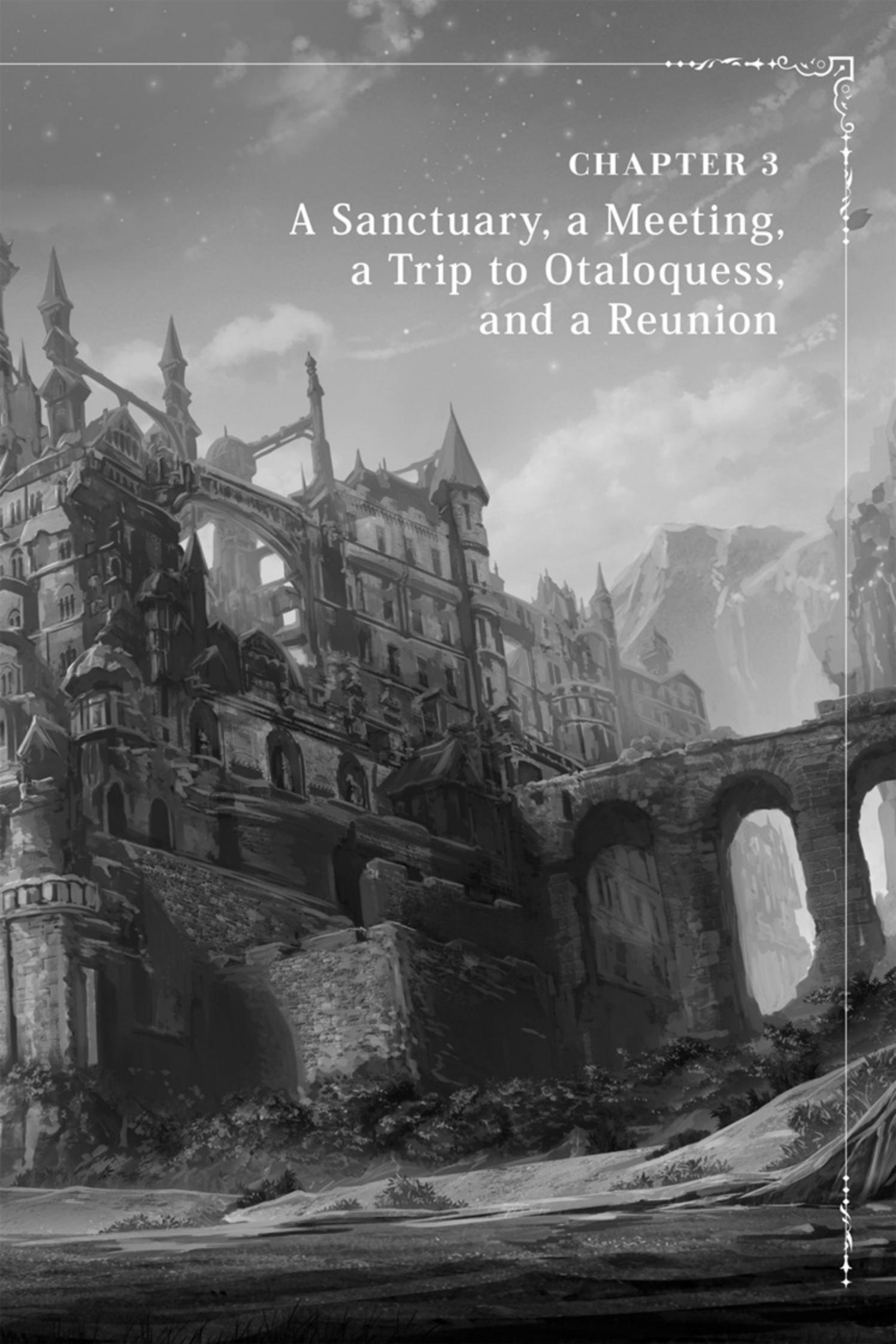
Afterward, the pair changed back into their usual clothes and left the castle. Concerned they might be followed, they cautiously left the Otaloquess capital and only breathed a sigh of relief after taking refuge in the inn of a small village on the western trade route.

“W-we should be okay now...”

“Otaloquess is scary, very scary, very, very, very scary...”

“Hey, Quolkeh! Get back here!”

This new level of trauma left deep fractures in their psyches.



CHAPTER 3

A Sanctuary, a Meeting,
a Trip to Otaloquess,
and a Reunion

Cayna left Felskeilo to return to the village and was soon greeted by her maid, butler, and adopted daughter.

“Welcome... back, Mommy Cayna.”

“Thanks. Great to be home, Lu. And thanks for watching the house, you two.”

“Think nothing of it.”

“Lady Cayna, didn’t we move here for a more relaxed lifestyle? You seem *awfully* busy.”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Cayna couldn’t refute Roxine’s biting remark. Even though she was the one who suggested hiding away in the village, it felt like she was running all over the place.

“Kuu...”

“Oh, Luka.”

Kuu left Cayna to sit on Luka’s shoulder. They patted each other’s heads and played with each other’s hair in a heartwarming scene.

“Mommy Cayna...”

“What’s up, Lu?”

Looking like she had something to say, Luka tugged Cayna’s sleeve without turning away from Kuu on her shoulder. Cayna crouched down to her eye level.

“Go ahead, tell me anything.”

“Can Kuu... sleep with... me?”

Cayna smiled at her timid request and allowed it.

"Just don't crush her in your sleep, okay?"

"I... would never." Luka puffed her cheeks in indignation.

"Kuu will sleep with Luka!" The fairy tugged Luka's hair as if to say, *C'mon, it's bedtime!*
"Good... night," Luka said, then left the living room.

Once Cayna was sure Luka was in her room, she turned to Roxilius and Roxine, who had been standing at attention nearby.

"Anything happen while I was away?"

"No, all was quiet."

"Might I ask why you sound like you ran into trouble, Lady Cayna?"

Cayna let out a deep sigh at Roxine's joy over another's misfortune and collapsed onto a mountain of cushions.

"Looks like we've got even more cushions," she said.

"Those are courtesy of Lady Luka. Her needlework is coming along nicely," Roxine explained.

"Really? What else has she been working on?"

"Her culinary skills need practice, but she can peel potatoes."

Roxine concluded her report as if she'd just pulled off the perfect prank, and Roxilius's eyebrow twitched. Even if friendship wasn't in the cards, Cayna wished they would at least try and get along.

The following morning, Cayna finished breakfast and flew back to Felskeilo. Of course, Kuu came with her. They could apparently be separated inside the house, but the fairy was never far behind whenever Cayna went out.

Since she could finally access it, Cayna used her Guardian Ring to fly to the First Guardian Tower instead of teleporting. The tower spat her out onto the sandbar, and she arrived at her destination. Cayna could have used the ring during the monster attack, but Shining Saber's sudden message had her so frazzled that she honestly

forgot. Using it might have prevented her from stopping the attack on the eastern gate.

Cayna asked the antique clock Guardian if it had noticed anything strange lately, but the tower was being treated as a divine messenger and not much else. She went to check the area along the sandbar but ran into a pile of flower offerings as tall as the castle walls. She wanted to know who was putting these here.

There were multiple reasons for her visit. Including something she wanted to ask Skargo.

“Kuu, do you remember anything else about the sanctuary?”

“Hmm. It was nighttime.”

“...You were in a sanctuary at night?”

“Hmm. I don’t know.”

“Oh boy... Guess I’ll just have to ask Skargo.”

Cayna didn’t know much about religion. The little she did know only amounted to what she’d heard from Sunya, who would stop by as a lecturer when Cayna taught the kids reading, writing, and arithmetic. She was a representative of Lux Contracting.

She tried asking Roxilius and Roxine as well but to no avail. The villagers’ knowledge was limited to simplified legends and fairy tales that claimed the world had two creators. Cayna tried to get more details, but even Sunya told her it was best to ask a holy figure. The church was likely more well versed than most. Since she was unaware of any creation lore in Leadale’s Game Era, it was unclear whether this religion was created within the past two hundred years or if it was a localized belief.

“Still, I have no idea if this Night Sanctuary, or whatever, is in the sky or down on earth. Somewhere impractical would be right up his alley, but I’m stuck if I don’t even know where to start... I bet this is his way of saying, ‘Think for yourself!’”

Keina wasn’t very informed back then, and it was Opus who had taken her under his wing. She remembered how he’d always say, “*Think for yourself!*” The possibility she had come all this way just for another life lesson from the absent Opus was depressing.

She entered Felskeilo proper and made a beeline for the church. A priest slightly past

his middle years greeted her in Skargo's stead and informed Cayna they would send a messenger when he was available. He was a top national leader with multiple responsibilities, so it was no surprise she had to wait in line.

Next, she visited Arbiter and the Flame Spears' regular inn to pick up her reward for defending the capital. The Adventurers Guild had informed Cayna that her share had been combined with the Flame Spears' since Arbiter had bundled their request forms upon completion. The reward for guard duty came from the royal palace and was divided among the mercenaries via the Adventurers Guild. Individual payouts were distributed after a short investigative survey.

Cayna had taken down an entire flying column, so her reward was hefty. It was nice to have cash, but being loaded would be problematic. She brainstormed a bit, then...

"All right, drinks are on me."

Cayna cut in while Arbiter and his crew were enjoying several rounds to celebrate a job well done. The mercenaries stared at her with incredulous, bug-eyed expressions. Elineh, who had joined them for a few drinks, was surprised as well.

"Are you certain, Lady Cayna? A group of rowdy men like these can burn quite a hole through your pocket."

"About one gold coin's worth?"

"Nah, even we couldn't drink all that. How much did ya get, miss?"

"Thirty gold coins."

An impressed choir of "*Ohhhh!*" rose up.

Shining Saber, who heard about the detached column, had sung her praises a bit *too* well. He must have estimated the damage to the capital if Cayna hadn't been there.

She was given a special bonus since Felskeilo likely would have been wiped off the map if the horde had attacked the capital in full force. There was also a bit of bribery involved to prevent the citizens from finding out the detached force had threatened their lives in the first place.

The bag Cayna received also included a letter from Prime Minister Agaido explaining

the reward amount and how this latest incident would be handled. Incidentally, Arbiter and his mercenaries were given fifty silver coins each.

She took out one gold coin and handed it to Arbiter. He stared at it in his hand, then nodded in satisfaction.

“All right, men! Looks like the miss is buyin’ tonight, so drink up!!”

“““YEAAAAAAH!!”””

Cheers rattled the inn, and passersby peeked in the tavern to check what was going on. Cayna drank weak fruit wine as she talked business with Elineh.

“Oh, a set schedule for wheat purchases?”

“Sakaiya distributes the final product, but the raw ingredients don’t have to come from a single shop. Your caravan travels the outer trade routes, so you can stop by the village every now and then, right?”

“Well, I’ll have to purchase the ingredients beforehand, but that should be fine. I accept your proposal. Still, my goodness. It’s quite fascinating how much you’ve changed since we first met, Lady Cayna.”

“Gah... Th-that’s true. You and Arbiter brought me this far. It’s high time I repaid you for those first lessons.”

“It is all about give-and-take.”

The two looked at each other and smiled.

Cayna could still buy wheat directly from Sakaiya. However, Caerick had previously informed her *“our Sakaiya won’t fall to ruin over this,”* so she decided to approach Elineh and reciprocate all the kindness he’d shown her.

The timetable would likely vary, but scheduling a monthly delivery of goods was a huge help. Even if orders from Sakaiya were delayed, she could simply teleport to Helshper and purchase them herself. Elineh’s caravan, on the other hand, was guaranteed to visit the village once a month. Cayna would also need to inform Caerick of this decision.

As Cayna dealt with drunks, had cheap drinks lavished on her, and talked business with Elineh, two women walked into their reserved tavern. Positive she'd just heard her name, Cayna turned around and saw two familiar women trotting up to her.

"Hello, Cayna. It's been a while."

"Hmm? It hasn't been that long, has it?"

"A minor detail. At any rate, we hardly see you."

"That's true. Sorry I haven't been in touch, Lonti, Mye."

"Pwshaaaaaaa?!"

The second Arbiter saw Myleene, he sprayed his drink all over his men. After all, who would ever expect a crown princess to suddenly waltz into a downtown tavern?

"Ugh, gross!"

"He just spat his drink all over us!"

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what's going on?!"

Myleene had made a beeline for Cayna, but the small commotion that broke out quickly caught her attention.

"Ah, Sir Arbiter. It's been some time."

"P-P-P-P-Prin... Wha...? What are you doing here without an escort?"

Just as Arbiter was about to say *Princess*, he caught himself and questioned her in a low voice instead.

Myleene smiled brightly and glanced back at the tavern entrance.

"I *do* have an escort. The captain of the knights himself."

"...Hello..."

A large silver dragoid in white armor with a sword at his side timidly entered the

establishment. Cayna had never seen Shining Saber so meek. For just a second, she wondered, *Who is this guy?*

He gave a slight bow, and the mercenaries started tackling him. Thick, suntanned arms wrapped around his neck, and the dragoid was forced to crouch down even though he was at least a head above the rest.

“Hey...!”

“How’s it goin’, bossman?”

“Don’t ya think you’ve gotten a bit cocky, greenhorn?”

“Hey, Mr. Big Knight Captain. How about teachin’ your underlings some manners? From what us adventurers can tell, they get a weird look in their eyes and come chargin’ like a bitch in heat.”

“Uh, well... Sorry.”

It might have been the alcohol talking, but the mercenaries unloaded complaints, fists, and knees on Shining Saber. They treated him like a rookie at the bottom of the dogpile. Maybe it was an expression of familiarity.

Lonti and Myleene watched with a smile, and Cayna tilted her head questioningly. The second-in-command quietly explained with a wry smile.

“Actually, half of our mercenaries are former knights. A group joined the boss when he left their ranks. Sir Shining Saber is the boss’s successor, so those who knew him back in the day lovingly treat him like a junior.”

“Huh, I had no idea... Wait, ‘successor’? Arbiter used to be captain of the knights?”

“Yes, he previously held the position.”

Next to them, Myleene overheard their conversation and nodded with a smile. However, this was apparently news to Lonti as well, and she acted just as surprised. The old captain in question grilled Shining Saber.

“Hey, didn’t I tell ya to play nice with adventurers? You wouldn’t be in this mess if you just listened to me. Right?”

“Wait, hold on. Please have mercy, sir!”

“No can do. I’ll show ya what a real defender looks like...”

“Gwagh! You reek of alcohol! Please don’t pick drunken fights!”

As Cayna pondered how to interrupt their awkward feud, Lonti and Myleene grabbed her arms and held on tight. Question marks floating above her head, she looked to the left and right. The pair smiled in unison.

“Come on, let’s get going. The High Priest is waiting,” they declared before dragging her away.

“Huh? Wait, *you’re* the messengers?! Why would the church send you?”

“Luckily, we were both free. However, that isn’t important right now. Let’s be off!” Myleene said.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming. No need to pull. W-well, Elineh, Arbiter. See you later!”

“Yes, understood. Please take care, Lady Cayna.”

“Right. Later, miss.”

Elineh and the mercenaries waved good-bye. With Shining Saber still at the men’s mercy, the three girls left the tavern.

“Don’t ditch me!”

“What’s that, rookie? You ain’t actin’ *indecent* toward the miss, right?”

“The boss has a soft spot for ‘er. Don’t make us drag ya down an alleyway.”

“Okay, okay, I understand! Please, just let me go!”

This continued for some time, and Shining Saber only reunited with the girls much later.

Lonti and Myleene guided Cayna to a nobles-only boat waiting along the shoreline. Bypassing the sandbar, they boarded the chalky-white cruiser and sailed directly to the aristocratic district on the other side of the river. By this point, the alarm bells in Cayna's mind were blaring. Kee was quiet as a mouse. If anything, it was her intuition talking.

"Is it just me, or are we headed somewhere *really* freaky...?"

They traversed the noble district's main avenue and continued on a straight path down a fine cobblestone road. The trio now stood right in front of their destination: the gigantic building Mai-Mai and Cayna had visited the other day.

Accessible to only a select few, it was the towering symbol of the capital—the castle. Several blue spires rose up against the white exterior. Built by some guild long ago, these intimidating structures gazed down upon all passing on the road below.

Cayna looked back dejectedly, but white armor blocked her view. Shining Saber had managed to escape Arbiter's clutches and catch up to them. His glare said she wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

"So what's up?"

"Nothin' official. Just a casual meeting. The High Priest will be there, so you can relax... He did have a few complaints for His Majesty, though."

"That doessoundlikeSkargocatchyalater—"

"Don't even think about running," Shining Saber commanded.

Cayna surrendered with an exhausted sigh. Her shoulders fell dejectedly, and she allowed Myleene and Lonti to cheerfully lead her through the castle gates. After entering the castle and passing down a long, fixed hallway, the group climbed several flights of stairs and arrived at a neat little door.

Castles were extremely helpful back in the Game Era. Between taking on quests and dealing with thoroughly unpleasant NPCs, she honestly didn't have a single pleasant memory of them. Cayna's opinions on the matter were already set in stone, which disappointed her messengers Lonti and Myleene.

"Do castles bore you, Cayna?" Myleene asked.

"Huh? Oh, there were castles everywhere back in the day. I'm kind of used to 'em."

"Aww, I wanted to tell you all about them," she complained.

"Ah-ha-ha, sorry."

Myleene's shoulders drooped, and she sighed. Cayna apologized with a wry smile.

Lonti knocked on the door and informed the maid who peeked her head out that Cayna had arrived. She stepped back, and Myleene joined her. It seemed that the two would go no farther. The maid retreated into the room, and the door swung open a moment later.

The room had a large window and was modestly decorated. Even so, it was clean and had a large round table in the middle. Three figures were waiting inside, and they rose to greet her.

The first was Skargo. His arms were crossed sourly, but he relaxed when he saw Cayna.

The second was a keen-eyed man in the prime of life. He wore large priestly robes.

The last was a plump woman in a light green dress who smiled pleasantly.

Given the circumstances, it was obvious who the two strangers with Skargo were. Holding back a groan, Cayna straightened her posture, took a step backward, and gave a slight yet flourished bow. As a high elf, she did not bow in a Japanese-style manner. Otherwise she was certain her son would grow indignant and shout things like, *Elven royalty should not bow to human royalty!*

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I apologize for the trouble my foolish son always causes you. I am Cayna, a high elf."

There was a short pause, and the two appeared dumbfounded. The king and queen looked at Cayna, then hurriedly returned the gesture, pressing their right hands to their chests. Skargo seemed to be nursing a headache as he sank into his chair.

Wondering if she did something wrong, Cayna said, "I greeted you like I would anyone else. I hope that's okay."

In truth, there was an unspoken rule that the host make their introductions first, so

Cayna's actions had startled the royal couple. Leaving his subordinates to guard the door, Shining Saber prepared to return to his own duties. He whispered that he'd pick Cayna up later and left.

The king and queen awkwardly offered her a seat, and she joined them with a "Pardon me." Skargo was on her right, and the couple sat across from her. Cayna felt a sense of déjà vu that was as repetitive as the doctors' candid medical advice. She turned to Skargo, and her sharp eyes questioned why she was there. Her son bolted upright.

"...U-umm, Mother Dear?"

"I apologize, Lady Cayna. We are the ones who selfishly requested your presence. Please do not condemn the High Priest," the queen implored. Her gentle smile held traces of Cayna's real mother, and her breath caught in her throat. However, she quickly came to her senses and collected herself.

"I only had a question that I wanted to ask Skargo. Why would Your Highnesses hold a meeting like this?"

"The High Priest told us what happened, and we merely wished to meet the person who has now saved the capital twice. Once you have finished your discussion, I wish to chat for a while."

The austere, authoritative voice reminded Cayna of her uncle.

Keina's father was disowned after he ran away from home and entered the family register under her mother's branch Kagami name. His younger brother (Keina's uncle) was chosen to replace him as heir to the main Kagami line. Cayna remembered how her uncle would often leave work for a breather and visit her in the hospital.

"Work is a circus," he used to say.

Each time he'd do nothing but complain. She had no choice but to listen patiently, and his daughter and secretary (Cayna's cousin) would always come by late to drag him away.

"Shall we do away with formalities? Speaking this way is tiring, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, let's. You're quite perceptive, Lady Cayna. I am Triste. This is my wife, Alnassi."

"Wait, Mother Dear! Please do not be so quick to cast off reservations. As a high elf, you must uphold your dignity!"

"Cut all that fancy nonsense! Besides, this isn't high-elf territory."

Skargo gripped his head in agony at his mother's frank indifference. After all, he could hear any hope of giving Cayna even the slightest advantage in these negotiations shatter into a million pieces. His dear mother had taken Shining Saber's words at face value. To her, this was nothing more than a meeting with her friend Mye's parents.

Meanwhile, the image of Cayna that Skargo and Agaido had painted for Triste and Alnassi was bone-chilling. It took her only two moves to mow down the giant monster that had attacked the capital and bested their top knights and mages, and her son and daughter said she could summon powerful creatures to do her bidding.

These incidents Skargo only mentioned reluctantly were duties she had performed as a Transcendental (Skill Master) of the past. After meeting Cayna themselves and noting her easygoing nature, the couple determined they had nothing to worry about.

The maid who had been waiting patiently in the room served tea as directed. Once finished, she bowed and left the room. When the four were alone, King Triste reverently dipped his head.

"First off, I'd like to formally thank you for helping us during both the monster incident and this most recent matter. I'm truly grateful. We've caused your sons and daughter great trouble as well. I apologize."

"Hmm. No need to bow your head, because I don't remember doing anything that commendable. I decked that giant penguin because it put a bunch of people in danger, and my friend Shining Saber asked for help with the recent monster invasion. Plus, I got hazard pay. I don't think I did anything worthy of a king's respect. Besides, Mye is my friend, and Agaido asked me to look after Primo."

Visibly disappointed, Triste raised his head and exchanged looks with Cayna. She was grinning. This was just her indirect way of saying, *I don't want to owe the country, and I don't want the country to owe me*. The king soon picked up on this and nodded with a satisfied smile.

