A LIVID LADY'S GUIDE to GETTING EVEN

How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires



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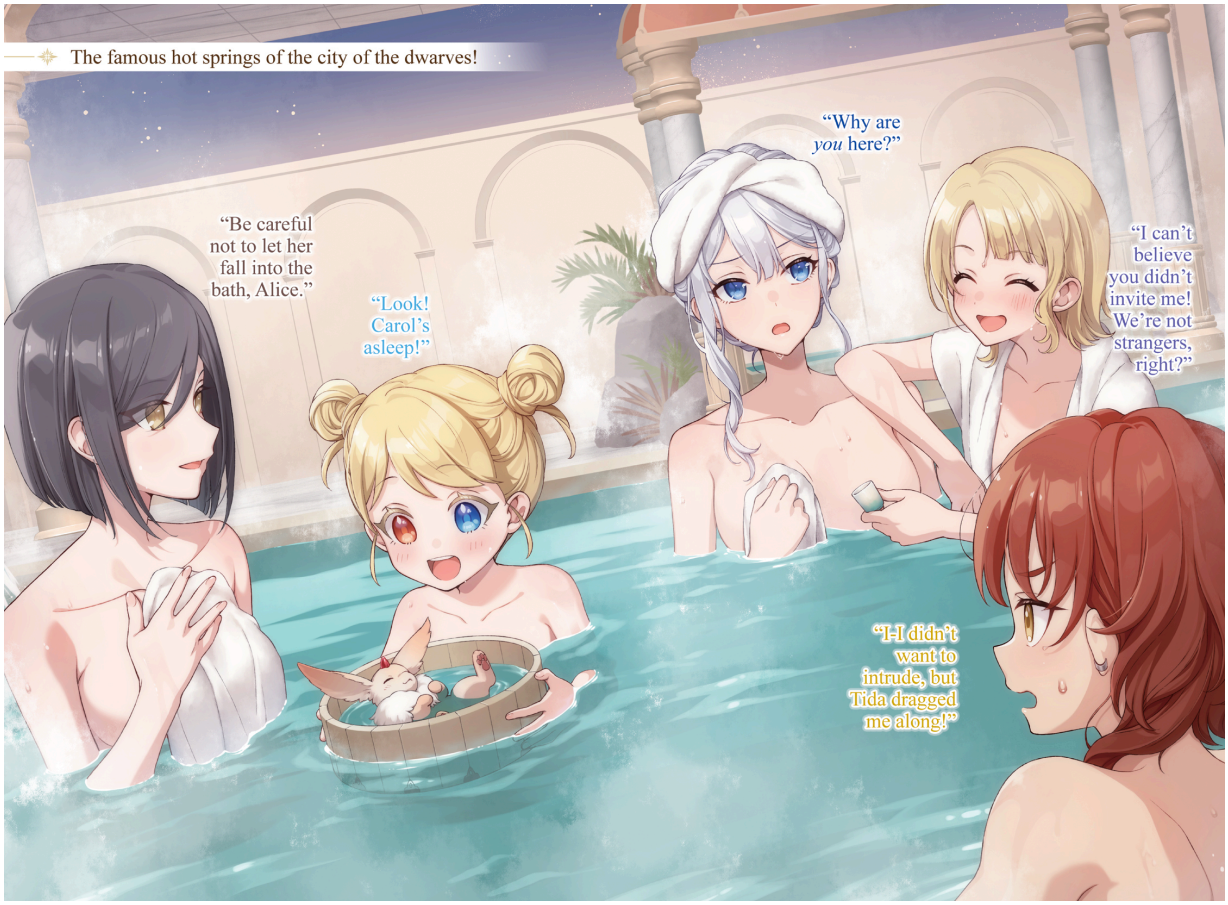
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“My name is Ellie Leis. I’m a merchant operating in the imperial capital. I’ve come to commission Mr. Gaien.”
“You want to commission a weapon? But you’re a magician, aren’t you?”
Kagali
A young dwarf woman claiming to be the disciple of Gaien, the Divine Artisan. She has the Mystic Eyes of Magic Perception.




The famous hot springs of the city of the dwarves!
"Be careful not to let her fall into the bath, Alice."
"Look! Carol's asleep!"
"Why are *you* here?"
"I can't believe you didn't invite me! We're not strangers, right?"
"I-I didn't want to intrude, but Tida dragged me along!"


Alice was the one who'd spoken, but the words sounded like someone else's entirely.
I hesitated, then turned to Salamander once more.
"Are you... Are you the one who just spoke?"
"I apologize for employing such means, human."



Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Jnovels
4. Prologue
5. Chapter 1: The City of the Dwarves
6. Chapter 2: The Sacred Mountain
7. Chapter 3: Gaien’s Disciple
8. Chapter 4: Reunion
9. Afterword
10. Bonus Short Story
11. About J-Novel Club
12. Copyright



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Prologue

The sun had already gone down when I picked up *that* item. I was in my room at my capital residence. When I'd first moved in, this room had been practically empty save for a few pieces of furniture, but I'd added a lot after taking in Alice. I had spruced it up with small decorative objects and artworks, as well as plenty of picture books and stuffed toys for my daughter to enjoy.

During the festival, I'd purchased a magic lamp from the merchant with a good eye for rare items. Under its subdued light, I once again examined the horn I held in my hands. The one-meter-long thunder dragon horn I'd received from Roselia the day we'd signed a contract was so full of thunder mana that it constantly shone with a dim glow.

"A rapier may truly be my best choice," I mused out loud, "but I imagine very few artisans have the skills to handle such a material."





What troubled me most at the moment was how to process the horn. An artisan with poor skills wouldn't be able to work with it; that much was plain as day. I caressed the surface of the horn while making a mental list of the first-rate artisans and alchemists I knew.

"I really cannot think of anyone more fitting than Gaien, the Divine Artisan," I said.