“I see. In that case, might I consider you a friend of equal standing?”

“I didn’t want to rub elbows with royalty and whatnot, but I guess that’s pretty tough since Skargo is one of the Big Three.”

“Mother Dear?! Please do not speak as if I am at fault!”

“I don’t know the details, but is he actually helpful?”

“Wha...?!”

“Oh, yes. He unifies the church both domestically and abroad. The citizens also love seeing him sparkle and blossom during his sermons.”

King Triste smiled wryly at Cayna’s frank question, but it was Queen Alnassi who answered in her husband’s stead. Cayna reacted to the unremarkable response with an astonished look of *Well, whaddaya know* and stared at her son.

“...Wh-what is it, Mother Dear? Why do you appear so incredulous?”

“Nah, it’s nothing. If the country’s top leaders say so, I’ll take their word for it.”

“...I would very much like to hear your opinion of me in further detail...”

“Maybe learn to act normal?”

The teary-eyed Skargo tried to get up, but Cayna grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. The king’s and queen’s eyes widened at this sudden twist in the conversation between parent and child.

“Hold it. There’s something I want to ask you, Skargo. That’s why I came all this way.”

“*Sigh...* I cannot guarantee a satisfactory answer, Mother Dear, but I shall listen.”

“Do you know anything about a Night Sanctuary?”

“...Night?!”

Skargo’s eyes abruptly narrowed, and the king and queen fell mysteriously quiet. This question was apparently a bolt from the blue.

"What brought this on, Mother Dear? Have you an interest in the gods now...?"

"That reaction tells me there *is* a Night Sanctuary. I see. Very interesting."

The problem was whether or not this "Night Sanctuary" was the place Cayna was looking for.

"It is said one-half of the Creation Gods is enshrined in the Night Sanctuary. What business might you have there?"

"It looks like an acquaintance is hiding away there."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-who in the world could coexist with the Lord of Night?!"

Cayna personally thought Opus would have zero trouble living alongside the divine. People like him didn't understand boundaries. If anything, he was probably driving the god nuts.

Still raving and gripping his head, the elf mumbled to himself as he stared at the ground. Thick storm clouds roiled around him.

"I thought I could be of rare assistance to you, Mother Dear, yet you are curious about the Lord of Night of all things. Although the great Lord of Night is said to be ruthless, the Dream God is quite gentle. While I would never question your circle of companions, I believe not even the Lord of Night would stand a chance against you if such a situation arose. How very like you, Mother Dear! You truly have the most astonishing connections!"

An unsettling concept had apparently struck Skargo mid-thought. A neon sun hung behind him, and Cayna flushed red while her son praised her to the high heavens.

The Dream God was a fragment of the Sun God and protected the night. However, there was a more frightening side of the deity known as the Lord of Night. Similar to a man-eating fiend, it used magic to etch fear in the people's hearts. One might say it was a superior form of Igzdukzyz, who had appeared the other day.

As Skargo's spirits soared, he realized the eyes of those around him were echoing the lukewarm stares of guardians watching a child at play. He coughed and sat up straight.

"They say the Dream God takes up residence in people's dreams... but when she

becomes the Lord of Night—”

Skargo silently pointed up. He meant the moon.

Even the greatest Skill Master couldn't reach the moon, and Cayna felt her strength leave her. Just like back in the game, this world had a moon as well. However, there weren't two, it wasn't purple, and it wasn't massive. It was a regular white moon that waxed and waned the same as it did on Earth.

That aside, something Skargo said caught Cayna's attention and raised even more questions.

“Lord of Night...?... Huh? Where have I heard that name before?”

“It is the name of a deity, so I'm certain you have heard it somewhere. At any rate, even you must take care, Mother Dear. The inquisition will be waiting if you utter its name too openly.”

“Hmm. Well, I'll deal with that as it comes. Lord of Night. God of Night. Night God Sanctuary?... I swear it's on the tip of my tongue. How'd it go again?”

Hey... know... let's call—

That... sou... terr—

“Kee!”

“Yes?”

The room grew silent out of consideration for Cayna as she fell into deep contemplation. Unable to remember the rest of the conversation that ran through her mind, she called upon her external memory—Kee. Please ignore the fact that he was one with her in body and soul and could be called upon at any time and place and for any reason.

Of course, since Cayna was the only one who could hear Kee, the king and queen grew concerned when she suddenly began shouting at someone who wasn't there.

“Check the log for Night Sanctuary!”

"Understood. Just a moment."

"Um, whatever is Lady Cayna doing?" the queen asked.

"The Holy Spirit accompanies Mother Dear and gives her guidance. However, I cannot begin to surmise what she is searching for"

"...The Holy Spirit? You mean the same Holy Spirit of legend that appears before holy apostles?" the king questioned.

"I must admit I have not seen it myself," Skargo replied.

As the High Priest, king, and queen whispered among themselves, their attention fell on the girl presently checking Kee's log. The space in front of her contained an audio-less transcript of a past conversation, but since it was only visible to Cayna, the three outsiders watched her face grow darker as she stared at nothing. Not surprisingly, Skargo had the horrid feeling he was about to face the brunt of her absurd rage and trembled from head to toe.

The dialogue went as follows:

"Okay, we're finally done. That was one long month."

"Um, hey... I'm the only one who was stuck the whole time. Could you maybe not use the game to confine someone who can't leave her bed in real life?!"

"You can save your little complaints for later. First, let's celebrate. 'Cheers!'"

Clink.

"The drinks in this game taste like garbage. Do something about it, will you?"

"I'm sure some strongly worded feedback will resolve the issue."

"You think I'd mention stupid crap like that?!"

The log soon recorded a howl, a crash, and an explosion.

"...Anyway, this dungeon is seriously gaudy. The whole thing is drenched in gold."

"It's just a passion project between two Limit Breaker Skill Masters. I'm sure greedy young players will swarm to it like a roach motel."

"One point deduction for the vivid word picture. Geez, it's also packed with ridiculous traps..."

"Idiots trying to make it rich will drop like flies. They'll be like ambitious knights searching for glory. Hey, I know! We'll call this dungeon the Knight Dungeon!"

"That sounds really terrible."

"Okay, how about the Knight Sanctuary?"

"Well, you did put some weird religious statue on the lowest level. Sure, why not?"

"Let's get the word out. It'll be fun to watch who falls into hell first."

"We can start with our own circle. The numbers are small, so rumors will spread like wildfire."

"All right. Let's head back, Cayna."

"Also tell the guild master to lift the ban on binding, Opus."

"...So it was 'knight,' not 'night'? What the heeeeeck?! Dammit, Opus! Anyone would mix those up!!"

Her outrage activated several linked Active Skills, and a dense aura abruptly spread around her. The trio, who had been enjoying idle chitchat, were instantly terrified by Cayna's fury. Nonetheless, Skargo was relatively accustomed to his mother's eccentric behavior and successfully calmed her down. Peace returned to the room.

"I'm so sorry for losing my composure. I must have frightened you."

Cayna sincerely apologized to the older king and queen for her shameful behavior. The couple seemed to regard her as a leading figure of a long-lived race and insisted she think nothing of it. Cayna couldn't say she was just as old as she looked, which made the situation extremely complicated.

She somehow managed to find her own answers—which made Skargo burst into tears—but spent the rest of the day chatting with the royal family. Cayna and Queen Alnassi had plenty to discuss when it came to raising daughters, and the queen said she would give Myleene's old dresses to Luka if Cayna promised to stop by for tea on occasion. Although Cayna intended it as a one-time affair, neither would it hurt to work on picking less fights and avoiding verbal gaffes. The one who benefited most from this was Luka, who would receive the large volume of dresses as soon as Cayna got home.

As night fell, Cayna left the castle and teleported home. As usual, Luka stuttered as she adorably recapped her day, and Kuu was back in a good mood after escaping the large crowds of people. Roxilius and Roxine joined them in familial bliss. The pair seemed relieved to have Cayna back, but her new role as the queen's tea companion likely weighed heavily on their minds.

The next morning, Cayna teleported to Helshper to see Caerick. Since she had asked Elineh to handle her next shipment of wheat, she had to tell Sakaiya to freeze her order. However, grandson or not, Caerick was still a veteran merchant. Matters were only settled after a whirlwind of promises and a very complex wheat debate between herself, Caerick, and Elineh.

“Wow, you don’t miss a single detail...”

“Grandmother, a merchant always finds opportunity in oversights.”

“Didn’t you say before that ‘Sakaiya won’t fall to ruin over such a nominal fee’?”

“That is one matter. This is another. Besides, years of experience have taught me it is in my best interest to maintain a business relationship with you, Grandmother.”

“You won’t stop at alcohol, will you?”

Cayna smiled wryly as Caerick proudly thrust out his chest as if to say, *Naturally*.

After her main business was concluded, Caerick asked Cayna to refine more rhymestones during her visit. Incidentally, the raw ingredients were stones recently gathered by Caerick. A portion was sent to the village earlier, and Cayna used these to create gargoyles and strengthen the village’s defenses. There was plenty left over, though, so she stowed the rest away for future use.

After leaving Sakaiya, Cayna purchased the necessities and groceries on Roxine's shopping list and returned home. She turned most of the wheat stacked high in the storehouse into alcohol before calling it a day.

"Hmm..."

The next day, Cayna groaned as she spread a map across the dining room table and compared it to the mental game map provided by Kee—one only she could see. Kuu was lazily stretched out on Cayna's head, and Roxine was doing needlework by a sunlit window. She held one of the dresses Cayna brought home the other day. The fine piece, having once belonged to royalty, was naturally made from high-quality fabric. Unfortunately, it was no outfit for a village girl. The sleeves were too long, and the dress would soon tear if handled carelessly, which made it quite impractical. At any rate, Roxine was in the middle of modifying it into two gowns fit for the outdoors.

Cayna searched the map for the location of the Knight Sanctuary. The sanctuary was Opus's little pet project created for the sole purpose of screwing with newbie players. She had helped with construction but left the rest to him afterward.

In short, she couldn't remember where it was for the life of her. She carefully searched the earlier log entry for helpful keywords... or rather, Kee did.

The two clues Cayna did find were *Red Kingdom* and *Near relay point*. If the search was indicating a relay point in the game's Red Kingdom, a giant crystal sat in a hexagonal gazebo in the desert. Just south of that, she vaguely remembered her and Opus making a dungeon in an unexplored region along a mountain range.

Cayna compared this to the Otaloquess map she bought from Elineh. There seemed to be a small village in the overlapping area. It was at the southernmost end of the outer trade route.

"Hmm. Maybe the dungeon has been totally explored after two hundred years?"

It wasn't impossible to navigate, but it was the work of a certain sly, wicked trickster. Any adventurer whose level was still stuck in the double digits would have a bad time. Pitfalls and iron ball pendulums were one thing, but the place also had nuisances like Spawn Plank: Pop Goes the Monster. By etching a monster silhouette on a tatami-sized magic rhymestone board, this mechanism produced monsters at a set rate. It

accumulated small increments of magic daily, and when it finally reached a predetermined number, a monster would be automatically summoned.

Unlike normal summons, the beasts here would continue to exist until they were destroyed. However, limitations on each floor prevented the dungeon from becoming overcrowded.

Since spawn planks were placed on each floor, the best option for players level 100 and above was to rush in as a party and reach the lowest floor. That is, as long as the traps didn't get them first.

The man himself stated over half were just silly pranks, but how much could he really be trusted? How many hundreds of players had fallen into hardship in times of war thanks to his "mischievous" misdirection? His actions, which just barely toed the lines of regulation, brought great suffering to foes and allies alike.

Regardless, Cayna needed to see things for herself if she hoped to confirm what she'd gleaned from Kuu. It felt like she had brought this on herself, and just now everything was coming full circle. Her initial plan had been to gather her magic, toss in some bonus skills, and unleash an enormous ball of unrivaled destruction to destroy the dungeon, roots and all. However, since there was a village nearby, her only real option was to dive right in.

"Geez, what a pain..."

Back from cleaning the bathhouse, Luka stepped inside with Roxilius. He and Roxine glared at each other for a moment. Once Luka was safely in the room, the butler bowed to Cayna and turned back on his heel. He was likely returning to his daily patrol of the village.

"I'm... home..."

"Welcome back, Lu."

"Welcome home, Lady Luka."

"Welcome home, Luka."

Roxine stood and bowed to Luka, then quickly put away her handiwork.

"I shall start lunch," she said, heading into the kitchen.

Kuu jumped from Cayna's head over to Luka's. The girl dipped a cup into the cask of water always set in a corner of the room and quietly sat by Cayna. After finishing half her drink, Luka peered at the map in front of her mother.

"What's... that map of...?"

"It's a southern country called Otaloquess. Wanna come with?"

Luka shook her head. "No, I'll... stay here... Are you... going, Mommy Cayna?"

"Well, I've gotta check some things out, but it's probably a wild-goose chase. I might be away for a while."

Cayna shrugged tiredly and patted her adopted daughter's head with a warm smile. Luka ducked as if she were a little embarrassed. A moment later, she gripped her mother's hand on her head.

"We'll... be fine. I'll... take care of... everything. You don't... have to worry... Mommy Cayna."

"Oh my. When did you get so grown-up?"

The fire in Luka's eyes was nothing like when they first met. Cayna beamed and wrapped her in a tight hug. Again locked in Cayna's overenthusiastic embrace, Luka quietly sighed with a puckered expression that said, *I messed up*.

The maid peeked in behind Cayna from the doorway, and Luka's eyes pleaded to her for rescue. However, Roxine merely gave a pleasant smile and returned to the kitchen. Luka remained in Cayna's loving embrace awhile longer until lunch was finally ready.

Cayna told her family she would be dungeon crawling for the next several days. That night, she left Luka with Roxine and Roxilius and flew to Felskeilo before the sunrise. She would head to the Otaloquess capital from there.

The outer trade route to the south of the village was shorter in terms of distance, but the long trip to and from Otaloquess required to mark the country as a teleport location was a huge effort. It didn't seem worth it. If Cayna could set Otaloquess as a destination, she'd have flown there and gotten a move on already. She also had

temporary destination markers. However, she was hesitant to use them since it'd be a problem if those left at inns and such were relocated.

She hadn't visited the Adventurers Guild in Felskeilo in a while and decided to take a quick peek at the requests.

According to her receptionist friend Almana, the outer western trade route connecting Felskeilo and Otaloquess was currently impassable. This was partly thanks to the defensive battle a few days prior, but an investigation into the source of unfamiliar monsters like the leohead was also pending. The giant hole Cayna made was being filled in as well.

Instead, an available route cut horizontally through the continent and provided a direct connection to each major city. Originally open only to royalty and the knights, this road was reserved for urgent messages and emergencies. Since the royals, prime ministers, and other upper ranks of society couldn't tell what was happening with the Abandoned Capital, they announced the road next to it would be closed until deemed safe.

The knights and adventurers fighting on the western front lines glimpsed both Cayna's confounding battle strength and the mysterious leohead's power as well. Even the team-oriented knights couldn't have predicted what would happen next. After all, the monster used Bewitch from afar and nearly had them at its mercy.

And so, the earlier fighters, including Arbiter and his mercenaries, were now in the middle of an intense training period in an effort to reorganize. There were, of course, suggestions to have Cayna join them, but both Arbiter and Shining Saber said, "*She will. Destroy. Us. All,*" and rejected the idea.

Since she'd be venturing to Otaloquess, Cayna curiously searched top to bottom for escort missions on the bulletin board. The adventurers around Cayna occasionally stared at her with both admiration and jealousy, but she was too dense to realize. Only after a kind acquaintance brought the matter to her attention did Cayna take note of this (and more hostile emotions). She turned around, and any who made eye contact with the celebrity abruptly cleared their throat.

"Oops, sorry. Am I blocking the board?"

They crashed to the ground as Cayna apologized with a humble smile.

"Oh, there's a keeper."

Cayna grabbed a promising request and walked over to Almana. The staff looked between the high elf and the adventurers now picking up collapsed tables and chairs on the other side of the guild and flashed bemused smiles.

Cayna chose the escort request for a minstrel couple traveling to Otaloquess. Most lone travelers traversed on foot, and although stagecoaches used main roads on the regular, they avoided direct routes between capitals. The reasoning was that nothing should impede royal carriages.

The journey took about ten days, but Cayna felt it was time well spent. In addition to tavern songs and town ditties, the minstrels also taught her poems of mythical legends. In return, Cayna taught them her favorite idol songs back in the hospital. Since she had both tunes imported into Kee and background music from the game, their melodies echoed through the air once more. The astonished pair were pleased at the chance to enjoy foreign music.

Cayna also had an attack buff called Enchanted Song but hadn't used it since arriving in this world. She was happy enough to spend her days letting the music take her.

Frankly, the road to Otaloquess was almost entirely a downhill journey. As the group slowly descended, Cayna watched a deep emerald forest spread across the vast space ahead. Unlike the invigorating green hue of the elevated Helshper forests, this was more akin to a dense jungle. The air grew more humid by degrees. Cayna, who was unaccustomed to such climates, was less than appreciative.

As they approached the capital, the road transformed into a network of wooden bridges suspended between the treetops. Cayna felt like she'd seen something similar on TV. In the center of this city, reminiscent of a treetop-adventure playground, Cayna spied a giant castle that had merged with a tree.

They passed the guard station at the entrance and entered the Otaloquess capital. Before parting, Cayna collected her reward and promised the minstrels they would exchange songs again someday.

Once the couple was out of sight, Cayna turned around and stared up at the gigantic creature beside the castle.

"This must be what Exis and Quolkeh were talking about. What's Kujo's tower doing here?"

Cayna hadn't yet heard about the commotion the tortoise caused. Exis forgot to contact her, and Quolkeh only said her advice was helpful. However, she was positive the two had tackled the tower's trial.

She glanced around her. The locals were curious about the tortoise, but no one was making a big scene. Since she now knew where the tortoise was and it didn't seem to be going anywhere, Cayna decided to come back later.

"All righty. Should I head to the guild and get some info on that village?"

First, Cayna opened her Magic-Skill Command screen and confirmed Otaloquess had been added to her list of teleport destinations. After that, she vaguely looked around and tried to determine which identical-looking treehouse she needed.

"Every country has a guild and inn, right?"

She set out to question these locals when a loud voice assailed her from behind.

"AGHHHH ?!?!"

"...Lady Cayna?"

Cayna turned around to find the werecat siblings she recently met in the remote village. They had apparently passed the gate soon after her. The younger sister, Clofia, pointed at her in disgust, and the older brother, Cloffe, stared at Cayna in bewilderment.

"Umm. You're Cloffe and the little sister who might snap if I speak her name."

"As if I'd want my name to ever come out of *your* mouth!!"

"I spoke too soon..."

Cayna knew cranky children back at the hospital, so Clofia's attitude was nothing new to her. She used to patiently keep each one company and help them open up.

...However, this tale had a dark twist. Once the children finally revealed their hearts,

they admitted they had mistaken Keina as a serial stalker at first. She was appalled to discover they only went along with her out of sheer terror.

Slightly disheartened by past memories, Cayna's spirit withered. All the while, Clofia continued to spit abuse.

"I can't stand it here!" she yelled before stomping off.

"Please pardon my sister's rudeness, Lady Cayna..."

"No worries. Anyway... why is everyone staring at us?"

She shivered as the nearby guards and passersby gaped at them. Cayna had no idea, but Cloffe and his sister were Otaloquess's top adventurers. Clofia's temperament notwithstanding, the pair were seen as heroes.

Seeing as half of the aforementioned duo despised Cayna, one might say it was only natural for people to eye her critically. There were a few sympathetic looks in the mix, however.

"My apologies, Lady Cayna."

"Huh? Um, what?"

Cloffe suddenly grasped the situation and swiftly whisked Cayna away by the hand. His notoriety alone was enough to easily secure a private room at the back of the Adventurers Guild, and they both sighed with relief. Incidentally, he proceeded to concisely explain the unwelcome stares.

"That so? I'm guessing everyone at the inn will give me the old stink eye, too."

"I'm certain the castle will gladly prepare you a private room."

"People will just get more suspicious and wonder who let some stranger into the castle. It's not like I came all this way to see Sahalashade."

"That is true," Cloffe replied with a nod.

He was keen to know what Cayna was doing in Otaloquess despite her stubborn refusal to meet the queen. The werecat immediately knew it was his duty as a spy to

find a motive, join Cayna's travels to observe her movements if possible, and report his findings to the queen.

"Perhaps you would care to stay with us in our modest home? We have a spare room, so please use it for as long as you please. I wish to atone for my troublesome sister."

"Hmm. A tempting proposition. Won't your sister be mad, though?"

"The fault lies with Clofia. I will make her see reason."

"In that case, I might take you up on the offer... So what are you *really* after?"

"...As I thought, you are quite perceptive. I wish to accompany you on your travels, Lady Cayna."

Cayna didn't know what to say. After all, she was looking for the master of the ghastly dungeon known as the House of Murder and Malice. If someone around level 70 or 80 stepped wrong, she was almost certain they'd be squashed by the rabble of monsters in a split second.

Well, even if they *were* squashed, Cayna could still use the Revival Magic Skargo had banned. Incidentally, it was taboo because this real-life Leadale categorized revival spells as lost magic. Cloffe would definitely die, which Cayna suspected would cause problems for Clofia. If push came to shove, she had no intention of heeding her son's warning.

Since an Otaloquess adventurer would be knowledgeable about the nation's dungeons, Cayna negotiated a series of conditions, then agreed to let him come.

Cloffe listened carefully as she rustled open a map and pointed to a particular area.

"Ah, I know this dungeon. Would you like an explanation?"

"I'm wondering how many levels people have breached so far."

"I take it this dungeon has existed for some time. Hmm, yes... I believe it was discovered one century ago. Everyone was ecstatic to find the walls were made of solid gold, but I heard there have been multiple deaths on the first, second, and third floors since the very beginning."

"It's gotta be *those* things..."