"Would entrusting him with this matter truly be wise? He's a member of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council, after all," Mireille replied as she placed a cup of hot water in front of me. It was almost time for bed, so I had chosen that over coffee or tea.

"It shouldn't be an issue," I replied. "Besides, Yuu is also a member."

"That's a fair point."

Both Yuu and Gaien belonged to the empire's Merchants' Guild Council—the same organization that included Lotton Flywok, who'd behaved suspiciously on the day of the terror attack. However, I doubted Yuu and Gaien were linked to him. The council was far from a monolith.

"At the end of the day, the council is just an institution in charge of regulating the empire's economy, nothing more. Its members are the best in their respective fields, but they do not necessarily share one mind. Each of them has different goals and ideals."

I put the horn back in its mana-suppressing case and added three layers of magic seals on top before storing it away inside my Grimoire of Mammon. This item was just as precious as it was dangerous. I had to make sure it was secure enough to handle any unforeseen incidents.

"The biggest challenge will be getting him to accept my request," I said. "I suppose I'll have to negotiate."

"He's rumored to have a difficult personality," Mireille told me.

"Artisans are often like that. Most don't base their decisions on quantifiable, objective factors but rather on their gut feelings. In other words, it will largely depend on whether he likes me or not."

"How will you proceed?"

"There's only so much I can do... I imagine I'll start by sending him a gift."

I gave up on thinking about the matter for the time being and bade Mireille good night. Once she retired to her own room, I turned off the magic lamp and climbed into bed.

A few days later, I found myself walking through a back alley with Lunoa in tow. We were heading to a shop. Ever since I'd decided to have the horn manufactured into a rapier, I'd started making preparations for the process. This was one such step.

"Hello," Lunoa said as we entered the familiar shop. She hadn't spoken very loudly, but her voice echoed in the silent store.

The building's interior was clean and tidy, with dried plants and little vials filled with monster materials arranged neatly on shelves. The characteristic smell of medicinal herbs wafted through the air, but it was far from unpleasant.

"Yuu, are you here?" I asked.

"Coming! Give me a minute!"

We heard light steps coming from the back of the store, and a petite young woman with black hair appeared. She was Yuuka Kusunoki, the owner of Ptarmigan's Perch and one of my good friends. Yuu was not only a powerful adventurer but also the best doctor in the entire empire.

"Good morning, Miss Ellie. I've been expecting you."

"Is what we talked about ready?" I asked.

"It is! The batch I started brewing six months ago is looking good now. There's quite a bit of it, though. Are you sure you want to buy it all?"

"Yes. I'll buy as much of it as you can sell."

"All right, then. Please wait a few moments."

Yuu went to the back room and quickly returned with a large wooden crate full of bottles. Her disciple, Lily, was right behind her, carrying another box.

"There are two more," Yuu said.

The pair made another trip to get the remaining two boxes. Each contained twelve bottles filled with medicinal herbs suspended in clear liquid. This was medicinal brew, the same type of alcohol that Yuu had used to lure Tida into joining our party back when we'd

entered a dungeon together.

"Is this medicinal brew?" Lunoa asked, looking curiously at the herbs swirling in the alcohol.

"It is," I said. "I drank it once and it was delicious."

"Would you like some?" Yuu asked. "I opened one bottle earlier to sample the batch."

"Oh my, I'd love to take you up on that," I replied.

Yuu winked at Lily, and the young girl immediately fetched the bottle and a few glasses from the back. A strong smell of alcohol and medicinal herbs permeated the air as she poured the beverage.

I picked up two of the glasses and handed the less full one to Lunoa. Then, I brought my glass to my lips and slowly took a sip.

"It's just as good as last time," I told Yuu. "The taste is strong and quite unique, but it still goes down easy."

Lunoa had been a little hesitant to drink, but after hearing my impressions of the flavor, she made up her mind and took a sip. She grimaced when the alcohol touched her lips, but then her expression quickly relaxed.

"Oh, you're right!" she said. "The smell is a little much, but the taste *is* smooth. How strange! I can tell the alcohol content is high, but it's still so light on my tongue."

"Thank you, Yuu. It's perfect. Here's what I owe you."

Yuu had told me how much it'd cost beforehand, so I'd prepared a leather pouch with the correct amount inside. Yuu quickly counted the coins. Once she was done, I stored the crates inside my grimoire.

"I'd also like to buy three high-grade potions, ten low-grade potions, and five detoxifying potions, please," I said.

"Sure thing. Are you going somewhere?" Yuu asked as she pulled the potions off the shelves.

"Yes. I have a little something to take care of in the Hephaest Marquessate."

"In Hephaest? That's where the city of the dwarves is, right? There are a lot of volcanoes in that region, so monsters that use fire are rampant. I suggest you bring a few burn-healing potions."

"Then I'll take five of those as well, please."

“Thanks for your patronage!”

When I returned to my residence, Barl and Misha were outside, carrying toolboxes. They seemed to have just finished doing some carriage maintenance.

“We’re back,” I said.

“Miss Ellie and Miss Lunoa! Welcome back,” Misha greeted us.

“How are the preparations progressing?” I asked.

“The cargo is ready. We’ll be able to depart the day after tomorrow, as planned.”

“The carriage is good to go too,” Barl said. “A couple parts were damaged, but I changed what needed changing.”

“Thank you both,” I said. “Is Alice in her room?”

“She should be,” Misha replied. “She’s usually studying with Miss Mireille at this time.”

“I shouldn’t bother them, then. Oh, I bought sweets for everyone when I passed by Grimoire, so have some when you take a break.”

“Nice,” Barl said.

“Thank you, Miss Ellie,” Misha added.

I let the two of them get back to their business and entered my house. I gave Lunoa the box from Grimoire and went straight to my office so I could check and sign the last of the documents I needed to approve. More tasks would keep pouring in, but with my departure imminent, I would have no choice but to delegate.