"Several pieces of treasure great enough to counteract that were supposedly discovered, and the lost adventurers' friends started to open inns around the cave. The shops of other adventurers were soon added and formed a settlement. I suppose it is now the size of a large village."

Was *there treasure in there?* Cayna asked herself. The treasure chests Opus left in the dungeon were just items the two collected to kill time. It was all newbie equipment, like a Strength +1 Bracelet or a small Defense Up Shield with minimal effectiveness. In truth, Cayna had no idea this crafting process was a lost art in the modern world of Leadale. *Equivalent* skill was achieved by only a few famed artisans.

"There is an Adventurers Guild in the village, but one must be of a certain ability to enter the cave. From what I've heard recently, the farthest point achieved... is floor thirteen."

Thud!

Cayna pitched forward from shock. Naturally, this wasn't what she'd been expecting.

"No one's even gotten halfway through in a hundred years?!"

"Halfway"? Do you mean the dungeon belongs to...?"

"Yeah. Me and my partner-in-crime made it a long time ago, and there's a chance he's hiding out at the very bottom. I wanna see what he's up to."

"Ah... I see. So relatives of the queen can create such a dungeon..."

"No, my annoying friend's the one who built it. I'm pretty sure there are thirty levels, though."

Back in the Game Era, the field around the relay point was a farming area for low-level players. When Opus told Cayna he was going to make a dungeon to screw with the newbies, she thought he had way too much time on his hands. Still, Cayna couldn't deny she had gotten carried away, too. She'd had a blast painting the hallways gold with her smug friend.

The dungeon was never meant to challenge experienced players, so anyone who

wasn't a total rookie could easily clear it. Neither could have guessed how weak the world would become.

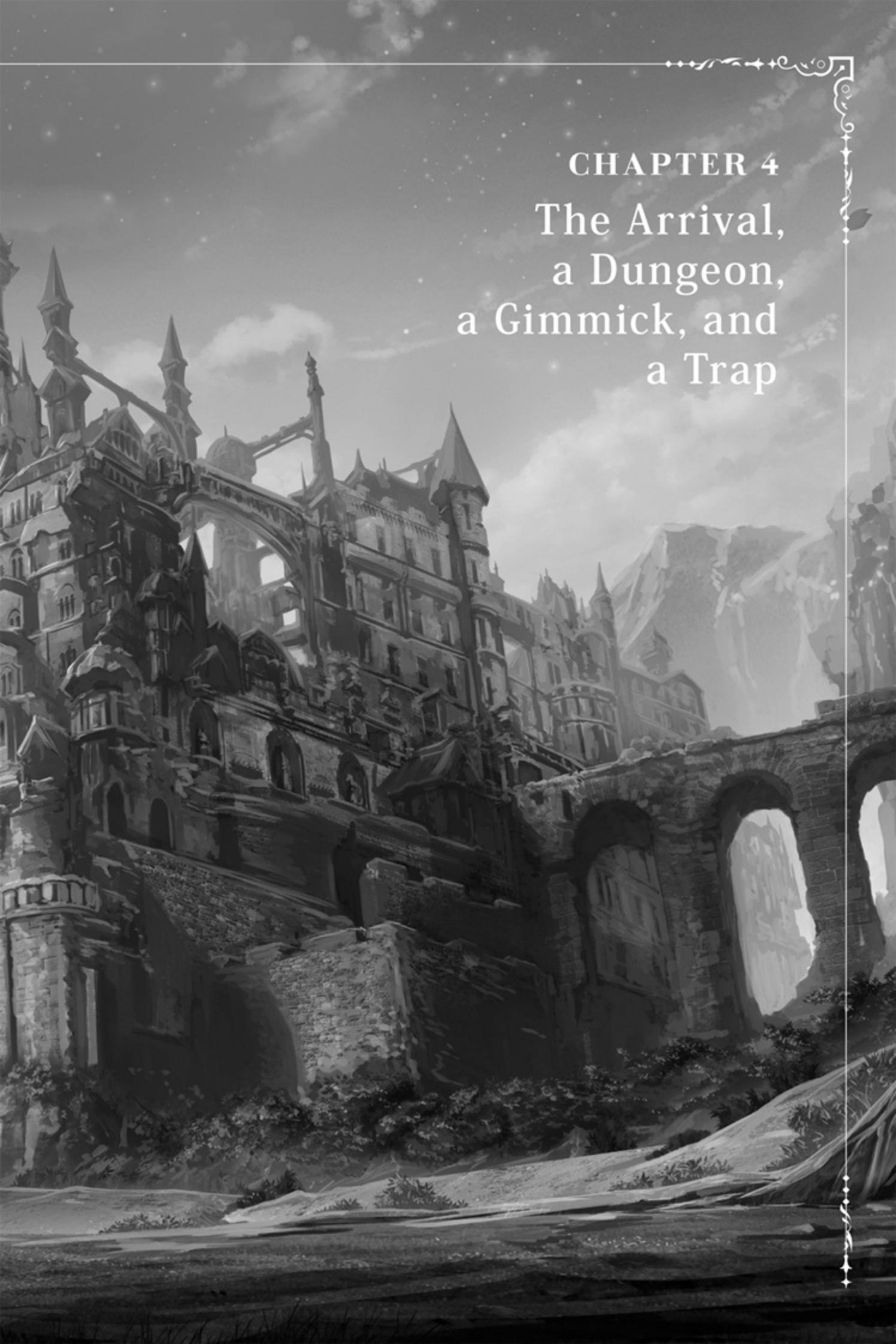
"Sheesh. Looks like I'm handling those last seventeen levels myself."

"I may not be of much help, but I will gladly assist where I can."

Things wouldn't be as easy as Cayna hoped, and her shoulders drooped in tired annoyance.

Conversely, Cloffe was eager to meet this "annoying friend" who could cause her such grief yet warranted a visit. Determined to accompany her no matter what, the werecat offered his assistance more out of personal interest than duty.

All without knowing the dungeon's true nature.



CHAPTER 4

The Arrival,
a Dungeon,
a Gimmick, and
a Trap

Cayna ended up staying with Cloffe and Clofia for two nights. The siblings were just returning from a long mission when they ran into her, and this gave them time to rest and prepare. Although Cloffe had immediately asked to join her in the dungeon, his exhaustion was obvious. When Clofia icily explained this, Cayna suggested they take a break first. She tried to show consideration to the hostile werecat girl by finding an inn, but Clofia said her brother absolutely insisted on hosting her.

The siblings' home in a corner of the capital was actually a treehouse. It was much larger than most dwellings, and the pair rented out their spare room as a sort of rest stop. Cayna's temporary lodging was small, but she installed a simple hub item and was back in her own village by nightfall.

Roxilius and Roxine woke upon sensing Cayna's return. She explained what was going on and gathered any available Guardian Tower items that seemed useful in a dungeon. Then, after treating herself to a silent peek at Luka's sleeping face, she flew back to Otaloquess.

When Cayna got back, she gave Clofia a whooping when the werecat sneaked into her room to harass her. This unintentionally sparked a petty war of retaliation, and the thoroughly enraged Clofia returned the next night for revenge. The fact she was chased out of her own home by the Lightning Spirit's auto-counterattack system is a small detail best omitted.

Cayna heard the journey from the capital to the dungeon village would take about five days on foot. The village was officially called Lekti, but she figured this was a one-time deal and forgot almost instantly. The trio decided to take a public carriage that frequented the town regularly. They would arrive in about three days.

A pack of goretigers attacked the carriage en route. Cloffe and Clofia swiftly eradicated them rather than Cayna.

Along the way, Cloffe provided mostly useless facts about Otaloquess. Cayna thought most of the country's citizens lived in trees, but that wasn't the case. In fact, most of the people who fancied treehouse-living were in the capital. Cayna didn't see how the location really mattered.

In addition, the queen was a surprisingly compassionate and well-respected figure who occasionally set her title aside to wander the castle town and observe the goings-on.

“You shouldn’t share classified information with outsiders!” Clofia shouted angrily.
“What if Her Majesty was harmed?!”

The werecat girl looked at Cayna each time she voiced her displeasure, which gave everyone in the carriage the wrong idea. They shot her death glares, and Cayna concluded Clofia had no idea she was the queen’s relative.

“Why are some people dying to be monkeys? It’s weird.”

“Don’t call people monkeys just because they live in trees! Should we call those who prefer the ground something similar? ‘Crabs,’ maybe?”

“I guess the two of us will have to throw persimmons at each other later, huh?”

“What are you even talking about?!”

The reference to a famous folktale flying right over her head, Clofia snapped at Cayna’s casual quip. The werecat’s hotheaded comments fueled the high elf’s teasing. The two would be teaming up in the dungeon soon enough, so it’d be troublesome if they hated each other too much. Cloffe smiled pleasantly from behind, and the three entered Lekti.

Since the village was built around the dungeon, there wasn’t a treehouse in sight. The architecture mostly reflected the remote communities of the old White Kingdom. Most of the buildings were reserved for lodging, and the rest were tool and equipment shops for adventurers, as well as a tavern. The brothel was an added bonus. The locals just ran businesses while a majority of patrons were adventurers.

When the dungeon was first discovered, rumors claimed it was the tomb of an ancient royal family or other influential figure since the entrance and inner walls were laid in gold. However, the relatively powerful monsters on the first subterranean level made exploration extremely dangerous.

Cayna’s expression soured when she heard this. The dungeon was supposed to be an absurd, stupid joke, so hearing it be taken seriously sent an unpleasant chill down her spine. After all, Opus said it was “*a hazing dungeon for newbies*.”

In most games, beginner players were below level 10. However, in an MMORPG like *Leadale*, the ultimate goal was to become an almighty level 1,000. Naturally, the term *beginner* was adjusted accordingly.

Beginners were considered level 200 or below. Levels 300 to 500 were intermediate. Levels 600 to 800 were advanced. And players like Cayna, who reached level 1,100, were addicts. Many concluded you could get the most out of the game and enjoy the various acts of warfare if you were between levels 600 to 700. Needless to say, the nation of addicts who deviated from this norm were as popular as scorpions.

At any rate, the gimmick behind the Knight Sanctuary was that anyone below level 200 could tackle it. Modern locals obviously didn't have a snowball's chance. Cayna reckoned Caerina could have probably kept up the pace, but she didn't expect a loyal knight to abandon her duties to travel this far south.

At level 80 and level 70 respectively, Cayna thought Cloffe and Clofia could make it halfway. Maybe they were even the ones who reached the thirteenth floor.

"It was not us, I'm afraid. Two-person teams are at a great disadvantage when traversing dungeons."

"Is it a matter of skill, or can you manage with enough people?"

"If anything, I would say the former. Larger numbers send groups into disarray. The two of us often serve as vanguards."

"I see..."

Cayna glanced over at Clofia. It would be tough trekking through a booby-trapped dungeon with a hothead like her.

"Hey! What was that look just now?!"

"Oh, nothing."

Cayna's secretive grin set Clofia off like an angry teakettle, and the werecat went in for the kill. The elf parried her as if swatting a pesky fly, and Cloffe couldn't hide his amusement.

"And you, Brother! Why are *you* smiling, too?!" Clofia wailed. And thus ended the fight.

Her high-pitched shrieks were hard to miss, and a crowd of adventurers stared around them. But perhaps it is more accurate to say they were shocked by only two of the three.

“H-hey... Aren’t those two...?”

“Yeah. They’re those siblings Cloffe and Clofia...”

“What’re they doin’ way out here?”

“The Adventurers Guild ain’t fed up with this place already, right?”

“Whoa, hold up. That’s gonna hurt our wallets...”

The three caught disgruntled whispers from every direction, and Clofia sniffed with obvious contempt. The adventurers immediately flushed with rage, and a dangerous aura permeated the air.

“I don’t think they like you very much,” Cayna pointed out.

“There’s little point in worrying about it,” Cloffe replied.

Making no attempt to admonish his sister, he said, “Right this way,” and led the group to a tidy little inn. The innkeeper noticed Cloffe and tossed the werecat a key.

“Second floor,” the innkeeper said before immediately dismissing him.

Cayna tilted her head quizzically at the odd interaction, but Cloffe gave her an amused smile and insisted the two were good friends. Cloffe apparently stopped by this village often for non-dungeon matters.

The elder werecat led them to a spacious, comfortable room. Clofia put away their luggage and leaned against a window apathetically. The room was empty except for a safe; there were no beds or chairs to speak of. Cloffe informed Cayna that large groups slept in huddles here.

“Huh, you don’t say.”

“Shall I reserve you a private room, Lady Cayna?”

"What, why? It'll be like a field trip where everyone sleeps in the same room. We'll be bonding in no time."

"...'Feel trip'?"

Clofia scowled at the word *bonding*. The fact she kept her complaints to herself was impressive enough.

Cayna never had the chance to experience a school trip, but the ones in books and dramas fascinated her. Nonetheless, she was aware her present situation wasn't even remotely the same thing. She giggled privately to herself while Cloffe tried to wrap his head around this newfound vocabulary.

"Maybe I should craft a bit before we leave. I'm sure it won't get in the way."

"What will you make, exactly?"

"A little somethin' for our dungeon search."

"I see."

Cloffe gave a clueless nod, and Clofia didn't express the slightest interest. However, they both turned around in astonishment as Cayna's Craft Skills began to glow. She took out several ingredients from her Item Box, lined them up along on the floor, and cast her skills with an air of nonchalance.

The pair hadn't witnessed any of Cayna's lost arts—that is, her skills—since her cooking demonstration back in the remote village. Clofia attempted to feign disinterest, but her eyes were wide as saucers.

Cayna crafted items meant to raise Cloffe's and Clofia's chances of survival. She obviously didn't expect these to save anyone from their own slipups, but she wanted to give the siblings something that would prove handy as long as they followed her instructions. Cayna could only hope Clofia didn't embarrass herself by jumping the gun out of spite.

Perhaps Cloffe had lectured Clofia beforehand, because the werecat girl was quiet as a mouse despite everyone sharing a room together. Cayna curled up in a blanket for her first huddle, and as far as she was concerned, morning dawned without incident.

After leaving the inn, they arrived at the dungeon entrance and began to inspect their equipment and supplies. Meanwhile, all three fell under intense scrutiny from the adventurers around them who were eager to earn a little extra cash. By their merciless, hateful looks, they clearly regarded the group as nuisances.

The dungeon entrance, awash in morning sunlight, revealed a golden pathway bursting with nouveau riche flair.

"Wow, this sure takes me back."

"*You forgot it even existed.*"

Cayna glowered at Kee's pointed comment but held her tongue. After all, flying off the handle in public would only make her look needlessly weird.

Incidentally, only the first three floors were made of gold. While creating the dungeon with Opus, the pair went overboard and bought every scrap of the gold they could find in shops and auctions across the seven nations. Gold prices within the game instantly skyrocketed, and rumors spread that the Skill Masters were sitting on a mountain of it. No matter how renowned the Skill Master, one's abilities were not proportional to the nature of business. Cayna and Opus eventually ran out of money, and their gilded efforts came to an end.

"Here, wear these. I made you hair accessories."

"You call these 'hair accessories'? Pretty shoddy if you ask me," Clofia cracked.

Cayna handed each sibling an item she made the day before. They were indeed hair accessories, but the main body resembled a fountain pen. In truth, these rhymestone-infused items were also working floodlights that activated with the phrase *Gods, light a path before me*. The oddly formal wording prevented the magic from canceling out with a snap of the fingers or in the middle of a normal conversation.

Cayna also handed over several potions she'd concocted. She had warned Cloffe earlier of the grave dangers ahead, so Clofia obeyed her brother and accepted them without complaint. The transaction was apparently more palatable coming from Cloffe instead of Cayna.

The group then entered the Knight Sanctuary, and Cayna introduced them to Kuu as soon as they were out of the public eye.

“...M-my goodness.”

“No way. It’s a fairy...”

As Cayna predicted, the siblings’ jaws dropped in shock. She looked alarmingly like Opus, beaming as if she’d just pulled off the most spectacular prank.

“Kuu is Kuu!”

Clofia watched the floating fairy give a tiny bow, and her gaze turned menacing. Kuu seemed to sense this and hastily backed away. The werecat’s expression fell sharply; her poker face probably could have used a bit more work.

The inside of the Knight Sanctuary (or dungeon, rather) was remarkably quiet. The hallways were wide enough for three people to walk alongside one another, but Clofia, insistent she had the best search instincts, pushed ahead to the forefront. Cloffe followed right behind her, and Cayna brought up the rear. Although they sensed other living creatures, there was no sign of any monsters.

This came as no surprise, considering the spawn planks on each floor thus far had been smashed to pieces. Enemies couldn’t spawn otherwise, which explained the current silence. Anyone who caught monsters popping out of the wall would destroy the plank and cut enemies off at the source. You couldn’t raise your level without beating baddies, though, which meant adventurers were typically on the weak side. The ones who trekked the Knight Sanctuary seemed in no rush to get stronger.

“Well, that’s a shame...”

“What is?” Cloffe asked naively as Cayna mumbled at the sight of the damaged spawn planks. She glanced behind her and briefly explained their unique function.

“Their job in this dungeon is to keep pumping out a certain number of monsters.”

“Yes, I have heard similar reports. More than a few succumbed to their might when this place was first discovered.”

“If destroying those plank things got rid of the monsters, what’s there to complain about?” Clofia argued with understandable relief as she wiped the thought from her mind.

She wasn't wrong, considering how their absence saved lives. Nonetheless, even the constant spawn of new monsters played a vital role.

"I'm guessing you didn't realize defeating the monsters also drops loot."

"What?"

"...Huh?!"

"Are you saying treasure will not appear unless we eliminate an enemy?"

"That's right."

Unlike in Admins' dungeons, players were free to decide the location and drop rate of their own treasure chests in great detail. Cayna and Opus had scoured the continent for useless items most would label *junk* and *a waste of space* and piled them up high in spare rooms of the dungeon. These were later transferred to monsters who would drop them as loot, but destroying the planks obviously meant no more free goodies.

Too little too late, the mind-boggling revelation left Cloffe and Clofia speechless. They stood dumbfounded for some time but returned to their senses when Cayna outpaced them.

"...Brother."

"Yes. Once we leave here safely, we must inform the others on the surface."

"Can we really believe everything she says?"

"We have the chance to overthrow the assumption this dungeon is almost dry, and more importantly, we've established why the once-abundant chests have disappeared alongside the monsters. There's no harm in testing this theory. If we defeat a monster and a chest appears, then we'll have definitive proof."

Cloffe's unusual loquaciousness and high spirits surprised Clofia, but she couldn't stomach the fact *that* woman brought him such joy. The nauseating yet curious situation sparked her jealousy and sounded like a tall tale more than anything else. An elf making a dungeon? Clofia thought even a dwarf would be more believable.

"Hey! What do you think will happen if an amateur walks ahead and leads us right into

a trap?!"

And so, she firmly chose not to believe it. Without realizing how much this would come back to haunt her, she yelled at Cayna to quit walking ahead.

"Hmm. There's no way a boss-room plank could be broken, right?"

"You mean to say there is a plank here? I wasn't aware."

Standing before an enormous door on the periphery of the fifth floor, Cayna tilted her head while Cloffe looked back at her in bewilderment.

Although there was a designated boss room every few levels, the Knight Sanctuary only had a grand total of two located on the fifth and thirtieth floors. This was, of course, the will of the dungeon's master.

According to him:

"Keh-keh-keh. First, we'll put one on the fifth floor. Everyone who dives farther down will expect the same exact thing on the tenth floor, but we don't play by the rules! When they realize the boss room isn't there, they'll think it must be every ten floors. Then, when it's not on the fifteenth floor either, they'll assume there aren't any more bosses, crash from the mental gymnastics, then decide to head home and try again later. The player will step on a warp point thinking it'll transport them right back to the surface, BUT it'll actually be a trap that sends them back to the fifth floor! Keh-keh-keh. They'll beat the boss again and start getting nervous. They'll wonder, 'Can I step on a warp point?' Some will make the right gamble and walk back to the entrance on their own. Others will choose wrong, step on the warp point, and end up on the thirtieth floor! If they beat the boss, great. If they don't, they'll die and suffer the consequences. A trap will set off and force the losers to walk allll the way back to start! Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh! I can see it now! The pain of all those newbies deciding whether to die and respawn outta there!"

This was followed by a burst of raucous laughter.

As one might have guessed, only the warp points on the fifth and fifteenth floors were capable of sending players back to the surface. However, even these were traps unconnected to the outside world. In short, if you beat the boss on the fifth floor, reached the fifteenth floor in hopes of taking down the next boss, then decided to warp

back to the entrance, you would be taken to the fifth floor. And using *this* warp point did nothing more than whisk you away to the final floor. A player's only cruel option was to backtrack. There actually was a spell that could transport you out of a dungeon in an instant, but no beginner was advanced enough to know it.

Moreover, Opus was a man who relished watching the little fledglings suffer. Yes, he was *that* type of person. The suffering of others was nectar to him, and there was nothing sweeter than a newbie player. His dungeon, the Knight Sanctuary, was a ploy meant to lift them up before slamming them back down. Well, Cayna was also party to the dungeon's development, so she didn't really have the right to point fingers.

As she pondered all this and tried to recall what the first boss was...

"More importantly, it seems another issue will require our attention first," Cloffe remarked.

Cloffie and Clofia whispered to each other and glanced back. Intrigued, Cayna followed their gaze. Needless to say, she didn't miss the figure trailing from a fixed distance.

She assumed it was a run-of-the-mill adventurer hoping to leech off their victory, but the werecats seemed to think otherwise. Unsheathing the sword at his side, Cloffe stepped in front of Cayna protectively. Clofia nocked an arrow.

"Huh?"

"Honestly, get a clue already. You'll make life way easier for yourself," Clofia muttered with a weary sigh as she stared down the passageway.

The thin rhymestone lights on the werecats' heads exposed the clumsy intruder from head to toe as they approached the open area in front of the boss room.

"Tch! So you caught me..."