I’d been at work for some time when a knock at the door pulled me out of my focus. Mireille entered to tell me I had a guest. It seemed she’d already finished teaching Alice for the day. I asked Mireille to show the guest in, and she soon returned with a young man who was carrying an ornate box under his arm.

“It has been a long time, Miss Ellie.” The young man gave a polite bow.

“Oh my, there is no need to show such courtesy to a commoner such as myself, Viscount Grint Sarjas Leysteria.”

Grint smiled awkwardly at my remark. This young man was the former ruler of the Kingdom of Sarjas. After the border conflict,

Sarjas had been incorporated into the empire as a new region. Grint was now a subordinate of Margrave Lebrick—or as I knew him, Lucas.

"Allow me to extend my belated congratulations on receiving your title," I continued.

At first, Grint had been used as a puppet consul, but he'd shown everyone that he was in fact a skilled administrator. In addition to that, the people of Sarjas had begged for clemency for their former prince with such intensity that the imperial government had decided to bestow a new name and a new title upon him. He now had some level of authority and helped govern the region under Lucas's leadership.

"Thank you," he said. "I was certain the emperor would make an example out of me by having me executed, but this serves as a reminder that none of us can truly know what fate tomorrow holds."

"Well, no one knows Sarjas better than you do."

"That is true." He paused for a moment. "I came by to give you this, since I was in the capital." Grint held out the intricate box.

"I'm sorry for making you go out of your way."

"Don't worry about it. I could have let someone else do it, but I wanted to thank you in person."

"I haven't done anything deserving of your thanks."

Grint laughed. "You've been secretly making sure my mother and sister have lived comfortably since they arrived in the capital, haven't you?"

"That's Lord Lucas's doing, not mine. There isn't much I can do in my current situation."

"I've thanked Margrave Lucas personally too." He bowed to me once again.

I told him to lift his head, and I took the box. "I'm glad this arrived in time."

After the terror attack on the capital, I had sent someone to Milista to retrieve something for me. Milista was the village that was raising my aqua crawlers in order to produce aqua silk. It had initially been a tiny place, but after news of the aqua silk had spread, many talented alchemists and artisans had gathered there.

It continued to grow bigger by the day, and it would soon be large enough to be called a city.

I lifted the lid of the box and took out a vial. Inside the transparent tube was a liquid just as clear.

"This...just looks like water," Grint commented. He brought his face closer to the vial, perplexed.

In exchange for my support, the alchemists and artisans who lived in Milista periodically reported their discoveries and progress to me. When something caught my eye—either as a prospective product or for my personal use—I sent the inventor additional funds so that they could continue developing it. Something in one of the latest research reports I'd read had piqued my interest so much that I'd just *had* to get my hands on the product as quickly as possible.

Mireille read through the letter from the alchemist that had come with the box. Once she was done, she turned to me.

"He named this magic item 'crystal thread.' That sounds a bit grand."

"Well, alchemists often retain the right to name their inventions," Grint commented.

"That's fine. I'm the one who agreed to let them keep that right when they first assembled in Milista, after all."

I picked up the vial. The material it was made of looked just like regular glass, but it was actually a modified alloy made with magic metal that was far more durable. Mireille passed me the note from the alchemist, and I read through it quickly. Once I was done, I opened the vial, poured mana into it, and turned it over. The liquid inside transformed into a thin thread, which fell out of the vial.

"It seems to work as intended," I said.

This crystal thread was a magic item created using aqua silk. It normally was in a liquid state, but turned into thread when it came in contact with mana. The thickness of the thread would change based on the quantity of mana one used, ranging from thin enough to be practically invisible to as thick as a whip.

After seeing Spider's thread techniques during the attack, I'd understood how useful this type of material could be. And so, once the mayhem in the capital had cooled down somewhat, I'd reached

out to the alchemist in Milista who'd come up with this idea.

I wrapped the aqua silk thread around my finger and tried to control it like Spider had. The piece of string flew across the room and left a deep cut on the wooden door of my office.

"I need some training, don't I?"

Controlling this would prove to be more difficult than expected. Unlike with regular thread, one needed to have full control over both water *and* physical objects for crystal thread. I put the strand back in the bottle before handing it to Mireille.

"Mireille, please send an additional reward to the person who invented this."

"Understood, miss."

I turned to Grint. "Thank you very much for delivering this to me, Viscount Grint. Will you visit your family after this?"

"Yes," he replied. "I've received permission to see them while I'm in the capital."

"I see. In that case, I'll give you some chocolates to take to them. I happen to have some of Grimoire's upcoming products at home."

"I'd be most grateful. My sister wrote to me that she adores the confections from your shop."

While a maid prepared my gift for Grint, the two of us exchanged information. Most of what he told me pertained to his work, so I took the liberty of giving him some advice. As a former prince whose nation was at war with the empire not too long ago, he wouldn't have an easy time living here, but I trusted that Grint could make it.

After bidding him farewell and watching his carriage depart, I returned to my office. There was still much to prepare before my next trip.

Chapter 1: The City of the Dwarves

Two days after I received the vial of crystal thread from Grint, we set out on our next adventure.

"We're going to the city of the dwarves, right, mama?"

"Yes, Alice," I replied. "The Hephaest Marquessate used to be the country of the dwarves. It was called the Hephaest Kingdom then. When the empire started growing its sphere of influence, that kingdom was integrated into the empire without a fight as one of its regions."

"There wasn't a war?" Lunoa asked.

"No," Mireille replied. "At the time, the empire's military was incredibly powerful. In comparison, the capital of the Hephaest Kingdom, which was located in a volcanic zone, relied heavily on food imports to survive. After the empire annexed Hephaest's neighboring nations, the elites understood that they wouldn't be able to win and chose to surrender before a war even started. In response, the emperor made the former king a marquess, and not a single drop of blood was spilled."

"So the marquess is the king of the dwarves?" Misha asked.

"The current Marquess of Hephaest is the grandson of the last king," Mireille told her.

Lunoa's and Misha's eyes widened in surprise at Mireille's answers, but Alice didn't appear to really understand all of it. She gave up and started playing with Carol's tail instead. As always, the carbuncle was perched on her head.

"If I'm not mistaken, Hephaest's two main industries are the export of high-quality ores and the trade of weapons and precious alloys crafted from those ores with the dwarves' advanced techniques," Lunoa said.

“You’re correct,” I replied. “That hasn’t changed from the days of the Hephaest Kingdom.”

“Does this mean Traitre will be delving into that industry?” Misha asked.

“At the moment, that isn’t my plan. The special magic ores that can be mined in the marquessate could be interesting ingredients for our cosmetics, but there are heavy restrictions on their import.”

“Even as a Special License holder, you weren’t given permission?!”

“Without a Special License, I wouldn’t even have been able to put in a request,” I said. “While the Hephaest Marquessate is part of the empire, the way it’s governed is closer to that of a vassal state. Trade requests are made to the empire’s Merchants’ Guild, but the marquess has the final say.”

“So, to obtain permission, you’ll actually need to negotiate with the marquess himself.”

“If I were to put a branch store on the table, he might very well agree,” I said. “But I’m not certain that it’s a good idea to increase the number of branches we have before we’re fully prepared. I’d like to avoid that.”

“What makes you think we’re not prepared?” Lunoa asked. “Considering Traitre’s size, setting up a few more branches shouldn’t be too hard.”

Lunoa had truly grown a lot. She was right. At the moment, Traitre had the funds and personnel to set up new branches.

“You’re not wrong,” I said, “but I’d like to be more deliberate with them. Establishing a branch solely to gain access to their ore feels like a poor return.”

“What would convince you to open a branch in Hephaest, then?”

“At the moment, what Traitre needs most is access to new markets. Since we’ve secured a port, the next step is to find a location within the empire that can serve as a logistics hub—or at least be used as a stepping stone toward that goal.”

“A logistics hub... Then what we want is a place connected to major highways that’s booming with trade.”

“Exactly. Find me such a place, Lunoa.”

"I will!"

When the sun started setting, we stopped the carriage at a campsite and got everything ready for the night. Once we were done, I started sparring with Lunoa and Misha. Today, we were working on empty-handed combat, so no one was using a weapon. I allowed skills and magic as long as they didn't include incantations.

"Acceleration!"

Lunoa used a simple wind enchantment to speed up her motion and swung her fist at me. I ducked under it and unleashed a kick at Misha as she ran at me. She jumped and landed on my extended leg before kicking off from it to leap even higher.

"Miss Lunoa!" she exclaimed.

"Magic Shield."

Lunoa had just used a nonattribute defensive spell that created a shield out of mana. It was incredibly simple to pull off and was one of the first spells mages usually learned. The drawback was that it took relatively little strength to break the shield. However, Lunoa had conjured it right above her own head. Instead of using it to defend against me, Misha landed on top of it, using it as yet another platform so she could leap again. She curled up and started shaking her tail vigorously to spin in the air, falling toward me with her heel facing downward.

"Chasing Kick!"

Thanks to Lunoa's Magic Shield, Misha had been able to delay her attack masterfully. However, I still blocked her easily with my left arm.

At that moment, Mireille called for us. "Everyone, it'll be night soon. Please wrap up today's training session."

"Mireille's right," I said. "That last attack was good, you two."

Lunoa and Misha exchanged a look with each other and smiled sheepishly.

"But you still managed to block it with one hand, Miss Ellie..." Misha said.

I tilted my head to the side in confusion before realizing that I hadn't told them what had happened.

Mireille had noticed what I'd done, though. "Miss Ellie used the skill Body Fortification against the two of you for the very first time today."

"Body Fortification? How is that different from the usual body reinforcement technique?"

"Do you remember the two types of body reinforcement I taught you about before?" I asked.

"Yes. External reinforcement and internal reinforcement."

"Exactly," I said. "Internal reinforcement is about cycling mana through one's body to reinforce it from the inside. That is how you achieve body reinforcement using a *skill*. External reinforcement means forming a layer of mana outside your body so it can protect you like armor. That, on the other hand, is a *spell*."

I'd taught the girls this in the past. I looked at each of them to make sure they were following before continuing. "Body Fortification uses both of these techniques. The point is to reinforce your body from both the outside and the inside simultaneously."

"Does that mean you have to cycle your mana internally to improve your physical abilities while also wrapping yourself in a layer of mana?" Misha asked.

"But then that would mean you'd need to use a spell while actively cycling mana... That sounds terribly difficult," Lunoa pointed out.

"Does it?" Misha replied.

"Well, cycling mana requires you to constantly move the mana within your body, right? But to activate a spell, you have to first anchor your mana in place before transforming it. They're completely opposite processes. It would be like having to run while sleeping!"

Lunoa's comparison was a fitting one. The two principles behind Body Fortification *did* contradict themselves.

"It's a high-level technique," Mireille said. "To master it, one must perfect both conscious and unconscious use of mana."

Misha and Lunoa nodded in awe.

"That last attack was powerful enough to break through my body reinforcement technique. You forced me to employ Body Fortification

at the very last moment. You did well."

After complimenting the girls on their performance, I used water magic to create fog and wash off everyone's sweat.

"Shall we have dinner now?"

We sat on logs around the fire. Mireille handed out bowls of soup she'd made to each of us, and I took a piece of warm bread to go with mine. We'd only been gone for a day, so there were plenty of fresh vegetables and meat in the soup. If I used my Grimoire of Mammon, we could have fresh ingredients anytime, but that wouldn't help Lunoa and Misha learn about the normal logistics of travel.

"Kyui?"

"What's wrong, Carol?" Alice asked.

Carol had been in a good mood after chowing down on some mana from Alice, but she had suddenly lifted her head. I followed her gaze and saw a lantern swaying far in the distance. It probably belonged to a peddler or an adventurer. It was common to stop and set up camp before nightfall, but sometimes unforeseen circumstances forced travelers to keep moving in the dark.