The youthful-looking elf man before them tsked. His race made it difficult to pinpoint his actual age. He was joined by werecats and kobolds, and the sinister group numbered about ten in total. They stood in front of the trio and blocked their path. Seven were dressed in adventurer garb and carried swords while the other three wielded bows and arrows. The air around them warned this was no accidental run-in.

"I'm quite certain I know the answer, but I shall ask anyway. What is your business?"

Cloffe questioned, taking the initiative.

The hostile group seemed to regard him as the trio's leader. This was solely their opinion, of course. After all, none could have guessed that, out of the three, it was the defenseless, goofy-looking elf girl you least wanted to antagonize.

"Ain't it obvious, *young man*? We followed the smell of money."

"Huh. Oh yeah?"

"At least show a little concern!"

Clofia yelled at Cayna, who stood there freely nodding as if to say, *I see. Some people really are like hyenas.*

"We're sick of this dried-up dungeon, but there's gotta be somethin' good in it for us if we dive down with pros like you."

"Heh-heh, play nice and spill your secrets. We'll pay you ladies back *very* generously."

Ten lustful pairs of eyes slithered over Cayna's and Clofia's bodies. The werecat girl shuddered in disgust, but since Cayna considered herself naturally scrawny (with the weight loss from her hospitalization not helping), she just gave the men a blank stare.

"So you are desperate for more than information. How pathetic."

"We don't need your damn pity!"

Cloffe gave the group a sorrowful look, and their enraged leader drew his sword. Quickly following suit, the others brandished their own swords and bows. When Cayna used Search on them, she found the average level of their attackers was slightly less than 20. At this rate, Cloffe and Clofia wouldn't suffer more than a few light scratches.

"We've got the numbers. Surround 'em. They'll be singin' like canaries once we show 'em a little pain."

"Hee-hee-hee, me and the girls are gonna have lotsa fun later."

"It's first come, first served, man!"

Cayna wearily stared at the bandits, who were already confident in their victory, while Clofia, too angry to even speak, simply bared her fangs. It was unclear whether this vitriol was directed at the men's character or the severity of their actions.

"You brutes will never be half the man my brother is! Prepare yourselves!"

Clofia pulled back a single arrow as far as it could go, and it pierced the foul-mouthed elf's shoulder faster than the eye could see.

"Gah?!"

"Keh. Drawin' first blood, eh? Get 'em, boys!"

"""YEAAAH!!"""

Cayna's group was apparently to blame for this mess.

Arrows flew, and the men charged at the three with swords raised. Clofia shot a second arrow at record speed and pierced the foot of a kobold on the front lines. He pitched forward with a howl, gripping his foot as he rolled on the ground. Those behind the kobold wasted no time stampeding over their fallen comrade. They truly were barbaric.

"Can I jump in now?" Cayna asked Cloffe quietly.

"Please exercise restraint," he urged.

"Half kill 'em, then. Gotcha."

Magic Skill: Ruby Iyah Zors

This brief chant produced a giant fiery spear over Cayna's head and stopped the approaching mob in their tracks. The spear rivaled the height of an adult human and was fiendish enough to make anyone who saw it catch their breath. Even the shower of red and orange sparks above her dampened the men's earthly desires.

"H-hey... What're you gonna do with that?" a man at the forefront asked in a reedy voice as he pointed at the flaming spear.

Cayna only gave a wide grin.

The man suddenly paled, and he spun on his heel to escape. However, nothing said he could dodge the spell by escaping the caster's line of sight.

"Hee."

"Huh?"

It was not Cayna who pulled the trigger, but Kuu who sat silently upon her shoulder. Well aware no one besides the caster should have been able to manipulate the spell, Cayna couldn't hide her concern.

At any rate, the burning spear burst forth and struck the back of the retreating man. A typical Flame Lance would have either pierced through the target or burned a hole, but this Ruby Iyah Zors was a different beast entirely. The moment it came into contact with its victim, the spear unraveled, wrapped around the entire body, and consumed *everything*.

"AGHHHHHH?!"

The flaming man let out agonizing screams as he burned in a continuous pillar of flame without ever actually dying. The spell was absolutely atrocious but set an excellent example.

Cayna planned to call off the spell as soon as the others became too mentally broken to continue the fight. At that point, the ordeal would end with no more than a few singed clothes and light burns.

"D-don't kill us, pleeeease!"

"W-we give up!"

"H-h-help! I'm sorry! Forgive me!"

The men tossed their weapons in short order.

"It seems like they bit off more than they could chew," commented Clofia.

"Well, their opponent *is* Lady Canya, after all..."

The little girl the men had marked as the weakest link nearly destroyed them in one

of the most gruesome ways imaginable. Who could blame them for shaking in their boots?

"I was really hoping it wouldn't come to this, though," Cayna said.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't have it in the first place?"

"Clofia."

"...Yes. I'm sorry, Brother."

"If I don't come down hard at times like this, then someone who didn't learn the first time will plot their revenge. I'd hate to pile up cold bodies in an alleyway."

A chill ran down their attackers' spines as Cayna delved into graphic and horrifying detail.

Her merciless methods and ability to cast powerful magic with hardly a chant were enough reason for the men to surrender. However, if Cayna went any easier on them here, she had a feeling they'd jump from the shadows for revenge. That was the last thing she wanted.

Among the injured, the one Clofia shot in the foot got the worst of it. The man extracted the arrow himself and bandaged it to stop the bleeding. But despite the botched robbery attempt, it wasn't like Cayna's group could let their attackers off scot-free.

"What should we do?" Cayna asked.

"I suggest we leave them tied here and continue ahead."

"Isn't that a bit lenient, Brother?"

Although this was only the fifth floor, they weren't about to just turn back around. The three decided to leave the men there, and Cayna knocked them out with Intimidate and Glare for good measure. There were no monsters on this floor, so the crooks were perfectly safe even in the depths of sleep. She started to write "*Pedo*" and "*Animal*" on their foreheads, and in this alone did Cayna and Clofia find common ground. Gleefully joining in, the werecat added "*Coward*" to the list of insults. Cloffe alone solemnly observed the men and clasped his hands in prayer.

Incidentally, the boss of the fifth floor was a level-50 ghoul. Cloffe, who wasn't given a chance to shine in the previous battle, vanquished it with one swing of his blade. A treasure chest materialized, but Cayna was disappointed to find it was only a low-level potion. Cloffe and Clofia, on the other hand, were all over it.

"Brother! We've... we've come upon these before."

"Yes, it's a high-level potion."

Her knees buckling, Cayna dropped to the ground. She gripped her head with the agonizing realization that the lost techniques of the past were giving birth to terrible, terrible misunderstandings.

It's barely even a potion...

"*Perhaps you should tell them that?*"

But they look so excited. I'd hate to rain on their parade.

There was no way she could walk up to the delighted siblings, look at their little test tube of potion and say, *Yeah, that was nothin' back in the day!*

"*If it's not especially pertinent, perhaps it's best to let the matter drop.*"

You're *the one who said I should say something, Kee!*

While Cayna mentally conversed with Kee, Cloffe and Clofia calmed down and suggested they press forward.

"Let's continue, Lady Cayna."

"Comiiing."

"Where is your enthusiasm?! You're the whole reason we're down here!"

"Comin' right up..."

"Are you insulting me?!"

Clofia's shrill voice echoed emptily across the dungeon.

Not much happened between the sixth and thirteenth floors. All the spawn planks were broken; Cayna would put each one she found in her Item Box. If she ever managed to meet up with Opus, they'd have to decide whether or not to keep this dungeon. Knowing him, the demon wouldn't spare a second thought for the many adventurers intrigued by it, so he'd probably toss it. In that case, the outcome would depend on Cayna's opinion as well.

She'd be a sitting duck in a war of words, and she contemplated how to deal with him as they sank to the fourteenth floor. Sensing a disturbance farther down the passageway, Clofia held out an arm to stop Cloffe.

"What is it?"

"There's something up ahead."

She shot an arrow, and a sharp, metallic echo rang out. Their foe was seemingly impervious to arrows. The three got into battle position, and a light sluggishly emerged from the dark hallway. They were silver rhinoceros beetles. Each was about the size of a grown pig, and a trio of them advanced as a unit.

"Blitz beetles, huh? They're slow but tough as anything."

As Cayna offered intel on their enemy, the siblings raced forward in unison. Clofia's consecutive hail of arrows bounced right off their glowing silver exoskeletons.

As if finally registering Clofia and the others as a threat, the three blitz beetles picked up the pace and rushed toward Cayna and the siblings. But despite having six legs each, they were as slow as anything.

Cloffe moved ahead of Clofia and swung down his sword on the foremost beetle, but a loud clamor rang out as the carapace halted its destruction.

"Ngh, they're tough..."

"Yeah, I told you so."

Although blitz beetles were only level 40, their hard shells alone could give a level-100 monster a run for its money. Moreover, it was a frustrating enemy that wasn't worth a

newbie's time. Back in the game, players usually had to either stop a blitz beetle with something like a paralysis ball and gang up on it or temporarily leave the active area before striking from behind.

Cayna had been betting on such methods and sighed as she watched the werecats jump the gun and struggle for victory. After all, the monsters weren't coming after *her* thanks to the huge level difference. So the enemy targeted the go-getter duo instead.

Most insect monsters were weak against magic, so spells did the most damage. Since dark magic capable of eroding the soul would be super effective, Cayna chose Magic Skill: Blind Shot. Several hundred shadow needles suddenly formed around Cayna and thoroughly skewered the blitz beetles. With their souls torn to shreds, the monsters were swiftly eliminated. Only untouched corpses were left behind, and even those soon dissolved into visual noise and vanished.

"Th-that was magic."

"Darn, no treasure chests this time?"

The dense thicket of needles sticking out of the ground quickly disappeared as well. Looking rather bored, Cayna went ahead of Cloffe and Clofia as the two stared at the spot the monsters had just been.

The siblings were so shocked because they had never seen monsters disappear like that before. In this dungeon, enemies only dropped experience points and the very occasional treasure chest.

"Hey! Don't walk ahead!"

Cayna was a considerable distance ahead when she heard two pairs of feet. One complained all the while. No, it was more like she was trying to pick a fight.

"Why do you keep trying to lead the way?!"

"...'Why,' you ask? Because you couldn't even *scratch* those pip-squeaks, that's why. What are you gonna do if we're attacked by some horde?"

"Ngh! I—I was just monitoring the situation! Next time I'll take them out before you can get in my way!"

Clofia's face burned with rage, but she managed to keep herself in check. Cayna narrowed her eyes and murmured a quiet "Oh?" before stepping aside for the werecat girl. For whatever reason, Clofia sniffed derisively and nodded in self-satisfaction. This time, however, she proceeded with caution. Cloffe passed by Cayna with a small bow and a look of apology before catching up to his sister to act as support.

"Not particularly dependable companions, are they?"

Just give it to me straight, Kee.

"They are getting in the way, aren't they?"

Cayna cringed at Kee's brutally honest opinion. She shrugged and followed after the siblings.

Another condition had been established when Cloffe and Clofia decided to join her. They were to ignore any small rooms they came across during the trip. This was in order to save a portion of the spoils for potential adventurers in the future. If Cloffe returned home and shared what he knew about the treasure chests, the spawn planks were less likely to be destroyed as well.

And so, they ignored every small room and forged straight ahead. Clofia occasionally glanced at the doors and let out a heavy sigh. Incidentally, Cayna had tacked on this condition after witnessing the attitudes of the adventurers on the surface, but she told the werecats she'd probably retract the clause if it *"became too much of a hassle."* This exasperated Clofia, but anyone who knew Cayna understood that's just who she was. Being too soft is not always a good thing.

Soon enough, the three found a flight of stairs and descended deeper to the fifteenth floor. Kee had memorized every floor; Cayna only had to warn their guide, Clofia, whenever she was about to make a wrong turn. For better or worse, the werecat didn't offer any sass or refuse her help.

Clofia's thief intuition was the real deal, and Cayna herself had forgotten many of the dungeon's details. These gimmicks in *Leadale's* game system could essentially be bought via micro-transaction for several hundred yen and included traps like *Whoever steps into a given area will set off a gimmick that does [blank]*. Players could either use skills gained in offline mode, like Passive Skill: Intuition or Sense Danger, to sidestep the trap, or they could intentionally set it off and dodge the incoming threat.

In other words, there was no need to pull or step on every little hidden switch. That was why having someone like Clofia, whose thief skills of trap detection and defusal were unrivaled (at least in her own mind), walk in front of them seemed like a pointless suicide mission.

Clofia's floodlight washed over the labyrinth ahead, revealing a T-shaped intersection.

There was nothing unusual about the corridors on either side, but a suspicious switch jutted from the wall between them. It looked like an on/off switch designed to flick up and down. When Cayna approached it from the back of the group, the Danger Radar in her head set off alarm bells.

She mistakenly believed the two in front of her felt the same danger.

Lacking Cayna's skills, Cloffe and Clofia blindly walked straight into the hazard zone. A bulky stone akin to a roofing tile (thirty centimeters on each side and two centimeters thick) suddenly dropped from the ceiling and struck them.

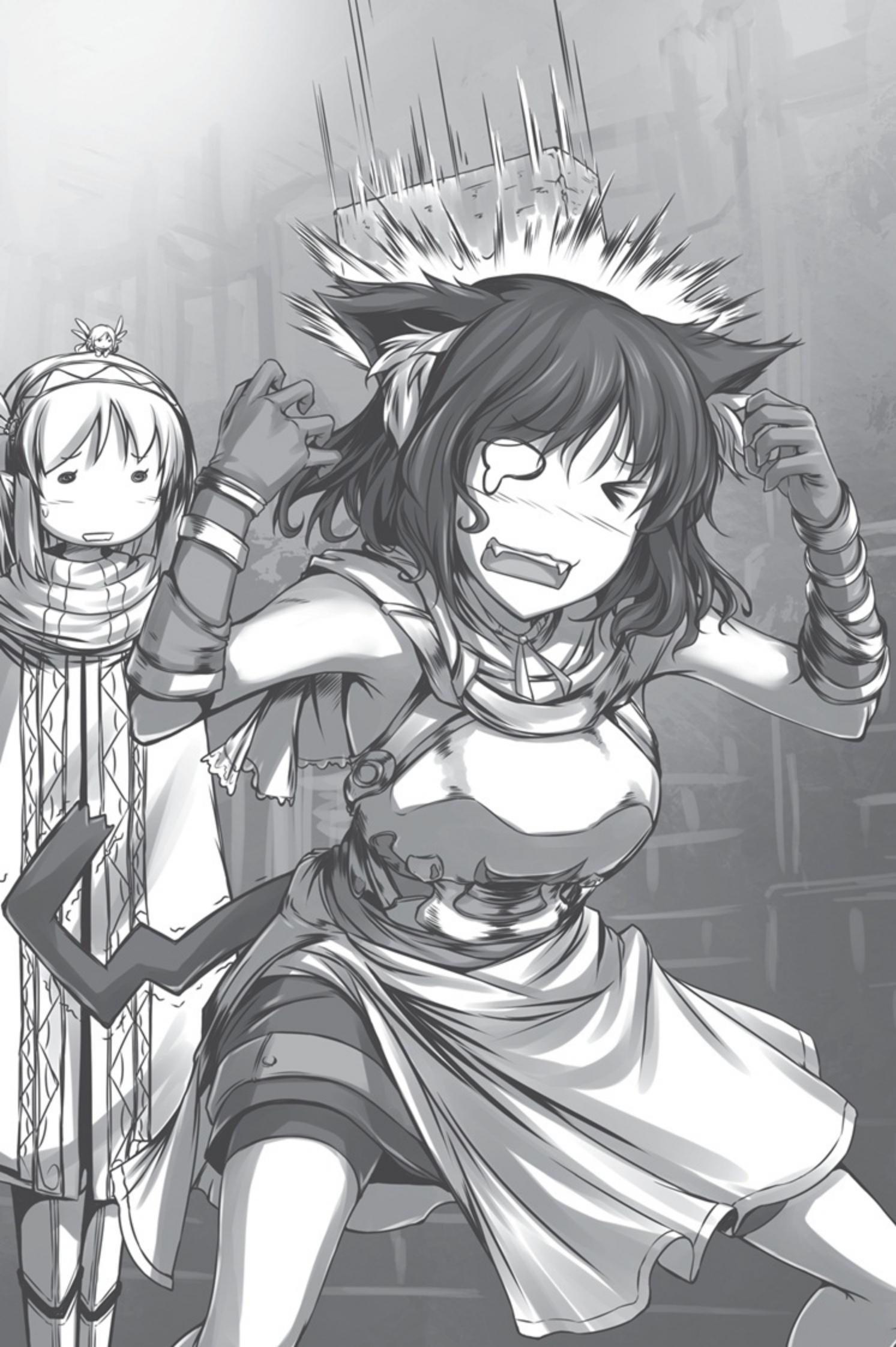
...Or at least Clofia, who led the way.

An agonizing *clunk* rang from the top of her head, and the stony culprit fell to the ground with a thud that could probably be heard throughout the dungeon. Clofia somehow remained conscious despite her lack of a helmet. Collapsing to the floor, the werecat gripped her head in indescribable pain and trembled as she stifled a scream. Judging by the sound it made on impact, the rock could easily break open the average person's skull. Cloffe rushed over to pat her back and offer consoling words.

Cayna picked up the stone and looked at the ceiling. She had no idea where it came from. There wasn't a single opening to be found.

"I see. I bet another one will drop if we stick around. Cloffe, please move forward a bit before you heal her. We'll see round two otherwise."

"R-right..."



Cloffe picked up his sister princess-style and took the corridor to the left. Incidentally, the switch was only a carving, and the stone tile had dropped two steps in front of it. Placing a trap where people expected to be safe was a reflection of Opus's malicious nature.

En route to the sixteenth floor, a pitfall on the landing took Cloffe and Clofia by surprise. There was a square, ten-meter landing stationed halfway between each floor, and when they stepped on this one in particular, their feet disappeared from beneath them. It wasn't just a trap door, either; the floor *literally* opened up.

The siblings had no time to jump back, and they vanished from Cayna's sight in an instant. She heard something dry being crunched to pieces below, and dust rose up around her waist.

"Cloffe?!"

By this point, even Cayna was starting to wonder how either one could have taken the stairs without the slightest hint of danger. They surely had their own protective measures, so she had assumed they were just grabbing life by the horns.

At any rate, she could hear a man and woman violently coughing inside the hole. Cayna used Wind Magic to gather the particles into a dust storm and blow them away from the staircase. Once the twisted atoms dissipated, Cayna cast Additional White Light Level 1: Light over the ceiling to give herself a clear view. The source of the dust was cast in high relief.

"N-nooooooooooo?!"

"...Uwagh?!"

"...Whoa."

Stuck in the hole with a front-row view, Clofia screamed. Cloffe realized what was happening as well and couldn't hide his own shock. Its repulsiveness made even Cayna break out in a sweat from her perch above.

Down below, the two were standing on the giant, desiccated body of a pale annelid. Or in laymen's terms, a big worm. The organism was about eight meters long, and anyone who fell into this trap once could have expected a very slimy bath.

After two hundred years, the worm was dry as a bone and now looked more like a structure eroded by wind and the elements. The siblings had fallen straight through its body, but the worm had largely retained its original form.

Despite her adventurer status, Clofia let out a shrill scream and immediately fainted after realizing she had inhaled the dust of some disgusting creature. Cayna just thought it was kind of gross, but she wasn't about to head down there herself. Instead, she used Pull to get them out.

Once the pair were out of harm's way, a lid appeared out of nowhere and covered the hole. This was paved with cobblestones, and soon enough not even the faintest line betrayed the pitfall's existence.

"He really knows how to push people's buttons."

"I shudder to think what would have happened if it were still alive."

The three tested the landing again, but the floor didn't disappear. Intuition and Danger Radar remained silent as well. The trap's sole purpose seemed to be fraying people's nerves. Cayna could only express her condolences to Clofia for suffering through the experience.

"Well, it's almost evening. Why don't we make camp for the night?" Cayna suggested.

As she started taking firewood and foodstuffs out of her Item Box, Cloffe sought constant validation that the floor wouldn't drop out from under them again.

"It'll be fine."

"But there is always the chance it may disappear at night when we are at our weariest..."

Apparently under the impression Cayna was only trying to make him feel better, Cloffe hovered around the edges of the landing.

"The trap caught people like it was supposed to, so there won't be a second time. The guy who came up with this stuff gets a kick out of a prank only on the first time. If nothing else, you can trust me on that."

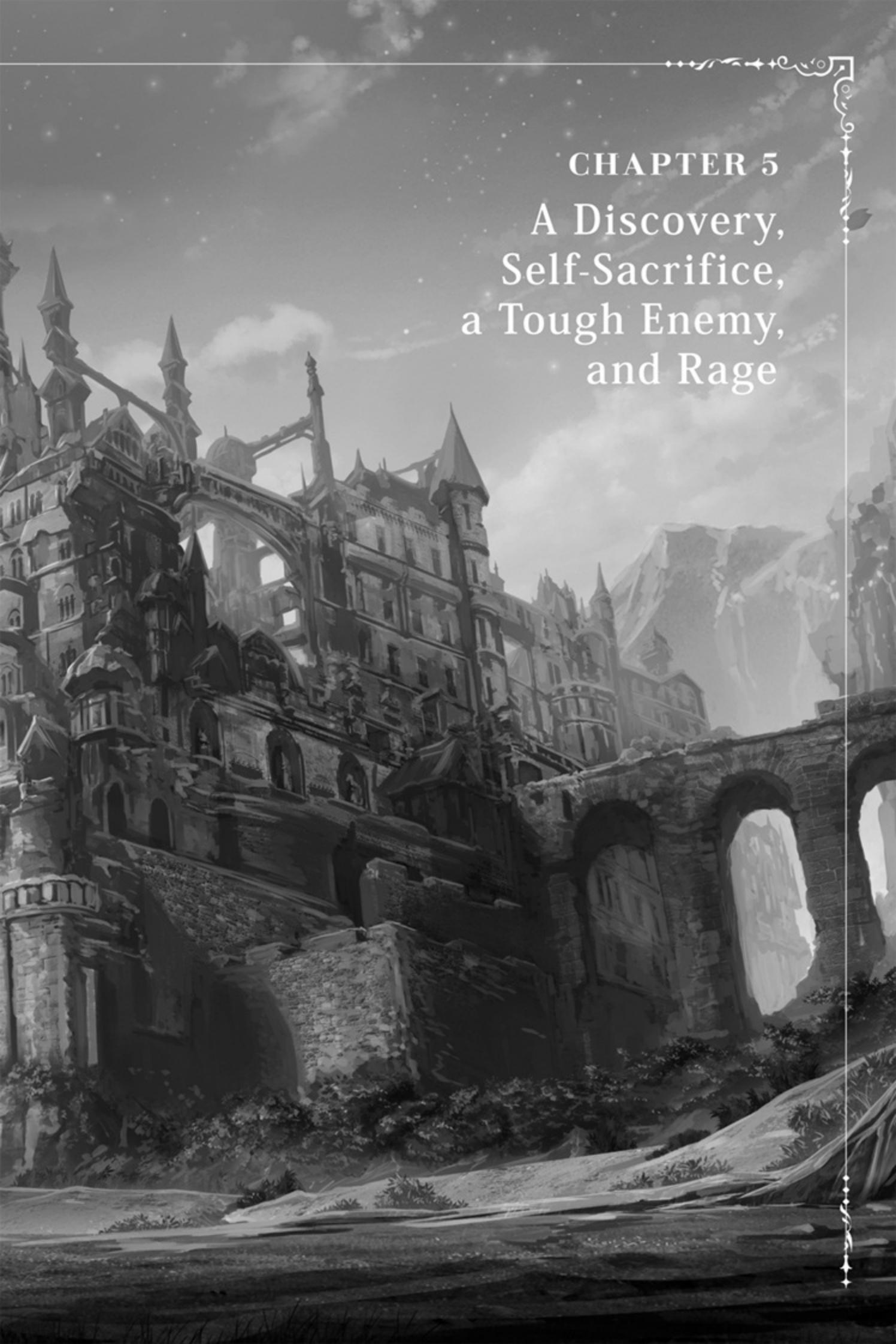
It wasn't a very comforting thought, but Cayna would lose faith in everything up ahead

if she allowed room for doubt. This was the best way to ease her nerves.

Cayna prepared dinner with her Cooking Skills, and Cloffe finally rejoined them on the landing.

Still, Clofia let out another scream the second she woke up, so it was safe to say Opus had achieved his objective.

If Opus was watching them, it was unlikely he'd activate the same trap twice. Cayna placed an Isolation Barrier over the entire landing for the night, but Clofia alone stubbornly refused to sleep there. She instead found a corner between the wall and stairs.



CHAPTER 5

A Discovery,
Self-Sacrifice,
a Tough Enemy,
and Rage

Then the group arrived on the nineteenth floor.

They traversed the sixteenth and seventeenth floors without much difficulty and didn't run into any traps. A few monsters appeared here and there, but even Cloffe and Clofia handled them with ease. The corridors had grown considerably wider, so Cayna surmised the traps were probably inside the small rooms.

On the eighteenth floor, they encountered a lot of small ogre-type monsters such as goblins and imps. Cloffe and Clofia once again dispatched these effortlessly, but Cayna stepped on occasion to help with the larger volume. Simple Fire Magic usually did the trick. Clofia glared odiously as Cayna rained down a hail of fire arrows with only a few words. Cloffe tried to admonish his sister, but almost everything Cayna did infuriated her.

More ceiling traps awaited Clofia on the eighteenth floor. Her head developed a new bump over the one that finally stopped swelling, and her eyes pooled with tears. Things only got worse for her, so Cloffe strongly suggested he lead the group instead.

Leaving monster duty to the werecats, Cayna took up the rear and decided to confirm if memory served her correctly.

"Kuu, about before."

"Hmm?"

Kuu, who was cheerfully humming to herself on Cayna's shoulder, looked puzzled.

"You interfered with my spell and set it off on your own, right? How'd you do that?"

The fairy cocked her head and bent at the waist, then twirled her arms for good measure. Cayna wondered if it was some kind of dance but really didn't have the slightest clue.

It was apparently Kuu's thinking pose. After twisting to the left and right, Kuu thrust out her chest with a proud grin that said, *Nailed it.*

"Uh, no, I'm not saying you nailed it. I'm asking *why* you did it."

After Cayna repeated her question, Kuu pressed a hand to her mouth and pondered something. Then her eyes welled with tears.

"Was I bad?" she asked.

"N-no, you weren't bad. Really. I wanted to thank you. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Don't cry, okay?"

Feeling like she just picked on a little kid, Cayna patted Kuu on the head and tried her best to console her. Clearly, asking more questions of the fairy and her limited vocabulary wouldn't yield any answers.

As Cayna expected, the idiot holed up on the bottom floor was the only person she could ask. She vowed to add this item to the beatdown she had lined up for him.

At any rate, their current issue was what awaited them on the nineteenth floor.

Whooooooooooooosh.

A dumbfounded Cloffe and Clofia stared, mouths agape, at the powerful white winds blustering past.

"Right, this," Cayna mumbled wearily.

Unlike previous floors, the terror of Mother Nature was in full force here. The trio were greeted by rolling, snowy hills and a driving blizzard. The sky was thick with dim gray clouds, and not a single shadow or seam could be seen along the presumed ceiling.

For players like Cayna, these dungeon scenes were entirely commonplace. There wasn't anything special about finding a field here. The sky, the forests, the mountain ranges in the far distance were like CG wall projections, and the layout actually wasn't much different from the eighteenth floor.

There were no passageways, however, so the challenge was finding the next flight of stairs. Considering the size of the hills, the ceiling was pretty high up. Although the cold was unpleasant, it was far better than some frozen hellscape where they'd be exposed to frostbite.

"U-u-u-u-um, L-L-L-L-Lady Cayna. What is this place?"

"Hmm. Looks like your average dungeon floor to me. Nothing unusual here, right?" Cayna answered plainly. Cloffe and Clofia shuddered.

Cloffie noted her composure and didn't bother telling her this wasn't normal in the least. Even if Cayna had told them such sights were common two hundred years ago, it would feel no less strange. He couldn't help but wonder if similar dungeons were prevalent. Rare, underground structures from that era had been previously discovered, but no sightings like this had ever been reported.

If one plunged deep enough, identical dungeons could be found all across the continent. Nevertheless, modern adventurers were so stunted that they could never hope to reach that far.

The one person among them who not only had firsthand experience with the dungeon but actually helped create it stepped into the soft snow and looked around. It was dim, and visibility was poor. Even the hills didn't look like much more than bumpy, white silhouettes against the dark sky.

As mentioned earlier, the biggest pain in a dungeon like this was finding where the stairs to the next level were buried. The staircase itself was probably packed with snow, too.

Will we have to dig...? I don't have a shovel, though. Magic?

"You have a tracker beast, do you not?"

I can summon my kirin after I take out all the Active monsters. We might have casualties otherwise.

Casually chatting with Kee, Cayna set off through the snowfield and began digging in a spot a stone's throw away from Cloffe and Clofia. She poked through the snow with her magic staff, and anyone lacking basic knowledge of these types of dungeons would think she had lost her mind. Cloffe watched Cayna without any idea as to what she was trying to accomplish. Clofia tugged at her brother's clothes.

"What is it?"

"Brother, what's your relationship with that woman? You speak so politely to her... Is

something going on?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, I guess I should tell you before your rudeness crosses the line."

Just as Cloffe was about to reveal Cayna's connection to Clofia's beloved Queen Sahalashade, they heard a strange *thud* from behind.

With the greatest of caution, the two turned around to find three pairs of coal-black eyes staring at them. The werecats quickly jumped back to get a better look at the newcomers, and the discovery confounded them.

They wore buckets on top of their vertically stacked, rotund bodies, and gloves hung from their tree-branch arms. Checkered scarves around their necks, coal eyes, impressive eyebrows, and carrot noses—no matter how you sliced it, these were definitely snowmen.

Realizing this was *their* territory, Cloffe readied his weapon. After a quick glance around, he knew they weren't alone. A mass of similar shadows hovered on the other side of the blizzard.

He had no idea how these foes appeared out of nowhere. Cloffe wouldn't dare let his guard down, even in the middle of a conversation.

While indeed snowmen, their official name was Snow Demon. At level 100, these magical creatures were a considerable challenge.

Snow Demons preferred wintry plains and could move anywhere within their element. This allowed them to silently ambush prey from behind, and unless you struck their slime-like core, defeating them was a herculean task. Snow Demons were born from snow, so swords and arrows didn't faze them in the least. No matter how great the swordsman, swinging one's blade on frosty, unknown terrain wouldn't do much good. After all, even a maimed snowman could simply absorb the surrounding blizzard and revive itself.

Clofia rushed to Cloffe's aid and sank her arrows into the Snow Demons, but to no avail. As the siblings stood there at a loss, their foes barreled across the snow toward them. The intense onslaught would jolt them to the very core.

Avoiding a direct attack was simple enough, but the werecat siblings had to stumble across the unfamiliar snowscape. After a hit or two, damage accumulated, and the pair

fell to their knees. As they looked around them, Cloffe and Clofia watched the Snow Demons swiftly multiply. Five became seven, and just as they counted more than ten, non-snow-bunny Clofia slipped and rolled around as the Snow Demons glommed onto her.

They immediately pounced on Cloffe's back next, and he sank under a pile of snow.

"Ngh..."

Cloffe glanced beside him and watched Clofia hopelessly plunge into the snow as well. He tried to move but failed. Just as all seemed lost and he would soon meet an icy end...

Magic Skill: Iyah Flare Shot

...several crimson rays cut through the blizzard and struck the Snow Demons. Their heads and torsos melted on impact, and the creatures scattered in every direction as they were mercilessly mowed down.

When Cloffe stood and raced over to Clofia, she was covered in snow but managed to rise up from her own hollow cavity.

Cayna watched the Snow Demons flee in desperation.

"You won't get away that easy," she said with a wave of her arm.

Summoning Magic: Load: Flame Spirit Level 7

"We'll find the stairs if we melt all the snow, right?"

A fiery torrent surged from the crimson magic circle in front of Cayna. The scattered flames boiled like magma, and the moment they fell across the snowy plain, giant clouds of steam rose up to create holes.

Flames spewed endlessly from the magic circle and flew in all directions. Even the earth beneath the snowmelt made a bubbling noise as it boiled and evaporated. Then everything turned red until a giant, burning gorilla finally burst out of the circle with shoulders squared. It was level 770 and nearly as tall as a two-story house.

The gorilla Flame Spirit, Solar Prominence, was made mostly of magma, and flames erupted all over its body. Since it produced a never-ending heat wave, the surrounding

temperature skyrocketed upon its arrival. This had no effect on Cayna, the summoner. However, she cast Flame Resistance on Cloffe and Clofia to protect them.

Kuu seemed perfectly fine as she joined Solar Prominence in a mighty roar.

The gorilla landed, and every last drop of water evaporated beneath it. Even the stone floor started to melt.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

Solar Prominence howled and beat its chest as blazing rings of fire surrounded the summons at several meter intervals. There was no trace of the Snow Demons left, and the once-wintry landscape was already nothing more than a stone space.

The rings moved in rhythm with the Flame Spirit's arms and, with an upward swing and wild howl, thickened and shifted from red to bluish white. In short, several pale hoops surrounded the beast as it raised both arms high in the air. The only option left was for them to come back down. The gorilla struck the ground with gusto, and the blueish rings sank into the cobblestones. They melted straight through the floor, and cracks spread all over until the nineteenth floor completely caved in. Every last bit of debris that came in contact with the blue-white rings evaporated.

As the floor's destruction caught up with them, Cayna cast Fence around everyone and added Float to slow their descent. Fiery dregs continued to fill the air, and scattered bits of building bubbled and dissolved midflight.

Its purpose now complete, Solar Prominence grew quiet as its existence faded into nothing. With one mighty swing of its arms, the gorilla had ruthlessly destroyed two entire levels and sent the trio to a corridor on the twenty-first floor. Melted stone dripped incessantly from above like a leaky roof.

"Uh-oh. I might've overdone it."

“.....”

Cloffe and Clofia stared wordlessly at the broken ceiling and catastrophe around them. Even if neither knew the spirit's exact level, it was obvious that whatever Cayna had summoned was no chump. It shattered two floors in a single hit. They didn't think anything capable of destroying dungeon floors of unknown material and solidity in the blink of an eye would just roll over.

Cayna's only intention was to summon Solar Prominence to help melt the snow, but it was apparently so excited to be summoned that it went all out.

Cloffe once again failed to hide his disbelief. The queen's aunt possessed extraordinary powers, and he could only be thankful that Cayna hadn't turned her full strength on his sister yet.

This aforementioned sister had feebly collapsed to the floor. The thought of that same power smiting *her* filled Clofia with terror.

Cloffe walked over and offered her a hand.

"Here, let me help you."

"O-kay... Thanks, Brother..."

"All righty. Looks like it's full speed ahead."

The dungeon air still scorched from the aftermath. Not minding in the least, Cayna trotted ahead.

Cloffe pulled Clofia to her feet and sluggishly trailed behind. His sister was walking along in a state of shock as well but remembered their conversation before the gorilla interrupted. She asked Cloffe to continue where he'd left off; the revelation was enough to rattle the very foundation of her worldview.

"..... Huh?"

"Lady Cayna is Queen Sahalashade's aunt."

"..... What?"

As Cloffe pulled his sister along, Clofia recalled her previous behavior. Her mind went blank.

They neared the twenty-second floor. Clofia's head hung low, and Cloffe continued to tug her along. Cayna led the way, the siblings obeying her intermittent warnings as they traversed the twenty-first floor. The trio stuck to walls, cleared uneventful

corridors, and avoided running into any traps.

Their guide, Cayna, didn't understand the sudden lack of obnoxious comments but could hear Cloffe telling Clofia about her relation to Sahalashade.

Well, she'd deal with that later. This floor was their current problem.

As they descended the stairs, the three were greeted by a pitch-black space with a faint light all the way at the end. Cayna tried using a Light spell, but the glowing orb in her hand was snuffed out in a second.

"An anti-magic field?!"

For whatever reason, even the werecat's magic floodlights had significantly weakened upon entering this floor. As soon as Cayna recalled the phenomenon she deemed to be the culprit, her face darkened. Cloffe and Clofia's support wouldn't be nearly as effective now.

"Lady Cayna, what is this 'anti' thing you speak of?"

"It's an anti-magic field. It means there's a good chance we can't use magic on this entire floor."

"We can't use magic?!"

Incredulous, Cloffe and Clofia raised their hands overhead to see if she was right. By their increasingly thunderstruck expressions, their shock was palpable.

"H-how is this possible...?" Cloffe asked.

"It's not that unusual, really... Oh, right, I guess you don't have this sort of thing nowadays!"

"C-correct. Situations where one cannot use magic are limited to audiences with royalty and nobility."

"It's not like you *can't* use magic in those places, though, right? Won't you just get thrown in jail if you try without permission?"

"Yes, well, I cannot deny that."

“Gweh.” Cayna grimaced at the bad news.

She was suspicious of how Kuu could still fly around like normal but chalked it up to fairy magic just being a bit different. Cayna then turned her attention to the light far up ahead and peered into it. Thanks to her various skills, she could see a single path cutting through the darkness.

“I knew it. Opus being Opus, he’s telling us to take the one dark road. However...”

Cayna extended her magic staff and poked the inky black ground. As she suspected, everywhere else was an empty cavity. If you slipped, would you arrive on the next floor or fall into the pits of hell itself?

She warned Cloffe and Clofia behind her of this fact. By this point, challengers could only hope luck and physical ability were on their side. Cayna said a brief farewell to this lively room rife with event flags and stepped forward.

Cayna’s Intuition immediately sensed danger, and she ducked her head. Half a second later, she heard something faint fire off on her right, and a silver light passed through where her head had just been. It vanished into the darkness on her left.

“Is he trying to kill—?!”

BOOOOOM!

Before Cayna even had the chance to complain, the flying silver light that disappeared to the left set off a huge explosion and released a smoldering shock wave. The two watching from behind thought it was an extremely thick arrow, but it actually seemed to be some kind of ridiculous explosive. The shock and heat chipped the wall and sent bits of stone flying.

Cayna’s Equilibrium skill and Kee’s defensive shield protected her, but it was no less of a surprise. Cloffe’s and Clofia’s faces twitched at the sight of the lethal projectile.

“Um...”

“Wh-what in the world is going on...?”

“Damn youuuuu, Opusssss! Why the hell did you put missiles in here?!”

As she said, it was a missile. An item that really didn't belong in a fantasy RPG.

Cylindrical arrow-shaped ones were called missiles, and round throwable ones were pineapples. You only had to be a midlevel player to access the quest needed to obtain the skill, but it was a weapon that inflicted damage equivalent to one-fifth its creator's level. If someone like Opus or Cayna decided to make one, no player below level 200 would stand a chance. The advantage here was that the level required to *use* these items was low. Even beginners could take down an enemy with ease if they got their hands on one. Needless to say, pineapples made by Limit Breakers were a highlight at auctions.

And such an item just mercilessly flew out of nowhere. Since its creator was a certain someone, there was no question Cloffe and Clofia would have been blasted away if they'd taken a direct hit.

Cayna looked back at the siblings and quietly ignored the fear in Clofia's eyes. She beamed and proposed the best plan she could come up with.

“Run for your liiiives!!”

““R-riiight!””

They were only able to confirm reaching the other side, but that first attack was apparently the only lethal one. Anyone would be on edge after being shot at like that.

Realizing she fell for the mastermind's scheme hook, line, and sinker, Cayna sighed and suddenly felt very tired.

They descended the stairs at the end of the corridor and reached the twenty-third floor. This was not an anti-magic field. However, there was still the chance of lethal traps, so Cayna said they should check the path ahead.

“In—in that case, I shall act as reconnaissance!”

“Vetoed.”

Wondering where the hothead she knew suddenly went, Cayna frowned and cut Clofia down point-blank.

“Why?!”

“Weren’t you listening? There might be more missiles and mines. It’s too dangerous.”

“But with my skills, those traps—”

“Argue all you want, Clofia, but we don’t have a vote after getting caught this whole time. Let’s do as she says.”

“...But, Brother...”

“I’m telling you to drop it.”

“...Fine.”

Clofia tried to get Cayna to see things her way, but Cloffe’s harsh rebuke put her in line.

“I apologize, Lady Cayna. It feels like we are only weighing you down.”

“Maybe, but it’s not really your fault. Actually, I’d be more worried about sending you two back on your own. Think of this as a learning experience.”

“I’m terribly sorry for the bother...”

“Don’t sweat it. Anyway, I’m gonna go scout ahead, so just wait here a bit.”

“Understood.”

“.....”

At the bottom of the stairwell, Cayna cast Isolation Barrier in a corner of the passageway to create a temporary break room. She headed deeper into the floor and left the siblings on their own. They leaned against a wall and caught their breath after the mad dash upstairs. After she calmed down a bit, Clofia spoke glumly.

“...Wh-what do you think I should do, Brother...?”

“Do you mean about Lady Cayna?”

“...Yes.”

Clofia seemed to wilt as she brooded.

Although Cloffe told her the truth, he never thought it was anything to get so worked up over. From what he could tell, Cayna was an amiable force of nature who shunned power and privilege. Most people too strong for their own good had a tendency to look down on others, but that wasn't the case with her.

Normally when you tell someone you're a foreign spy, they get nervous and avoid you. However, not only did Cayna not care about this revelation, she even befriended him and his brash sister. Cloffe wouldn't hesitate to say she was the strangest person he'd ever met.

Furthermore, he now understood why the queen warned him not to get on her bad side. Cayna did things Cloffe had never heard or seen before, like summoning the aid of a bone-chilling beast at no cost to herself. Nevertheless, considering her "*overdone it*" comment, evaporating those two floors probably wasn't even the most she could do.

Cayna was a powerhouse, and when she (unaware of his motives) allowed the duo to accompany her into the dungeon despite their obvious inferiority, he thought he'd struck gold. However, now he couldn't help but feel guilty that she was protecting burdens like them. Even if it was out of duty, Cloffe wanted to punch his past self for asking to come along in the first place. He couldn't speak for Clofia, but he had multiple regrets.

"We can only bow our heads in apology."

"Wh-what do you have to apologize for, Brother? I'm the only one at fault here!"

"My inexperience has caused a lot of problems for Lady Cayna. That's all."

"Excuse me?" came a voice.

"That's not true, Brother!"

"Hello?"

"Haven't you noticed the difference in strength between us and Lady Cayna? We're just in the way, Clofia."

“Well, yes, I suppose...”

“I said *excuse me!!*”

““Who keeps talking—?!””

The two whipped around in surprise at the sharp voice and were doubly surprised to find a stranger standing there.

“I cannot pass when you are in the middle of the road.”

Cloffe and Clofia had started out along the wall but fell so deep into discussion that they ended up blocking the path. The newcomer was a beautiful elf woman with a mischievous smile. She had lovely gossamer hair that was black as night and indigo eyes. Her long locks tumbled down her back, and she carefully held a paper parcel in her left hand. Her gorgeous proportions were the envy of every woman, and she wore a maid outfit that would make anyone to scratch their head and question if they were really in a dungeon. To be honest, it was a surreal sight.

Even adventurers like Cloffe and Clofia faced deadly enemies at every turn here. It wasn’t any place for a housemaid to check off her shopping list.

The fact the maid was inside their shield made the pair even more uncomfortable. Cayna had erected the barrier to keep out anything malicious. If she entered it with no trouble, she had to be harmless.

“Pardon me. A fine day to you.”

The elven maid with the paper package politely bowed to the flabbergasted pair and disappeared off into the dungeon.

“What’s up, you two? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something...”