"Be on your guard," I said. "Just in case."

Misha glanced at her dagger while Lunoa pulled her staff closer to herself. After a few dozen minutes, I heard the rattling of approaching wheels, and a wagon entered the campsite. A man who appeared to be a merchant was holding the reins, wearing a tired expression. The wagon's cover was torn, revealing a group of wounded adventurers inside. I assumed monsters must have attacked them.

The merchant gave me a nod, and I returned the gesture. Once he stopped the wagon, he and the adventurers disembarked.

"Good evening," the merchant said as the group approached us. "I hope you don't mind us camping next to you."

"Not at all," I replied.

The two of us shook hands, and I took another look at his wagon.

"That's in fairly bad shape," I said. "Were you attacked by monsters or brigands?"

Rather than the merchant answering my question, one of the

adventurers who seemed to be escorting him spoke up.

"Monsters. We were unlucky enough to run into a pack of forest wolves."

"That must have been tough." I turned to my group. "Lunoa."

"Y-Yes! Um, if you'd like, I'm happy to heal you with my magic," she offered.

"You wouldn't mind?! That'd be a big help!"

Lunoa nodded. She took Misha with her as a precaution, and the two of them walked up to the merchant's group. She cast Healing Wind on them before returning to my side.

"Good work, Lunoa."

"Thank you. Um, Miss Ellie, they gave me this...to thank me, they said."

She showed me a small leather pouch. When she opened it, she found three large silver coins.

"That's your payment for healing them," I said. "Your work deserves compensation, so you should keep it."

"But isn't this too much money? Most churches only take a few regular silver coins for treatment, don't they?"

"That's the market price in the middle of a city. Here, at an isolated campsite, it's only natural that healing services would be worth a lot more. Besides, you healed several people, not just one person. That amount seems appropriate."

"Really?"

"Yes. Usually, no one would expect to find a healer in such a remote place. Scarcity drives up the value. You should accept this sum for the sake of everyone involved."

"What do you mean?"

"There's no telling when anyone might start a rumor. If you do not accept payment, gossip might spread about how these people are so ungrateful that they cannot settle their debt. Conversely, a rumor that we heal people free of charge could spread, and we might find ourselves constantly asked to heal people for free. That's why it's better for everyone if you receive the proper compensation."

The following morning, we greeted the merchant's group, who

were still getting ready, before departing. The road that led to the Hephaest Marquessate first passed through fields. As we crossed several territories, the landscape shifted and we ran alongside a dense forest. We advanced some more, and the terrain gradually turned into a wasteland, though there were still some trees scattered about.

"It's hot around here," I said.

"Kyuu..." Carol whined.

The carbuncle seemed to be suffering from the heat because of her fur. Alice picked her up, transferring her from the top of her head to her lap.

"We are in a volcanic zone, after all," Misha said. She poured a glass of water for Alice from a barrel we had in the carriage. I kept the barrel cool with my magic, so I hoped it would refresh her and Carol.

"The capital of Hephaest is close to a volcano, isn't it?"

"Indeed. The Sacred Mountain of Hephaest is quite famous," I replied.

I looked outside the carriage. One mountain was conspicuously taller than the rest. That was the Sacred Mountain of Hephaest. Almost no trees grew on it and smoke always rose from it, as it was an active volcano.

"Aside from the dwarves' impressive blacksmithing abilities, Hephaest is renowned for another thing: its hot springs," I said.

"What's a hot spring?" Alice asked.

"It's like a large bath where the water is naturally hot."

That was the simplest explanation I'd been able to come up with, but Alice tilted her head to the side, seemingly unable to quite picture it.

"Well, you'll see when we reach the capital," I said.

"Indeed," Mireille said approvingly. "We'll remain in the marquessate for quite some time while your weapon is being made. We should stay at a nice place and enjoy a well-deserved rest."

Misha served me a glass of water, which I accepted before nodding. I liked that idea.

◇

"I can see the capital!" Lunoa said from the driver's seat.

I peered through the window of the carriage. The high walls of the capital loomed in the distance. Unlike the neat stone walls of the imperial capital, which were built from countless dressed stones carefully cut to be the same size, the defensive walls of Hephaest's capital were large mud ramparts hardened with magic.

One of several watchtowers served as the main gate, and multiple groups of adventurers and merchants were waiting in line seeking entry. We stopped at the end of the queue. After a bit of waiting, we were eventually allowed in by the guards.

The streets in the capital of the Hephaest Marquessate were all paved. Here and there, we could see smoke rising that looked similar to that of the volcano—most likely from the workshops and hot springs. Some large inns also let off steam, and the distinctive smell of sulfur lingered in the air.

"What is this building?" Lunoa asked.

The roof of the building she was pointing at was marked with a large symbol made of interconnected circles. The structure's decorated white walls stood out among the surrounding unrefined stone buildings.

"That's a temple dedicated to the worship of fire spirits."

"A temple? Is that different from the churches that follow Ibris?" Misha asked.

"Most of the dwarves worship the Spirit King. Spiritanism is mostly prevalent on the Northern Continent, especially among the dwarves and elves," Mireille replied.

"Spiritanism is a form of nature worship," I added. "Those who practice it revere the archspirits who are believed to dwell in volcanoes, large trees, or springs. Considering this city's location, I assume that the residents worship the spirits of the Sacred Mountain of Hephaest. Since it's a volcano, it's likely home to fire spirits or earth spirits."

As soon as I finished my explanation, the sound of laughter rang

out from the temple.

"It's quite lively for a place of worship," I commented.

"I wonder what's happening," Lunoa said.

"Some sort of rite perhaps?" Misha mused.

I wasn't aware of any such noisy Spiritanic rites, but most of my knowledge on the matter came from the lessons that had prepared me for potential queenship. I figured there was more to Spiritanism than what I'd learned from books. I glanced at Mireille in the hope that she'd know. She always thoroughly gathered information before traveling anywhere.