After the siblings watched their visitor leave, Cayna returned from the opposite direction. They saw her and collapsed in utter exhaustion.



“Hey now, what’s with that reaction?! I’m a person, you know...”

“...No, I just felt like I was hallucinating...”

“I saw the same thing, Brother... It must have been a daydream!”

“You might be right!”

Cloffe stared off into the distance, muttering and rubbing his brow. Clofia grabbed his arm and was babbling nonsense.

“...What’d I miss?”

Cayna had no idea what was going on other than that the two were clearly confused.

As the trio continued down to the twenty-fourth floor, the siblings caught Cayna up to speed.

“A black-haired elf maid passed by?”

“...Yes, that’s correct.”

The three of them stuck close together as they chatted and moved forward—well, the four of them if you included Kuu. The fairy had planted herself on Cayna’s shoulder, but far from contributing to the conversation, it was anyone’s guess whether she even understood it.

Cloffe walked beside Cayna while Clofia brought up the rear. They were discussing the mysterious stranger from earlier while Clofia said nothing. She merely trailed behind them like a small, frightened animal. Cayna found this way more suspicious than anything else.

At any rate, there was only one black-haired elf maid who came to mind.

“That must have been Siren...”

“Is she an acquaintance of yours, Lady Cayna?”

"Ah, yeah. In a manner of speaking anyway... She's the personal maid of my friend who locked himself up in this dungeon. If you spotted her, that must mean he's here, too."

If that was indeed Siren, she was most likely heading outside on a routine shopping trip. Cayna wanted to yell at Opus, *If you're going to send a maid on a round trip from the thirtieth floor, get off your own sorry butt!* Unfortunately, he loved exploiting others so much that it wouldn't have done much good anyway. Besides, since Opus was the dungeon's creator, Siren almost certainly had some sort of item that allowed her to avoid the monsters and traps.

Opus was as much a veteran player as Cayna, and Siren was his personal maid summons. Seeing as her character design was based on "every man's fantasy," she was naturally a hit among male guild members. Her personality, supposedly the embodiment of the perfect woman, was elegant, gentle, and bursting with maternal instinct. Siren was a maid summons who made you think, *I want her to take care of me!*

"In any case, you can just ignore her."

"Ignore her...? But she's clearly quite unusual."

"I mean, Siren's a maid summons. She's also a tough vanguard who could totally take me on."

"...Understood. We shall leave her be."

Even at half the summoner's level, a level-550 vanguard like Siren would be a challenging opponent. Cayna specialized in rear combat, so a close-range battle leveled the playing field.

Not realizing this, Cloffe mistakenly believed the maid was as powerful as Cayna and decided it was best not to get involved any further.

Cayna pushed Siren out of her mind, then stopped to turn around and look at Clofia. The werecat jolted, and she froze like a convict just handed down a death sentence.

"Hey, c'mon. Say *something*, Little Sister. Isn't this the part where you snap, *How can you let some dangerous friend of yours run free?!*"

"Uh... well..."

Clofia ducked her head to avoid Cayna's eyes and mumbled incoherently. Cloffe stepped between them to interrupt his sister.

"I am terribly sorry, Lady Cayna! This is all due to my indiscretion!"

"Why are you jumping in to apologize, Cloffe? What are you, the secretary of some bribed politician?!"

"No, my brother is innocent! Lady Cayna! If my life will appease you, I gladly offer it! So please, I ask you to spare him!"

"Like I said, I have no clue what you're talking about. What do I look like, some evil overlord who gets a kick out of torturing people?! And wait—why are you being so formal all of a sudden?!"

"No, I beg of you! Please, at least spare my sister! I shall spend the rest of my life in your service!"

"Now you're offering to be my slave? How evil do you think I am?!"

"In that case, please sell me off instead!"

"Stay out of it, Clofia! This is my problem."

"Stop trying to take responsibility for my own misdeeds!"

The conversation had devolved into a sibling quarrel and left Cayna in the dust.

Kuu tilted her head. "Fighting? Why?" she murmured before flying off Cayna's shoulder.

The siblings' blame game erupted into a mutual tongue-lashing. Cayna watched the two with a sigh and snapped her fingers. Fists dropped from the ceiling and slammed down on both their heads.

Cayna hadn't suddenly remembered how to operate this dungeon; she'd used one of her Insta-Spells (or shortcut keys from the Game Era) to manipulate the surroundings and stop the siblings. That same method had ended plenty of fights back in her guild days.

This was Clofia's third bonk on the head since entering the dungeon. Tears filled her eyes, and she crouched down in agony.

"L-Lady Cayna..." Clofia moaned.

"First of all, I get it. You guys are close. Cloffe, tell me what you did that caused all this."

"Y-yes..."

Cayna crossed her arms indignantly and glared at the suffering pair. Cloffe was frozen in fear. Clofia was racked with guilt and on the verge of tears. Cayna stopped glaring at them and just sighed bitterly.

After explaining that he told Clofia about her relation to the royal family, Cayna's expression soured even more.

"I mean, it's true Sahalashade is the daughter of my little sister (*no relation*), which makes her my niece. But it's not like disobeying me means you're disobeying the queen."

Back in the game, Cayna's relationship with this little sister figure was more of a mentor/mentee situation. They weren't actually related, biologically or otherwise. Unsurprisingly, this was pretty much impossible for her to explain.

"Right now, I'm just your average adventurer who's not involved with running any country. That means you're totally free to be sarcastic and insult me like always. Do I look like the type of self-serving jerk who would hold my niece's position over your head?"

"...N-no, you don't."

Clofia was absolutely terrified; Cayna felt sad. The werecat's barbed tongue made her so much easier to talk to.

"If I want something, I save up my own money and earn it. If someone lays a hand on my family, I chase them down, tie them up, and make them regret even thinking about it. If I don't like something you've said, Clofia, I'll push back on the spot. I actually like that attitude of yours, though. Not many people give it to me straight. Oh—don't get me wrong, though, I'm not into that sort of thing in a weird way. If I'm mad, I'll tell you. I may be elf royalty or whatever, but I'd never accuse anyone of treason. Cloffe or

Sahalashade didn't warn you about me doing anything like that, right?"

"Y-yeah."

A bit of life had returned to Clofia's eyes, and she sounded more like herself. Cayna was relieved to see she was starting to relax again.

"So just keep mocking me like always. I'm sure Sahalashade will understand. And I'll get mad if she does try to punish you for it, so no worries."

"A spanking?"

"Yeah, good idea. I'll give her a spanking."

Kuu's suggestion set Sahalashade's punishment in stone.

If a mere adventurer dared to treat the queen in such a way, they would be labeled a traitor to the nation before the first swat. Hopefully this spanking remained purely hypothetical.

"Lady Cayna, I think it would be wise not to speak of such things."

"Hmm. Will the government come to arrest me? I'll wait until no one's around, then."

"I mean, we cannot know for sure if someone is listening, so please do not say it at all!"

"Okay, okay. I gotcha. No need to get so upset, Cloffe."

After pacifying Cloffe as one might a nervous horse, Cayna looked over at Clofia. She seemed to be brooding over something, and Cayna reached out a hand to pat the werecat's head. Clofia stepped back and dodged her at the last second.

"...Darn, I missed."

"Ah, n-n-no. I'm not running away..."

"Is the loudmouth I know really gone?"

"Y-yes... I apologize, Lady Cayna..."

Cayna was shocked by this new, skittish Clofia. It was a real shame. She preferred the snippy Clofia who reminded her of a feral cat.

“Oh well. It looks like... things will never be the same between us. Maybe I should visit Otaloquess once in a while so you can get used to having me around.”

“I suspect the queen will hear of such plans beforehand.”

“Don’t bum me out me like that. I can see it now...”

Predictably, Kee’s comment sent Cayna into a spiral of dejection.

“Please let me know when you do. I shall offer a room for you in our home.”

Cayna couldn’t help smiling at Cloffe’s formal hospitality. If she took him up on his offer, Clofia would probably claim she had “business” to take care of and run off somewhere. It was better to show up unannounced. Cayna would need to make a game plan for her next trip to Otaloquess.

“Kuu too! Kuu will come, too!”

“You couldn’t leave me if you wanted, Kuu.”

“Luka too! Luka will come, too!”

“Lu? Yeah, another group trip sounds like a good idea.”

Cayna promised another outing as Kuu tugged on her hair, and the fairy twirled around her with glee. Although Kuu had joined them on the last trip, she was invisible the entire time. Whether or not people could see you greatly impacted the experience.

The twenty-fifth floor. The annoying idiot was just up ahead.

Cayna decided to make camp in the dungeon since she was traveling with company. This was the fourth day of their journey. Surrounded by artificial light, the trio ate Cayna’s meat-and-vegetable pie. Kuu only nibbled on a tiny ruche fruit. It was almost the size of her head, but one lasted her two or three days. Fairy biology really was an endless enigma.

"Maybe I should just bust through the floor?"

After relishing the pie Cayna made with her Cooking Skills, a bug-eyed Cloffe and Clofia stared at her as she mumbled absurdities to herself. As far as they were concerned, "*bust through the floor*" meant the return of the giant fire beast from earlier.

"U-um... L-Lady Cayna? Will you perchance use *that* again?"

"Sheesh. Lighten up already."

Clofia's meekness was disheartening. Now that Cayna's connection to the queen was out in the open, it didn't seem like she'd be dialing back her modesty any time soon. Cloffe had offhandedly explained that his sister's admiration for the queen "*bordered on worship*," but this only made Cayna want to knock him out. She told herself she was just looking for a punching bag and composed herself.

"Time heals all wounds. She will come around before long," Kee admonished.

Nevertheless, the insults Clofia had hurled at Cayna hours prior felt like ages ago. At this rate, the only people who didn't give her special treatment were Elineh, Arbiter, Shining Saber, Cohral, Quolkeh, and Exis.

As Cayna continued dealing with her headache of a situation, a sign popped up on the path behind her: DIRECT ROUTE TO TWENTY-EIGHTH FLOOR.

Alarm bells went off in Cayna's head as she approached it, and she couldn't tell if the path itself was a trap or if touching the sign triggered something. No one knew what dangers awaited them at the end, either.

If they assumed something *was* there, Cayna was obviously the best choice to scout ahead. However, she grew conflicted at the thought of her companions soon becoming a delicious monster meal if she left them alone. In the end, Cayna decided her best option was to summon a beast that could set off every trap for them.

Even so, she had to choose wisely since the creature might revert to its wild nature if it strayed too far on its own. In that case, the summoner would lose control. She didn't need to call a high-level monster only to end up fighting a sudden boss battle.

After mentally reviewing several candidates, Cayna consulted with Kee and chose a

suitably self-possessed summons.

Summoning Magic: Load: Skidjack

A squid slithered out of the azure magic circle and stood upright on ten tentacles. Reaching five meters high, its enormous body crammed against the ceiling and bent the fin on top of its head. The creature's sparkling body was like transparent blue quartz. If it hadn't been a living creature, one might have mistaken it for an intricate work of art. This summons excelled in special operations and had a diverse set of skills not limited to water.

Cayna spared her companions a backward glance as they stared at it in wonder. Then she issued instructions to the squid.

"Set off the traps ahead and reach the floor below. If you find anything waiting to ambush us, eliminate it and—"

"Allow me to atone for my insolence!"

"..... Huh?"

Cutting Cayna off, Clofia suddenly shot her hand up and dashed toward the signpost. It happened too fast for Cloffe to react. Even Cayna, whose eyes were on the summoned beast, wasn't fast enough.

Clofia tapped the sign. A *clink* sounded, and the road around the sign was cut into a circular slice. It slid away like a piece of Baumkuchen. A new, sign-less road protruded from the opposite wall and filled the gap. It was like a revolver loading more bullets.

"What?!"

"Clofia!"

Even as the two tried to reach her, Clofia disappeared into the wall.

On the other side, Clofia, who had just been whisked away, road and all, gaped at the new corridor she found herself in. There was a downward slope behind her and a steel ball in front of her. It was the size of three people in diameter and had a spotlight on three sides. The road she just slid in on had broken apart and embedded into the wall. The sign kept the orb from rolling down, but only by a thread.

She realized the future waiting for her would not be a pleasant one and broke into a cold sweat. Yes, this was her punishment. Her comeuppance for raising her sword against an exalted, noble bloodline.

Regardless, she couldn't die here. Clofia tried telling herself this was because such punishment wouldn't atone for her deeds, but in truth, she was just plain terrified.

Clofia took one step back, then two, and watched the sign, her last line of defense, cruelly flop forward. She let out a squeak, but her pride would never allow her to curl into a trembling ball of fear and wait for death.

The dense, massive people-squasher obeyed the laws of gravity and began to rumble forward. Clofia stared at it and realized there was only one option.

Abandon all dignity and let instinct take over. She could take it or leave it.

“EGAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH?!?!”

Clofia tried to steel herself, but she let out a bizarre scream as her fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. Clofia didn't even notice as she raced down the steep hill. Anyone who saw would swear she shattered records.

Turning their heads diagonally to the lower left, the pair on the other side of the wall followed the Doppler effect of Clofia's screams, followed by the sound of something large rolling by. This, too, faded as if in hot pursuit.

“...I know you've got a lot on your plate right now, but try to assess the situation!”

“Now is not the time for that, Lady Cayna! Clofia is...! My sister is...!”

Half-crazed with worry, Cloffe started pulling at his hair, and he struck the wall with his sword. Sparks flew as a metallic sound rang out, but naturally it was almost impossible for mere mortals to destroy dungeon walls.

Although Clofia chose to charge ahead, Cayna's principles wouldn't allow her to abandon the werecat. She instructed the squid waiting nearby.

“Dig straight down with all you've got! Go save that girl!”

“*Shulululuuu!*” the squid answered, but it sounded more like a breath.

Its ten tentacles skillfully coiled, uncoiled, and coiled again. Glittering crystal blue shifted to green, and their natural properties transformed. A moment later, any part of the squid in contact with the ground released a cloud of smoke and an irritating odor that burned the eyes. The summoned squid began to slowly sink into the ground. Its body was producing a concentrated sulfuric acid that melted the floor.

In no time at all, the squid had created a hole two meters in diameter and dropped to the floor below. Cayna and Cloffe glanced down it and watched the squid start eating through the twenty-sixth floor. Cayna grabbed Cloffe by the scruff of the neck before he could jump in.

“Why are you stopping me, Lady Cayna?!”

“Wait until the squid is done. If you touch that, you’ll be a sticky mess, too!”

“Whaaat?!”

Still, Cayna was tempted to do the exact same thing. Based on what she’d seen on the twenty-fifth floor, the squid could melt two floors in no time at all.

Cayna protected Kuu, who was now huddled in her clothes with her eyes closed, and impatiently waited for the creature to finish its work below.

The twenty-eighth floor.

Midway through Clofia’s downhill run, the path transformed into a pool waterslide before sending her on a vertical trip through a spiral tube. The steel ball of death halted as she entered the tube and it began to return to its original position. She was surprised to see such sportsmanlike behavior from the very thing that tried to crush her and wondered why it even bothered in the first place. She couldn’t say whether steel balls had any integrity, though.

After slipping and sliding, Clofia was thrown into the twenty-eighth floor from midair and landed in water several meters below.

“Gwagh?!”

It was only a few centimeters deep, which made for an uncomfortable landing.

Although in considerable pain, Clofia sat up and glanced around. Rather than an inorganic, manmade dungeon, she found herself in a limestone cave. The ceiling was several times higher than earlier floors, and a mass of stalactites hung above her like icicles. The milky white structures gleamed and acted as a third light source by amplifying the surrounding illumination. The area was bright as day thanks to the phosphorescence in the air and faint gleam coming off the water's surface.

In truth, this area was also manmade. However, it had been eroded by two centuries of water droplets falling through the narrow cracks.

The dome-shaped space glowed from top to bottom, and Clofia couldn't help but admire the fantastical scene. She also remembered that her life had been miraculously spared.

However, just as she sighed with relief, the surface of the water around her stirred. Several odd, dense shapes rose from the shallow pool without warning.

"...Huh? What?"

Regardless of what might be hiding below, the water couldn't conceal anything more than a horseshoe crab. Even so, Clofia was bewildered when she saw several distinctly human shapes rise from the shallows. By the time she urged her sore body to get up, they had already surrounded her. These creatures of the lake were deep green, scaly, bipedal lizards commonly known as lizardmen.

A spawn plank had been installed on the bottom of the pool and was set to activate as soon as anyone entered. No enemies existed prior to her arrival, and even the glittering water was a deception meant to hide the plank.

There were over thirty lizardmen, each over two meters tall and wielding either a spear or sword. Very few could handle such numbers on their own. They raised their heads as one and stared at Clofia through slit eyes. Now the hunted, she cried, "Eek!"

She was out of the frying pan and into the fire. The lizardmen flicked their red, reptilian tongues and waded through the water to close in on the poor werecat who fell into their den.

Frantic, Clofia tried to run but was surrounded on all sides. Her enemy had the upper hand and blocked all escape. After only a few steps, she was boxed in and swiftly caught. They dangled her by both arms and got up close. The monsters played with

her face as if tempted to find out what she tasted like, and the smell of their rotten fish breath made her gag.

"Shaah."

"Sheh-sheh-sheh."

Several lizardmen discussed what to do with their catch while pointing their weapons at Clofia's throat and stomach. Wondering if this was her punishment for all the terrible things she said to Lady Cayna, Clofia resigned herself.

Just then, a long blue piece of augite dropped through the ceiling.

The skidjack had finally dissolved three entire floors. It landed next to the lizardmen holding Clofia, coiled its tentacles around them, and immediately snapped their necks. The squid then returned to its usual form and used one tentacle to save Clofia as she fell from the arms of the lifeless monsters. Thanks to this, she was spared another sore bottom.

One of the lizardmen called out a command of "*Sheh!*" and their swords and spears all simultaneously bounced off the skidjack's skin. When the squid leaned forward and shook its head, several unfortunate lizardmen fell into the water after being vertically sliced by its bladelike fin. Others who tried to approach were caught up in its tentacles and bent in half at the stomach. The monsters had assumed it was an average squid and paid the price. Realizing they were outmatched, the lizardmen went on the defense and put distance between themselves and the skidjack.

However, their next opponents were the fireballs and light spears that rained down from overhead. Once the acidic solution finally weakened, Cayna jumped down to unleash her magic. Cloffe followed behind her but wouldn't land for a while longer since he was using Float. The second Clofia came into view, his panicked expression revealed just how worried he'd been.

The frantic lizardmen tried to flee, but a hail of fireballs prevented them from moving forward or back. Lumped into one large mass, the confused monsters burned up as one.

When Cloffe at last floated down through the hole in the ceiling and landed on solid ground, he retrieved his sister from the squid and carried her like a princess. The recent chaos had put her in a state of shock.

"Argh, geez! Enough already! There's *more* enemies?!"

Cayna single-handedly tossed a clump of ten fireballs around her and used the other to shoot about a dozen light spears in a single swing-like machine-gun fire. A series of explosions followed and took down the multitude of lizardmen surrounding them. Bored with the current one-sided battle, the skidjack focused on protecting Cloffe and Clofia.

However, their location guaranteed there were waterspouts galore, and everyone was soaked by the time all was said and done. The lizardmen were pretty much eliminated, and Cayna checked for any sign of movement. Even if they cleared out the floor, more monsters would spawn before long. It was best to get a move on. Cayna instructed the skidjack to find the stairs to the twenty-ninth floor and sent it away.

Once they were out of the water, Cayna used Dry on everyone. She had obtained this skill while taking on a request from "a fishing village that, although famed for its dried fish, could no longer produce the specialty due to long rains." This odd quest had you "search for the spell and dry out the fish." It was a pointless Throwaway Skill that served no purpose in the game at any point afterward.

However, now that she was Cayna, it was one of her most essential spells for a variety of reasons. As demonstrated at that very moment, it could dry clothes while you were still wearing them. It could also dry laundry inside on a rainy day and create dried fruits.

"You never know when something might come in handy, huh?" she murmured with an amused smile.

"*Indeed,*" Kee replied with equal surprise.

At any rate, Cayna's current priority was lecturing Clofia about her reckless suicide mission. She wanted to give the werecat girl a piece of her mind (several for that matter), but Cloffe beat her to the punch.

He swung his fist onto Clofia's head, adding to the other bumps she'd earned thus far. Clofia sat on her heels as her brother's scolding commenced.

"Do you have *any* idea what the hell you just did?! Even if you were nasty before, who said you had to atone by yourself?! Lady Cayna forgave you and said you have nothing to feel bad about, so arbitrarily deciding to redeem yourself was completely pointless!"

“Why are you always, always like this?! Don’t you know I was worried sick?!”

It was more like venting than scolding. This was apparently also Clofia’s first time seeing her ever-composed brother express himself so openly, and her eyes were wide with shock.

“Don’t... scare me like that...”

“B-Brother...”

His face finally crumpled, and rare tears fell as he embraced Clofia. Whether it was because his feelings moved her or because she was experiencing a post-adrenaline crash, Clofia sobbed as well.

Cayna had been worried, too, and was glad to see her safe and sound.

“Still, I feel like I’m destroying this dungeon more than anything else...”

“You did pierce through two floors and then three more.”

Both the nineteenth and twenty-fifth floors had not-so-small holes in them. As someone who left destruction in her wake, she had no right to loftily ask, *Hey, Opus, you gonna keep this dungeon going or what?* Even without fancy gadgets, Cayna was more than worthy of her title as the Silver Ring Witch.

Cayna was almost positive she’d get an earful from Opus when he discovered the mess she made, but she decided to focus on the bottom floor just within her reach. As the group climbed down to the twenty-ninth floor, they entered some kind of auditorium. The entrance to another passageway was directly across from the stairs.

Something was likely waiting up ahead. Moreover, whatever happened from that point forward was unrelated to the siblings.

“You two,” Cayna called to the pair.

Cloffe and Clofia were still hugging each other and looked over at her. Suddenly self-aware, they flushed and quickly separated. Cayna chuckled and gave a smile before continuing.

“I’ve got a personal matter to take care of up ahead, so you can rest here.”

“Are you saying we need not accompany you?”

“Yeah. I’m just gonna go drag this one moron out of his hole, then we can all go home.”

“...Understood. We will be waiting for you, Lady Cayna.”

Cloffie paused for a moment, then nodded. Clofia opened her mouth to speak, but no words came.

A set of stairs wasn’t far down the second corridor. The walls glowed faintly as Cayna descended the long, long flight, and she arrived at a lavish, double-sided door. It felt like a final boss room.

The elf maid standing in front of it, however, told otherwise. She looked at Cayna, placed her hands in her lap, and bowed elegantly.

“It has been some time, Lady Cayna.”

“I thought I might see you. You’re looking good, Siren.”

After exchanging basic greetings, Cayna asked the first question that came to mind.

“Is your master up ahead?”

“Yes, he is. However, you must first undertake an event.”

“Opus wants me to beat a midboss before the final battle, huh? He can never resist the urge to make my life harder...”

“Indeed. According to my master, this is a rite of passage. I do apologize for the imposition.”

“Rite of passage, huh? Guess there’s no skipping that,” Cayna muttered irritably before facing the door again. On her shoulder, Kuu gave her a look that asked what they should do. Cayna responded with an inspiring double fist pump.

They didn’t have much choice. Even Siren had a concerned look on her face as she bowed once more. The door behind her simultaneously opened without a sound. You would normally hear some kind of creaking for stylistic effect, but Opus evidently wasn’t concerned about that.

Waiting on the other side of the door was an elliptical battle arena approximately the size of an indoor sports stadium. Fist-sized lights floated here and there, and as Cayna ventured farther inside, several shadows spread out at her feet.

When this floor was first created, there was a goddess-like statue enshrined at the very center. Cayna remembered always fighting with Opus over whether they should use it as a golem, but it was now nowhere to be seen. Even from the entrance, she could see a dark humanoid figure at the edge of the stadium.

“By the way, if my two companions follow me here...”

“Yes, I will explain the situation and keep them away. You needn’t worry.”

“Really? Thanks, much appreciated.”

With Siren in charge of Cloffe and Clofia, Cayna felt like she could focus. Knowing those two wouldn’t get caught up in her battle was the best part about this place.

Cayna turned to give a light wave behind her, then headed for the figure deeper within. The entrance closed soundlessly, but she didn’t notice.

She had already used Search when she first spotted the figure and confirmed her opponent to be a demon slightly over level 800. Despite the 300-level difference, a rearguard specialist like Cayna couldn’t take a vanguard enemy lightly. She could strike first from afar with magic, but considering this foe was Opus’s personal pick, she was more than a bit suspicious. She didn’t have to go along with his schemes, but you could never be too careful.

Cayna activated Battle Pack I and took out two Rune Blades from her Item Box. As she approached slowly to find just the right moment, the enemy came into focus.

“Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha! *You* are my foe? My name is Drekdovai. I bear no grudge against you, but my master’s word is absolute. Unfortunately, I must end you.”

“...An Underworld demon!”

He was a black dragoid three heads taller than the maximum player height. As further proof this was no average dragoid, he had six arms and countless red protrusions on

his back. Good thing he didn't have wings. Something that huge would only get tossed around the sky.

Drekдовai the demon dragoid held a halberd in each of his two uppermost hands and scimitars in his two bottom ones. The middle ones were empty, but it was unclear whether he would try to grab her during the fight or if he kept them free to give himself an advantage.

Her foe being what it was, the dragoid's vitality and strength stats were much higher than most of its race. Drekдовai's power and resilience were the direct opposite of Cayna's.

"You sure are a nasty piece of work."

"Mage or not, I shall give no quarter."

Seeing as he warned her in advance, the dragoid appeared to be a true warrior. Drekдовai flashed a set of red fangs and charged toward her without a moment's hesitation. His agility despite his massive frame astonished Cayna, and she poured magic into her Rune Blades. She just barely dodged the halberds that came down from above while simultaneously using a Rune Blade to ward off the scimitar on her left. Her strength only failed her when she tried to block a scimitar attack from the right. It lightly grazed her left shoulder.

The stinging pain surprised Cayna. Kee's protective wall didn't seem to be working. She tried to ask him about it, but there was no answer.

This was Opus's work. He knew all of Cayna's abilities and had taken measures against each one. She was at a disadvantage in close combat, as usual, and always came prepared. This wasn't half as bad as the time she got attacked by a horde of one hundred players, even if they *were* low level.

"Wasn't expecting that."

"Heh-heh. If you wish to surrender, now is your... Oh?"

Cayna backstepped as if she felt no pain at all and put distance between them. Drekдовai looked back slowly and nodded in satisfaction at the sight of her injured shoulder, but his expression soon grew bored when he watched a white light envelop the wound and completely heal it.

"Regede, I take it? In that case, I shall vanquish you with a cut powerful enough to surpass it."

"Could you maybe not?"

Drekдовай once again came at her full force. Cayna tried to dodge but switched from evasion to defense when she saw the bottom arm scimitars draw an arc toward her like an embrace. The only escape was backward.

When there was enough distance between them, the dragoid used centrifugal force to swing down the halberds from his upper arms.

Magic Skill: Load: Split Iyah Bomb

Cayna avoided the scimitars' pointed embrace by sending herself flying like a lightweight car directly hit by an army tank. Drekдовай, the aforementioned tank headed straight for her, veered to the right when his chest exploded. After all, Cayna had managed to fend off his halberds and left scimitar and take care of the right scimitar with explosive magic.

Cayna flew parallel over the ground for several meters, then adeptly twisted her body around to stab her Rune Blades into the ground, come to a quick stop, and lightly land. Drekдовай stumbled a step or two but showed no obvious signs of damage. She stared down her opponent and continued to cast spells.

Magic Skill: Load: Boa Lu Ludo

"Gwagh?!"

Several lightning bolts surged from Cayna and sped toward Drekдовай from every direction. His weapons deflected half, and only two had any effect. But the damage was minimal, and his enormous body didn't even sway.

"That freaking idiot. He sent me an enemy that's basically immune to magic..."

"Gwa-ha-ha. I am a mage killer."

Cayna heaved a tired sigh and put one Rune Blade back in her Item Box. Then she took her magic staff out of her earring and extended it. After adjusting it to a length she could wield one-handed, Cayna faced Drekдовай and dared to rush in on him.

The dragoid never expected a mage to charge at him like that, and his eyes widened in shock. His scimitars came down on her magical transforming staff but halted upon impact. Drekdovai had been certain he could shatter the staff to pieces, but one needed the almighty power of the Admins to lay so much as a scratch on an EX rank weapon like Cayna's.

The tip of the magic staff landed a damning blow on Drekdovai's face, and he staggered. Cayna then hit his defenseless stomach with Magic Skill: Load: Zan Laga. The lightning around her transformed into spears and fired off in quick succession. The distance between them grew with each blow as the dragoid slid backward.

“GWAAAAAAAAGH!”

However, he suddenly stopped as if rooted to the stone floor, and he screamed as red light poured from his back, eyes, and mouth. The light spears sticking out of him disappeared, and wild crimson eyes stared at her.

“Gah, Berserk?! That's definitely not good...”

The Berserk skill was the embodiment of physical prowess and no joke when it came to warrior-type demons. Strength and vitality stats more than doubled while intelligence and agility tanked. It was a player's last resort in a tough battle of brawn.

Unfortunately, it also made you extremely susceptible to magic, and you were stuck in fight mode until the effect wore off. Still, since your physical strength more than doubled, it was an effective method during a final boss battle with victory just in sight.

In this demon dragoid's case, his body swelled up even more, and he gained extra muscle. In addition, the blades on his weapons extended and seemed to have increased range and attack power. They apparently came with the demon as a set.

“Ugh, this is why I can't stand demons!”

Regardless of her complaints, it wasn't like the enemy was about to go easy on her. The armed demon once again readied himself, and she carefully looked for signs he was about to make his move. Although she steeled herself, the stats weren't in her favor.

“GRAAAAAAAGH!”

“?!”

The demon howled and came at her with such speed that she hardly had time to react. Almost beyond the speed of sound, her Rune Blade audibly sliced the air and saved her from a halberd by the narrowest of margins.

Although she managed to dodge, even the wind pressure of the attack scraped Cayna's skin. She used an Insta-Spell to cast more magic.

Like earlier, she put distance between her and Drekdovai by simultaneously setting off a massive string of ten or so Iyah Bombs.

...At least, that had been the plan, anyway.

The dragoid appeared from the flames unscathed and readied his halberds and scimitars to mow her down.

“GRAAAAAAAAGH!!”

“Gwagh?!”

She had jumped back while the bombs were going off to avoid fatal injuries. However, his immense strength overpowered her, and slices ripped through her chest, stomach, and hip. Cayna was tossed like a broken doll, and she rolled across the ground. A spray of blood followed in her wake and soaked the ground beneath her.

Drekdovai's eyes narrowed at her injured form, and he gave a deep laugh. Language was normally beyond one's control in Berserk mode, but Cayna didn't know what other skills the demon possessed. It was better to assume this was one of them.

“Painful, isn't it? You're in agony, right? Might as well die here.”

“.....”

Drekdovai spoke to Cayna as she lay motionless on the ground, but the thick magic that poured from her crumpled body directly afterward put a questioning look on his face.

“..... Painful? Agony? *Over something like this?*”

A faint white light enveloped Cayna, and her condition instantly took a turn for the better. Expressionless, she stood slowly yet gave no indication of pain. In fact, her

wounds soon healed as if time were being rewound.

Cayna's gaze was no longer calm; her eyes glinted with a cold, ruthless light. In that moment, she recalled the tragic scene after the plane crash. The night when she fell into such intense grief that pain and suffering lost all meaning.

"Opus really knows how to piss people off..."

Active Skill: Mega Stat Boost

"Hmm?"

A blue phosphorescence enveloped Cayna's body and morphed into a set of azure plate armor. A last-resort move, this temporarily multiplied the user's stats several times over but halved them for twenty-four hours afterward.

"GRAAAAAAAGH!!"

Drekдовai seemed to sense that something wasn't right; he lifted his halberds overhead and jumped, aiming to slice Cayna's head in two. His attack bet everything on speed and gravity.

However, Cayna's magic staff had an undulating blade along its surface, and the halberds came to a halt in front of her. She pushed against the Berserk weapons and stood her ground. In fact, a single glance at Cayna put Drekдовai on the retreat; something about the look in her eyes gave him a bad feeling.

Cayna tossed the Rune Blade in her right hand behind her and gathered up more blue phosphorescence as she twirled her staff.

Weapon Skill: Full Swing

Craaaaaaaack!

"Hwagh?!"

Just as Drekдовai took one step toward freedom, Cayna's glowing blue staff struck him at hyper speed and launched him in the direction of his escape with a satisfying sound evocative of certain sporting equipment. Flying into a tailspin, the dragoid slammed into the wall and even sank into it by several centimeters.

However, since these injuries weren't the least bit lethal to Drekdovai, Cayna smirked and yanked his body out of the wall before casting another spell.

Special Skill: Load: Triple Spell: Begin Count

The number *30* appeared within wire-framed spheres over each of Cayna's shoulders and began counting down the seconds.

Drekdovai chuckled to himself; he figured he would only have to endure this spell for thirty seconds. Just as he readied his defenses, the dragoid felt an immense amount of magic directly behind him, enough to rival Cayna's. He turned around in surprise and was greeted by a fairy the size of a grain of rice who cast her own red magic circle that was about ten meters in diameter.

"Kuu is mad, too!"

"Who the hell are you?!"

Clueless on how to respond, Drekdovai began raising his halberds overhead but was swallowed up by the glow of crimson arrows that burst from the circle without warning. Caught in its direct line of fire, the projectiles impaled him and easily sent his hulking frame flying. Drekdovai soon struck the ceiling.

"G-GYAAAAAGH?!"

Even with him plastered to the ceiling, the tide of arrows didn't stop. They penetrated his hard skin and skewered the dragoid. Drekdovai screamed in anguish as several hundred needles pinpointed and attacked every nerve.

The arrows abated not long afterward but left him severely injured. When he glanced over at the last place he saw the fairy, she was still there with her magic circle. He thought he might catch a break, but the attack had only just begun. Drekdovai expected to merely fall from the ceiling, but his eyes went wide when he felt something tug him.

Although Cayna had been momentarily dumbfounded by Kuu's insane attack, she turned her attention to the giant falling body and cast successive rounds of Weapon Skill: Pull. Defying the laws of gravity, the dragoid was thrown sideways at top speed as Weapon Skill: Full Swing sent him flying once more. Moreover, this time her weapon of choice was not the magic staff but a fiery, spiked iron rod. It made contact for a mere instant but felt like a hot branding iron.

To make things even worse, he was bleeding from head to toe. Covered in painful burns, Drekdovai was launched into the air. Just as he was about to smack into an obstacle, yet another Pull spell forcefully altered his path and dragged him back down to Cayna. Struck by a third Full Swing, he slammed into the roof with a thunderous roar.

“Guh...”

Drekdovai was repeatedly dropped, pulled, and thrown into the ceiling and walls with a violent Full Swing. Kuu would occasionally fly in as backup to barrage him with arrows and douse him in salt water.

Cayna could think of someone else who would do something as reprehensible as pouring literal salt on a wound. Kuu was adorable on the outside but merciless inside.

Once Triple Spell was finished, Drekdovai looked like a torn-up dishrag. Even so, his Berserk was still in effect, and he kept a sharp eye out for any possible opening. His halberds and scimitars were broken after the countless beatings, so he was now weaponless. However, he estimated he could still take on one girl and a fairy.

Cayna quickly obliterated that pride with her next skill.

Special Skill: Star Guide I

This was one of several skills that demonstrated her might as a Skill Master. It allowed skills like Triple Spell, which were normally limited to once per day, to be used more often. Of course, a Star Guide I meant there was a Star Guide II. When such abilities made an appearance, advantages like numerical logic and stat difference were pointless. Their effects were so powerful that taking on its caster was the height of foolishness. Cayna had done her best to keep it tucked away during the Game Era, but now that Drekdovai had unearthed past trauma and incited her wrath, *restraint* was no longer in her lexicon.

Drekdovai was dumbfounded; Cayna’s fiendish grin could send shivers down even a demon’s spine. Another wire-frame sphere surrounded her, and she stretched her arm out toward the dragoid for the umpteenth time.

His final moments involved a disastrous pummeling and a hail of arrows.

"Excellent work, Lady Cayna. Are you injured?"

"Haaah, haaah..."

Cayna's breath was ragged from adrenaline when Siren gently approached her from behind with a towel. Cloffe and Clofia followed the maid but were still a good distance away. They had apparently walked in during the fight and were terribly worried.

The wounds Cayna sustained during the battle were already healed thanks to Regede, but her cloak and equipment were coated in blood. Kuu sat on her shoulder with an invigorating smile and hummed pleasantly to herself.

Cayna took deep breaths to calm down. Unable to contain her Opus-fueled rage, she looked back at them with a terrifying smile. The pair behind Siren cried "Eek!" and stiffened. Cayna did her best not to look at them and focused on Siren instead. *You do know what will happen if I don't meet Opus soon, right?* her vicious gaze told the maid.

Predictably, Siren broke out in a sweat and took a step back. She quickly pointed to the open door on the other side of the arena.

"Please proceed that way," she instructed with a bow.

"I assume there aren't any more bosses waiting for me?"

Since Mega Stat Boost was still active, Cayna's Intimidate would make the average person foam at the mouth. However, Siren's pride kept her from fainting.

"I would never lie," she answered with a bright smile. At least, she thought it was a smile, but anyone else could see her face was twitching.

Still indignant, Cayna stomped toward the door, traversed the gentle curved stairway, and arrived in a room that seemed to be directly beneath the arena.

Before delving into the dungeon, she thought about what she would say when they finally reunited. Unfortunately, rage had stripped her of all reason, and one punch just wouldn't cut it anymore. Stewing with silent fury and a dead look in her eye, Cayna kicked the door open with vengeance. Mega Stat Boost was still active, so the door sailed through the air and shattered into a million pieces. The physical manifestation of her power made her more terrifying than usual, but fortunately none were there to witness it.

Well, except one victim who was about to experience her wrath firsthand...

“...Hrm?”

There he was. The old demon friend she’d been searching for.

As always, he was dressed in his favorite color—pitch black from head to toe.

“Mm?... Oh, *crunch, crunch* if it isn’t *munch, munch* Cayna. Long time no see, *chomp, chomp*. Life been *gulp* treating you well?”

“..... O..... pu..... sssss.”

Cayna was already at her boiling point, and his attitude didn’t help.

She gritted her teeth, her voice dripping with hellish resentment. Opus cocked his head, mistaking her as overcome with emotion from their reunion.

“You’re pretty beat up now that I take a good look at you. Something happen?”

He sounded concerned, but his posture was another story. Currently sprawled across his bed, Opus had a thin cracker in his mouth and was getting crumbs all over the sheets. The paper bag by his pillow had to be the one Siren was carrying from her shopping trip when Cloffe and Clofia ran into her on the twenty-third floor.

At any rate, he probably should have taken their reunion a little more seriously.

Cayna, meanwhile, was out of what little patience she had left.

“I’m gonna hack you to pieces.”

“Buh?”

Magic Skill: Load: Ancient God’s Blade

“Just hold on... Wha—?!”

Phosphorescent particles gathered in the air around Cayna, and a shining staff materialized in front of her. When she gripped the weapon with both hands, an enormous crystal formed at the top. Although the light staff was called a “blade,” it had

no edge to speak of. Be that as it may, its true power would be obvious soon enough.

The polyhedron crystal floating above the tip of the staff slowly constructed a giant, broad blade a short distance away. The weapon glowed white and pierced through the ceiling until only the hilt of the straight sword was visible. The blade alone was three meters thick.

The light staff was approximately one meter high, and the crystal above it was about the size of a person's head. The three-meter-wide blade pierced the ceiling of the room and came up through the bottom of the twenty-ninth floor. Siren, Cloffe, and Clofia, who were waiting in the arena above, watched the tip of the monstrous light sword slice through the floor, and they paled further. If Siren hadn't grabbed the werecats' hands and shouted, "It's dangerous! Run!" they would have likely been torn up with the floor.



Cayna slowly brandished the weapon and approached Opus with a fiendish expression.

Her eyes empty, Cayna aimed the Ancient God's Blade, whose tip was still sticking up out of the room, at Opus's brow and gave a powerful swing downward. The target's face twitched as he fell off his bed.

The Ancient God's Blade sliced the ceiling, walls, bed, and floor with ease. The thirtieth floor was the sturdiest part of the dungeon, yet it cut the walls like a knife through tofu.

"Hey, wait, what do you think you're doing?!"

"Shut up! After all the trouble and anguish and suffering and hardships you put people through, I came all this way, but *YOUUUU...*"

Following up on the momentum of the first attack, Cayna swung her giant sword sideways to take a slice out of Opus. The demon fell to his stomach, and the attack grazed past his horns as the room was cut diagonally in half. He moved to stop her rampage but heard something fire off directly next to him and jumped back.

The sound came from a log-sized crimson arrow that dropped in beside him and lodged into the floor. Realizing what this meant, Opus retraced the arrow's path. He saw a fairy and magic circle hovering in midair.

"Geh?!"

"Kuu will help, too."

Apparently Cayna wasn't the only hostile party here.

It wasn't clear if Kuu's "help" involved murder or something else entirely, but regardless, Opus now had to deal with deadly arrows on top of Cayna's attempts to turn him into mincemeat.

"Wait! Hold on! Let me explain!"

"Let you *explaaaaain?*"

Two flaming red eyes glowed from within Cayna's shadowy figure. She was the spitting image of a predator who made no distinction between right and wrong.

"I helped you both out in the open and in secret to make your life easier!" Opus yelled.

With his back against the wall, he was really in no position to be making excuses. Plus, his all-black getup made him look like a giant cockroach.

"You should've just stayed out in the open. I didn't have to suffer alone!"

"Ngh..."

Her words left him speechless. Indeed, he could have been there for her without sticking to the shadows.

"That's why I sent you the fairy—to help you out..."

"I thought you just forgot about her. How was I supposed to know she'd need a name?!"

"...Nghh."

Each of Opus's excuses magnified Cayna's rage. In this maniacal state, she wouldn't be able to think or listen until she calmed down. He was only adding fuel to the fire.

"And about that noble who stalked you..."

"*Opus.*"

"Y-yeah...?"

"You can explain later. First, I'm gonna *punch you in the face.*"

"Punch!"

Neither the fairy's arrows nor Cayna's sword were conducive to punching. Given the crazed look on her face, Opus realized conversation would get him nowhere.

There was no more point in arguing. The giant blade came ruthlessly crashing down. The attack, liable to split the room and Opus himself in half, hacked through the walls and ceiling and tore the arena to pieces.

Opus ran for his life, and the three-meter-long sword and log-sized arrows chased after him every which way. It never crossed Cayna's or Kuu's minds that their

onslaught might inflict more damage or bury everyone alive.

In less than five minutes, the twenty-ninth and thirtieth floors were rendered a pile of rubble.

BONUS SHORT STORY
Quolkeh's Suffering



“Welcome!”

Cayna beamed and greeted her friends visiting from afar with open arms. They returned her warm hospitality with hesitant smiles.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“Why would I be grumpy about seeing friends from out of town?” she pouted, puffing her cheeks in annoyance.

“Can’t argue with that,” he said with a hearty laugh.

“...Anyway,” the dragoid warrior began. He glanced from right to left at the tranquil scene behind Cayna. “Not much goin’ on here, huh?”

“Don’t tell me you got your hopes up over a village in the middle of nowhere,” Cayna mumbled. She glared at Exis.

A quiet forest village with no local specialties to speak of—that was most people’s initial impression of the place.

Lux Contracting sat right by the entrance. Their door was literally always open, and in addition to providing daily necessities, one sign advertised something a bit more peculiar.