As expected, Mireille provided the answer. "The believers who have gathered in the temple must have had a few drinks. It's customary to hold banquets to welcome the spirits."

"Really? I've never heard that before," I said.

I had been about to move on to a new topic, but Mireille's comment had piqued my curiosity. I'd never learned a thing about these supposed temple banquets during my lessons on prominent world religions.

"Well..." Mireille started, "only the dwarves practice this custom. I imagine that's why it wasn't mentioned in your lessons, miss."

"Oh." It seemed to be a regional tradition.

"But are they allowed to do that?" Lunoa asked, furrowing her brow. She had a serious personality and believed in the Church of Ibris. The thought of holding a banquet inside a sacred place seemed to puzzle her deeply.

"I don't think it's a problem," I said. "Faith, in essence, is about giving people something to depend on. If the dwarves find inner peace this way, then I'd say their religious practice is having the intended effect."

I viewed religion from the standpoint of a stateswoman, so I imagined religious people might not necessarily agree with me. Sure enough, Lunoa pouted.

"That might be true, but..." She was clearly not convinced.

Her pouting face was adorable, and I was about to pat her head when Alice pulled on my other hand.

"Hey, mama, that voice..."

"Hmm?" I strained my ears and listened carefully to the sounds escaping from the temple.

"HA HA HA HA!!! Cheers to the Spirit King, then!"

"Cheers!"

"HA HA HA HA!!!"

I knew that voice. And I'd run into this exact situation before.

I poked my head into the temple, and sure enough, I saw a young woman wearing a Church of Ibris nun's habit conversing with a group of dwarves. Her cheeks were already red from the alcohol, but she was gulping down another pint while leaning against a barrel of ale.

"It's Miss Tida!" Misha said.

"That it is," Lunoa replied.

"And as always," Mireille added with a sigh, "she's drunk in the middle of the day."

"Big Sister Tida!" Alice cheered, trying to sneak a peek inside. "Ah!" she exclaimed as I plucked Carol from her arms and put the carbuncle on her head to block her line of sight.

"Kyui!" Carol cried out in surprise.

I hoped Carol would forgive me for manhandling her like that, but Alice couldn't see Tida in this state. What a terrible influence she would make.

"HA HA HA— Huh?" Tida froze for a second as her eyes met mine. Then, she ran up to me, grabbed the hem of my clothes, and started making excuses. "I-I-It's not what you think! That's...um...so... Right! This is a cultural exchange! I'm not drinking because I wanted alcohol. That's *definitely* not it!"

"Let go of me! I haven't even said anything!"

The Church of Ibris did not reject other religions, with the exception of cults that extolled inhumane acts. That meant Tida was free to take part in a banquet organized by believers of another faith, even within a temple. I told her as much and she perked up.

"That's right!" she said with a nod. "I'm perfectly justified in being here!"

"But what brings you to this city?" I asked.

"After things calmed down in the imperial capital, I received an

order from the Grand Sanctuary saying that I had to come here."

"The Grand Sanctuary?"

"Yep. Apparently, they received a divine revelation."

"A revelation, huh?"

"Ah, could it be that you don't believe?" Tida asked.

I viewed religion as one political tool among many. I had no intention to mock or deny people's faiths, and I knew that some phenomena appeared to be miracles, but I personally did not believe in a god. Even if there was one, I didn't think they would care to meddle in the affairs of mortals.

"No, that's not it," I replied. "I was just thinking out loud."

Tida was a clergywoman, so I thought it best not to expose my views to her.

"Leaving that aside, the person who sent the order must be quite important if they can get *you* to heed their instructions."

"Well, yeah. It's from the pope." Tida sighed. "What a hassle."

"Are you sure you should be saying that? The pope is the head of the Church of Ibris, right?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I complain to the pope's face too. We used to be buddies at the monastery."

"You have unexpected connections... Well, it's not that surprising given your position, I suppose."

Despite the way she conducted herself, Tida was still a cardinal. It made sense that she knew the pope.

"And you?" she asked. "Are you here on business?"

"I'm here to conduct a deal, but it's a personal matter. I recently got my hands on an excellent material, and I was hoping to have it crafted into a rapier."

"The smiths of this city are renowned, after all. Do you already know which workshop you want to commission?"

"I do. I wish to commission Gaien, the Divine Artisan."

"Huh?! Now that's a big name! I heard his swords typically sell for as much as a mansion!"

"I've prepared the funds, naturally. And I have a letter of recommendation."

I took out the letter I'd gotten from Count Guide and showed it to

Tida. The last time we'd seen each other, he'd written it for me as thanks for helping his son gain experience.

"You're so well-connected! A true celebrity!" Tida exclaimed.

I smiled, then excused myself. "Well then, we must go reserve our rooms."

"Have you decided where you'll stay?"

"Yes. We were thinking of staying at the Cozy Jewel. It's nearby."

"The food is supposed to be really good there! But I'm surprised you picked that place. You usually insist on staying in the city's best hotel to protect your company's image. Hephaest's capital has one of Flywok's luxury hotels, doesn't it?"

"I'd heard many good things about the Cozy Jewel's food and hot spring, so I thought it'd be fine just this once. Besides, I'm here on personal business, not representing Traitre."

"I see."

"We'll be staying in this city for a while, so let's share a meal together when you have time."

"I'd love that."

We waved goodbye to Tida and climbed back into the carriage to go to the inn. Lunoa and Misha sat together in the driver's seat, chatting. As Alice looked through the open window marveling at the unusual sights, a small bird flew into the carriage. It was one of my saint birds.

"A message?" Mireille asked.

"Yes. It seems to be from one of our friends in the kingdom," I replied. As I read the message, I knit my brow.

"Did something happen?" Mireille asked.

"Friede is acting strangely again."

"His behavior has undergone a radical shift lately, hasn't it?"

"It seems that way," I said. "I can't tell if this is Adel's doing or if a wise advisor has joined his side."