“...This is a Sakaiya braaaaanch?!” Exis shouted, his eyes as wide as dinner plates.

Next to him, Quolkeh was similarly dumbfounded. The sign shocked most first-time visitors, so the employees were used to this reaction. Sunya, who was currently running the shop from behind the counter, ignored Exis’s yelling and focused on mending the clothes in her arms.

Cayna smiled awkwardly while Quolkeh pointed at the sign incredulously and blubbed like a fish.

“Everyone has the same reaction. Both the villagers and the shopkeepers are used to

it by now."

"Why does Sakaiya have a branch out here?!"

"You should ask Caerick. It came out of nowhere for me, too."

"Sheesh..."

Cayna walked ahead, and Quolkeh and Exis reluctantly followed. Their destination was Marelle's inn.

As one might expect, even the guest room in Cayna's home couldn't fit a dragoid. Thus, her best bet was to find the pair sizable lodgings.

Cayna skipped along with her friends in tow and greeted the passing villagers. Some asked if her companions were visitors.

"They're my adventurer friends," she'd stop and say each time.

Not a single person questioned this.

"I see, I see. We don't have much here, but please enjoy your stay."

Quolkeh and Exis both answered these well-wishes with fervent nods.

"The people here have really taken a shining to you, huh?" Exis commented.

"You think?"

"When we tell people we're adventurers, they usually get nervous and treat us like thugs and outcasts..." Quolkeh said softly.

Cayna pondered this. The villagers had been nothing but kind to her since the very beginning, so she never felt unwelcome. She looked at Exis for confirmation.

"It's pretty typical," he said with a nod.

"I don't think everyone's like that."

"Society just hasn't worn you down yet! Don't go thinkin' everyone's a saint."

The two stared at her, exasperated.

Their stern warning undoubtedly stemmed from their own harsh experiences. After all, most players had been living in modern Leadale far longer than her. Granted, Cayna herself already had to deal with pompous knights and pretentious noble sons, so she wasn't entirely oblivious. Kee was likely keeping better track of this than Cayna, though.

Kuu suddenly popped out and sat on Cayna's shoulder. She was crossing her arms and nodding vigorously.

Even the fairy agrees? How should I take that? Cayna wondered listlessly.

"Anyway," she said, "I was surprised to get a Friend Message from you."

"Yeah, we've got work in the area," Exis explained.

"Work?"

Cayna looked over her shoulder, and he nodded. Quolkeh elaborated.

"They're building a fortress along the eastern border, so we agreed to serve as guards. Some people can only work certain shifts."

"Ah, that must be the conference Skargo said he was going to..."

"Hmm?"

The moment Skargo's name came up, Exis looked concerned. Quolkeh failed to notice and continued on.

"The area is surrounded by forest, so we basically spend all our days off sleeping and drinking."

"So you figured you'd stop by my village to kill time?"

"Yep. You said you were gonna adopt Luka, right? This place really is right on the border. The soldiers told us about a remote village slightly east of the Felskeilo capital," Exis explained.

"And here you are," Cayna said with an understanding nod.

The night before, she received a Friend Message that said, "*Can we hang out at your place?*" Cayna had assumed that they'd tagged along with Elineh's caravan or something.

"I thought maybe you guys were taking a road trip."

"We would have checked your schedule earlier if we were!" Quolkeh retorted.

Cayna laughed, then pointed to the building in front of them. "This is the village's only inn."

She entered its wide-open doors and beckoned Exis and Quolkeh to follow. When the pair stepped inside, Cayna called to Marelle, who was taking a breather behind the counter.

"Marelle, I brought some guests."

The proprietress tiredly got to her feet. Lytt, who was also on break, trotted over to greet them. Exis's head nearly reached the ceiling; she stared up at him, mouth agape. Marelle, on the other hand, was quick to treat him like any old customer.

"You're friends of Cayna's, then? We don't have much, but we're happy to have ya," she said, ushering the two farther inside.

Lytt stood dazed for a moment but soon followed her mother's lead and set to work. As the new guests started writing their names in the inn ledger, Marelle eyed Exis apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Sir Dragoid, but our beds might not be perfectly your size. That all right with you?"

"Sure, happens all the time. I'm used to it, so no worries."

"Yeah, sometimes he rolls off the bed onto the floor. It's fine."

Exis's acceptance of his less-than-ideal sleeping situation elicited a biting comment from Quolkeh. Cayna interrupted and proposed combining two beds together, but Exis wryly informed her they'd need at least three for that.

“I can’t sleep faceup,” he said.

“What, seriously?!”

Back when they were camped out in Luka’s fishing village, Cayna only saw Exis wrapped in a blanket and couldn’t remember who slept how.

“Hey, c’mon. Dragoids had wing and tail options back in character creation mode. And even without that, we’ve still got bumps and horns. It’s impossible to sleep like a human.”

Exis pointed to his head, and Cayna saw what he meant. Lying on your stomach seemed uncomfortable for humans, but it probably allowed dragoids a better night’s sleep.

“Are you both staying just one night?” Marelle asked.

“Yeah.”

“We’ll be heading back to the border stronghold tomorrow. Today’s our day off.”

“That’ll be forty bronze total.”

““Uh...””

Both their jaws dropped when Marelle named her price. Cayna expected as much and grinned awkwardly.

“Ain’t that kinda cheap?!”

“What? Seriously? Are bargains always this good in remote villages?”

Still, she wished they’d tone down the *Remote village this, remote village that* stuff.

Seeming to sense Cayna’s irritation, Li’l Fairy drop-kicked the back of Quolkeh’s head.

“Yowwwwww?!”

The attack made no more than a light *boink* sound, but Quolkeh yelped and grabbed her head. Marelle and Lytt, who couldn’t see the fairy, stared worriedly as she

crouched down and waited for the pain to subside. Perhaps they thought she was something of an oddball.

"Hey, you feelin' okay? Cayna, does she have some kind of disease?"

"....."

Exis, who had once been kicked in the nose by the fairy, watched the tragic scene unfold with a cold grimace on his face. He sympathized. After all, even a casual attack like that sent the victim into a world of pain.

Under the impression something in their conversation had rubbed Cayna the wrong way, Exis apologized and bowed his head.

"What? You don't have anything to be sorry for, Exis," said Cayna.

"I just feel like we might've said something insensitive. Sorry."

"What're you talking about? Heh-heh-heh, what good is apologizing gonna do if you don't even know what you did wrong?"

Cayna laughed, and Exis couldn't help but join in.

Quolkeh looked up at the friends chuckling on either side of her and wondered if she should, too. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Li'l Fairy blowing on her fist and quickly begged for forgiveness.

The comical scene made Marelle and Lytt burst out laughing, and soon the inn erupted into giggles.

"Man, I thought I was gonna bust a gut..."

While Exis mumbled something about almost laughing himself to death, Quolkeh looked totally wiped out. Cayna and Lytt were with them. After their chuckles had subsided and the two put their luggage away in their room, Marelle said they should check out the bathhouse.

"Once you freshen up and wash the dust off, stop by our place for dinner and have your

fill.”

“Marelle’s food is the best,” Cayna said, wiping imaginary drool from her mouth.

Exis’s and Quolkeh’s eyes sparkled.

“Aw, man! If you’re gonna talk it up that much, I guess I can expect somethin’ good?”

“I can’t remember the last time we had a decent meal!”

“Um, what kinds of stuff do you guys usually eat...?” Cayna asked, surprised. Exis and Quolkeh didn’t always know when their next meal would be.

“You ate lots when you first came here, too, Miss Cayna!”

“Hey, Lytt, let’s keep that our little secret, okay?”

Cayna’s supposed ally had just spilled the details of her first day in this world. Cayna had her take a vow of silence.

Quolkeh and Exis both read between the lines and smiled uncomfortably in realization.

Lytt didn’t have a clue what was going on and stared at everyone blankly, but she seemed to notice something ahead of them and waved.

“Hmm?”

“Oh, it’s Lu.”

“...Hold up, you’ve got a cat-eared butler and maid at your place, too?”

Luka stood in front of the village’s public bathhouse along with Roxilius and Roxine, who held towels and bags of spare clothes. It turned out that they were about to enter the bath.

Lytt raced over to Luka, and Roxine eyed the pair behind Cayna as if they were a couple of cockroaches. Roxilius had met them before, so he bowed politely.

“You brought Lu along, Cie?”

"Yes. I thought I should also take this opportunity to wash that filthy cat as well."

Cayna was certain she could see sparks flying between the two werecats, but this was such a commonplace occurrence that she didn't care. Friction and malice quickly permeated the air, though Quolkeh was the only one sensitive to it.

"You'll just get caught in the crossfire if you let it bother you. Leave 'em be," Exis advised with a pat on the shoulder. Roxine was level 550, so she had an advantage over level-430 Quolkeh.

"Rox, you went on patrol today, right?"

"Yes. I assisted in the fields as well."

"...Ah, gotcha."

Still, Roxilius was hardly dirty enough to warrant being called a "*filthy cat*." Roxine started to tease him further, but Luka grabbed her tail, annoyed. The maid grew despondent; Exis looked on with admiration.

"Luka sure has gotten strong," he murmured.

At any rate, trouble brewed when the group divided up to enter the men's and women's baths. Quolkeh instinctively headed over to the men's side, but...

"Hold it, hold it, hold it! You're over here, Quolkeh!"

"Huh? Eh? Whaaaaat?!"

Quolkeh tried to follow Exis and Roxilius, but Cayna immediately caught her and pulled her over to the women's side. Quolkeh was thoroughly confused.

"You can't go in there, miss. That side is for boys only."

"Yeah... No girls... allowed."

"Honestly. I understand you are an adventurer, but do have *some* modesty."

Lytt and Luka made sound arguments while Roxine glared at Quolkeh.

“...Oh.” Cayna finally remembered Quolkeh was a man in real life.

“You remember, right?!”

“Yep. But just give up already.”

“...Huh?”

Quolkeh was male inside but appeared female. She could enter the women’s bath with no issue. Besides, if she was going to live as a woman, Cayna thought it’d be better for her to get used to things like this—and the sooner, the better.

Lytt and Luka quickly got undressed and left the changing room. So far, so good.

“Ah, one moment please, Lady Luka.”

Roxine elegantly rustled out of her outfit and went after Luka. Quolkeh blushed and looked away from the maid’s naked figure. In truth, she wanted to confirm a few mysteries (like where Roxine’s tail started), but she quickly came to her senses.

Once Roxine left the changing room, Quolkeh heaved a deep sigh of relief and relaxed her shoulders. But she froze once again when Cayna began to undress.

“Heh-heh-heh. Wanna see?”

“N-no, I...”

Quolkeh averted her gaze, and Cayna came around to face her. Quolkeh turned away again, and Cayna once again circled to her front. A battle of visual offense and defense ensued.

Just then, another key woman came into the picture.

“Oh! Hello, Cayna.”

“Hi, Mimily.”

“I heard you’ll all be heading into the bath. May I join you?”

Sliding inside from the door of her bedroom-slash-laundry room was the mermaid Mimily. Her movements reminded Cayna of a sea lion at an aquarium show, although she didn't dare say so.

"Sure," she replied.

Since Mimily was a mermaid, she would only need to take off her bikini top to be fully naked. Quolkeh did a spit take the moment she laid eyes on Mimily's extraordinary beauty and perfect proportions.

"Oh, we have a visitor?" Mimily asked, tilting her head at Quolkeh's odd behavior.

"Yep. This is my adventurer friend Quolkeh. She's a little shy and won't get undressed."

"Wha—?!"

Quolkeh blustered at the unnecessary backstory she was suddenly assigned.

"Well then, allow me to assist you," Mimily said with a pleasant smile as she moved to help her undress.

Cayna numbed Quolkeh with a light paralysis attack, and she and Mimily proceeded to try removing the adventurer's equipment, much to her dismay. Frustrated with Quolkeh's struggling, the mermaid wrapped her tail around Quolkeh's lower half.

"Now's our chance, Mimily!"

"Right! Come on, don't fight it!"

"...Oh."

For whatever reason, Mimily's top fell to the floor.

"○△\$♪×¥?!●&%#?!"

Presented with a full-frontal view, Quolkeh blushed scarlet. Her eyes rolled back, and she passed out.

"Umm?"

"First time, huh...?"

Roxine heard screaming and charged into the changing room. Mimily's confusion and Cayna's vacant stare couldn't even begin to explain what happened.

Meanwhile, in the men's bath, Exis bowed his head and offered a moment of silence. Roxilius didn't want to upset his master, so he resisted flying into the women's bath and ignored the ruckus.



The unconscious Quolkeh was transported to the inn and later spent the rest of the evening locked in her room. The next day, she returned to the border sight unseen.

And thus our story ends.

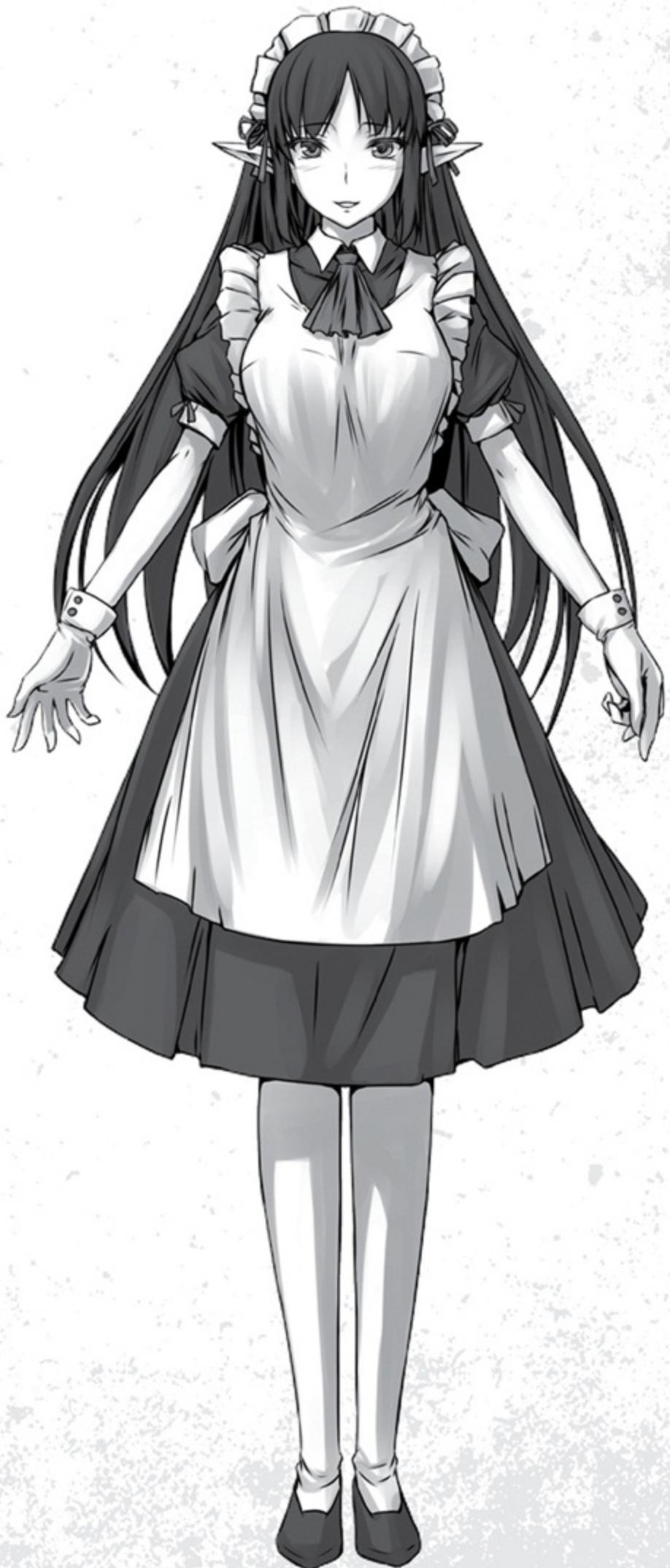
Character Data

Siren

Opus's maid summons.

Level 550. A mage who knows how to throw a punch.

A gentle big sister-type who treats everyone with kindness—except her master, Opus. She mercilessly pelts him with scathing quips that cut him to the quick. Otherwise, Siren is basically a saint and always has a smile on her face. Actually much stronger than her level indicates thanks to a cheat Opus used.



Hidden Ogre

The Twelfth Skill Master.

Around level 800.

His Guardian Tower, located in the sky, is a traditional Japanese home with a landscape garden. Something of a loner who mainly played *Leadale* solo, his only companions are his NPC little sisters. This user was originally a senior citizen who got into the game as a post-retirement hobby. A strong player with 108 little sisters registered in the premium Foster System. His fellow Skill Masters used to call him Gramps.



AFTERWORD

Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening. I'm the author, Ceez. Thank you very much for picking up the fifth volume of *In the Land of Leadale*. The story was action-packed this time around. I've never done so many battles in one volume! I'm still pretty bad at it, honestly. I hope I haven't dashed everyone's hopes with my bland writing.

This volume covers chapters thirty-nine through forty-five of the web release. I had to revise those battle scenes, too, so there are several differences between the two versions.

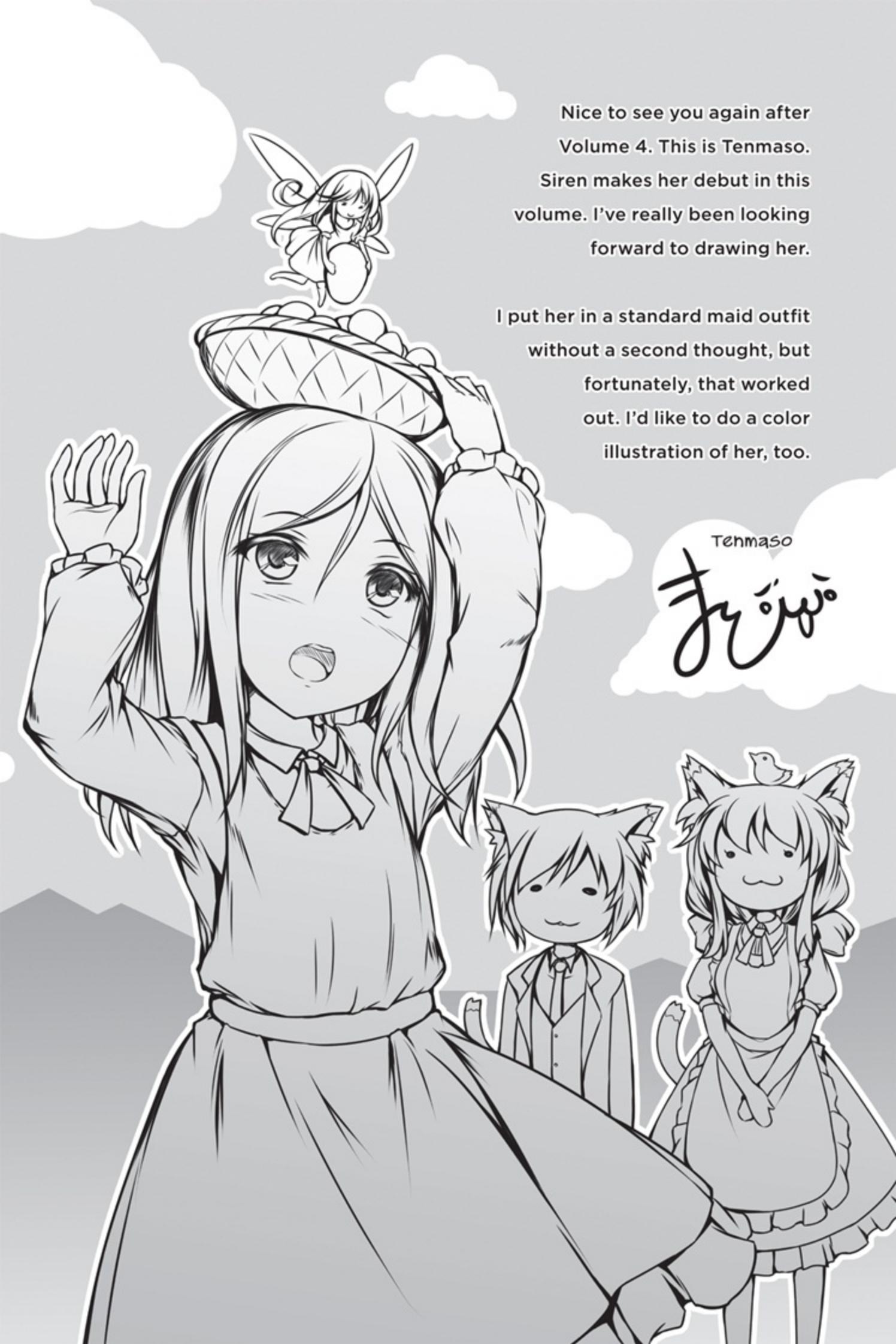
Also, one of the series' main protagonists, Opus, finally made his debut. Wow, I thought he'd never show up. That reveal took about as long as a certain transforming space robot. He often works secretly behind the scenes, but he's also a handful who doesn't do much more than run his mouth whenever he finally decides to show himself. Opus will make his move if left alone, but the process is a painfully long one.

I'm super slow anyway, but I had a terrible time bringing my thoughts and writing together for this volume. I'd like to apologize to both my editor and proofreader, as well as my illustrator, Tenmaso, for all the trouble I caused you. I've done some serious self-reflection since submitting the draft. I'm sure I'll do the same thing next time as well.

The focus of this cover is a tortoise, so I arbitrarily imagined a brown palette. However, the final version is green. Tenmaso's lovely illustrations are beyond compare.

Thank you very much to the editing department, related staff, the manga-ka Tsukimi Dashio, and everyone who made this book possible. I'm extremely grateful.

Ceez



Nice to see you again after
Volume 4. This is Tenmaso.
Siren makes her debut in this
volume. I've really been looking
forward to drawing her.

I put her in a standard maid outfit
without a second thought, but
fortunately, that worked
out. I'd like to do a color
illustration of her, too.

Tenmaso

てんまそ

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