I gave the letter to Mireille and asked her to destroy it once she was done reading it.

"If someone is helping Friede, we must discover why," I continued.

"Should I ask our moles in the palace to investigate?"

"Yes. It might be risky, but we cannot afford to fall behind."

"Understood," Mireille said. "I'll tell them to put the plan we discussed in motion."

"Make sure they remain careful. They'll need to be wary of Friede, naturally, but also of Adel."

After giving Mireille my instructions, I looked at Alice. The sight of her excitedly gazing at the streets of the capital of Hephaest helped me take my mind off things.

◆

"My brother did *what*?" Adel asked, astonished.

Roselia nodded as she read through the report she'd received once more.

"As I said, he stopped a dungeon stampede in the region he was visiting as a negotiator."

"This is the *third* time he's done something like this. Last time, he got rid of a horde of orcs that attacked a village he was inspecting, and before that, he ran into a large-scale bandit organization by chance and dismantled it," Adel said, recalling Friede's recent achievements. Needless to say, there wasn't an ounce of admiration on her face. "This is incredibly fishy. I refuse to believe that these are lucky coincidences."

"And I refuse to believe that Friede could have truly solved these incidents under his leadership," Roselia replied.

"Yet regardless of our beliefs, my brother's popularity is rising."

"We cannot let this continue," Roselia said. "I doubt he has truly changed his ways, and even if he has, that does not erase everything he has done up until now."

"I agree. What happened during the Sarjan conflict can never be forgiven." Adel reached out for the cup of tea Maoran had brought her. She took a sip and placed the steaming cup on her desk before picking up a document. "We also have this other issue."

"I'm terribly sorry. The responsibility falls upon us," Roselia said with an apologetic bow.

Adel gestured for her to lift her head. "No, this isn't your fault,

Roselia. Neither Eiwass nor you could have imagined there would be an attack. If anything, the terrorist may have purposefully waited for the delegation to leave before striking."

"You think he tried to frame us?!"

"That's just a theory." Adel crossed her arms and her gaze sharpened. "After all, don't you think it's a little too convenient that evidence supposedly implicating the kingdom was found in the terrorist hideout?"

"I do," Maoran chimed in. "The empire and the kingdom were at war not too long ago. What better scapegoat could there be?"

"So they timed the attack based on our departure..." Roselia whispered.

"It's still nothing but conjecture at this point," Adel insisted.

"But who would want to frame the kingdom? Don't tell me... Elizabeth?!"

"The magic contract you got her to sign only stipulates that she cannot intentionally harm the citizens of the *kingdom*. Harming *imperial* citizens and putting the blame on the kingdom, on the other hand, is something she can do," Maoran said.

The contract between Roselia and Elizabeth had some loopholes. By committing a false flag terror attack in the empire, Elizabeth could start a war—and thus harm the people of the kingdom indirectly.

"Elizabeth may act in cold blood for the sake of her goals sometimes," Adel said, "but deep down, she's soft. She's always been that way. That's why she refused to give up on my idiot brother for so long and kept supporting him."

"That's... That's true," Roselia replied.

"It is. People can't live all alone. Even if she likes to act above it all, Elizabeth must have made some connections with the people of the imperial capital after living there for so long, especially as a merchant. Traitre's employees are 'her' people, and, by extension, so are the people of the empire. Obviously, there must be some people she dislikes in the empire, but I believe she'd never plan an attack of this scale in a city she views as her own."

"What should we expect in the coming days?" Roselia asked.

“First of all, I doubt we’re headed for immediate war. Many in the empire have realized that the evidence seems fabricated. Naturally, they’ve lodged an official protest to keep the bellicists in check, but the document reads more like a question than an actual accusation.”

“I see,” Roselia said. She let out a sigh of relief.

“The best course of action is to avoid provoking the empire in any way until they have completed their investigation. At the moment, my brother’s sudden change in demeanor spells more trouble than this matter does. If we leave him be, he’ll gather more and more support both among the people and the nobility.”

“What do you propose we do?” Maoran asked.

“That’s the tricky part,” Roselia said. “Regardless of any hidden agenda Friede might have, his recent actions have benefited the people. If we try to sully his name right now, we risk being exposed. We’d have to bear the consequences, then.”

“Exactly. We can’t do that,” Adel agreed. “If lowering his standing isn’t an option, I should try raising mine instead.”

“But how will you do that, Your Highness? Your existence has been kept secret from all but a select few. Under these circumstances, there aren’t many ways we can influence the commoners, not to mention there’s a limit to the number of nobles we can win over.”

“You’re right. That’s why...” Adel paused and took a deep breath. She looked into Maoran’s eyes and then into Roselia’s. “The time has come for me to step forward publicly.”

◇

We entered the room and put down our luggage. This inn, the Cozy Jewel, was privately owned and rather small, but it had a reputation for great food and clean rooms. While it was popular, it was not a first-rate hotel, though.

The reason I’d given Tida for why we were staying here wasn’t entirely a lie, but there had been another motive for the diversion from my usual habits. Having witnessed Lotton Flywok’s suspicious behavior during the terror attack, I was hesitant to stay in one of his

hotels. That was why I'd asked Mireille to find accommodations he had no control over but that also wouldn't seem too unnatural of a choice. I knew I wouldn't be able to escape Lotton's eye entirely by doing something like this, but it was better than nothing.

"We'll be back by the time the evening bell sounds," I said. "Please take care of Alice for me, Mireille."

"Of course, miss."

"See you later, mama!"

Even though we'd only just set down our baggage, we didn't have time to rest. I took Lunoa and Misha with me to look for Gaien.

"This way, Miss Ellie," Misha said. She guided us using directions she'd written in a notebook until we arrived in front of a building.

"This is Mr. Gaien's workshop?" I asked. "It looks like a regular house to me."

While the building itself seemed well-made and sturdy, it lacked a large chimney or waterwheel like workshops often had.

"No, this is the store where he sells weapons and takes orders," Misha explained as she put her notebook away. "He keeps the location of his workshop private."

Misha and Lunoa entered the shop first.

"Welcome," someone said lazily. The voice belonged to a young dwarf woman. She took a good look at Lunoa and Misha as though appraising them. "Sorry, but we don't sell anything cheap here. There's a shop that sells affordable, reasonably good-quality self-defense weapons two streets over," she said, her tone curt.

As a merchant, I didn't really approve of the way she was treating prospective customers, but I also couldn't blame her for assuming Misha and Lunoa had entered this shop by mistake.

"Hello," I said as I stepped in.

The young woman looked at me, and her eyes widened in surprise.

"You..." she trailed off.

She clearly wanted to say something, but I pretended not to notice and started looking around. There weren't many weapons on display, and they were all very expensive. Even a small knife cost

several gold coins. I realized that despite the woman's tone, she hadn't intended to be mean to Misha and Lunoa when she'd told them about the cheaper store. That was likely her way of being considerate.

I picked up a dagger and a knife and brought them to the counter. "I'll take these."

"You know we can't offer discounts or payment plans, right?"

"Yes, that's fine." I turned to the side. "Misha."

"Yes, Miss Ellie." Misha took out a little leather pouch from her bag and started rummaging through it. She put down several gold coins on the counter.

The dwarf girl was shocked to see her take out enough money to purchase a medium-sized carriage so casually. After counting the coins, she looked back at me and said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I didn't mind." I handed the dagger to Misha and the knife to Lunoa. "You should have an unenchanted weapon on you too, Misha. As for you, Lunoa, a knife you can use in battle as well as for other purposes seemed fitting."

"Thank you very much, Miss Ellie," Misha said.

"Th-Thank you!" Lunoa exclaimed.

Under different circumstances, the two of them would have argued and tried not to accept my gifts, but they seemed to have understood that I was making a point by showcasing my buying power. Lunoa was a little shaken, but I felt the girls' reactions deserved a passing mark.

"My name is Ellie Leis," I said. "I'm a merchant operating in the imperial capital. I've come to commission Mr. Gaien."

"You want to commission a weapon? But you're a magician, aren't you?"

The dwarf's words surprised me a little. In battle, it was easy to tell how powerful someone was by sensing the mana they exuded, but we were simply talking at the moment. She shouldn't have been that focused on my mana, especially when I made a habit of intentionally suppressing it.

Her eyes darted to my hands and then to my feet. "Oh, you can also use a sword, I see. You're pretty good too."

“You can tell with a single glance? That’s impressive.”

“It’s become second nature to me. I see adventurers every day, after all.”

“I see.” I noticed several knives right next to her on the counter. “Oh, these right here...”

They looked more like regular working knives than ones used for combat, but they were beautifully forged. I could tell they were slightly different from the rest of the weapons in the shop. The mana inside Gaien’s weapons was concentrated within the blade, but these had mana evenly infused throughout the entire knife.

“Ah, these? I crafted them.”

“You did?”

As a general rule, it was preferable for mana to be concentrated in the blade, but spreading it so evenly required considerable skill.

“Yeah. I’m Kagali, Gaien’s disciple.”





"Oh my, I didn't know Mr. Gaien had a disciple. I apologize for failing to greet you accordingly."

"Well, I don't often make public appearances, so I wouldn't expect otherwise. Anyway, my master is kind of busy at the moment."

"Is he taking care of an urgent request?"

"Not exactly..." Kagali said dismissively. It looked like she didn't want to talk about it.

"I won't pry. We all have things we'd like to keep private."

"Sorry about that. I wouldn't want rumors to spread."

"We'll be in this city for a while, so we'll come back. If you see Mr. Gaien in the meantime, could you please tell him that Ellie Leis of Traitre is hoping to commission him?"

"I will. If you're giving me your name, I assume you must know my master."

"To be perfectly honest, we don't know each other well. We met only once in the imperial capital."

"In the capital? Ah, it must have been when he traveled there to attend a meeting of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council."

"Indeed. I had the honor to meet the members of the council. We didn't get to talk in private, but I think he might remember my name."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that... My master has a tendency to forget about things that don't interest him. In any case, tell me about the capital! It has to be much bigger than this city! And there must be many more people there!"

"Well, it *is* the largest city in the empire, after all."

"I've never left this city... I really wish I could see the capital, just once."

"It's not very far from here. You should visit," I told her. "If you ever do, come by the Traitre Commercial Firm. We'll show you around."

Gaien's disciple seemed to admire the capital. Such feelings were probably common among the youngsters who lived in the empire's other cities. Kagali kept talking about the capital, so I told her about a few famous tourist spots before bidding her farewell.

"Well then, we shall take our leave for today."

"All right. My master should be back in a few days, so please be patient until then."

"We will," I replied. "We'll drop by from time to time, so please let me know when he's back."

"Got it!"

After leaving Gaien's shop, I announced we'd be heading to the local Merchants' Guild.

"We're not here to do business, though, are we?" Lunoa asked.

"No, but I'd still like to stock up on some materials, and we'll need fodder and water for our horses."

"Let me see... Ores for developing the new cosmetics and fodder and water for the trip back... If I recall correctly, Special License holders are allowed to store their belongings in the guild's warehouses, so we can do that," Lunoa said.

"I'll leave the preparations to you two."

"We'll take care of it!"

I could now leave most small matters to Lunoa and Misha, which took a lot off my plate.

The entrance to the Merchants' Guild—which was located in the center of the city—was wide open. Even from the outside, we could see it was bustling with merchants who presumably wanted to purchase ores and weapons crafted by the dwarves.

"There aren't many dwarves inside the guild," Misha remarked, looking at the merchants crowding the meeting tables and staring at the information board intently.

"I wouldn't say that. It just seems like there's relatively few dwarves because there are so many people of other races. I assume most of those people are merchants here on business," I replied. "Now then, Lunoa and Misha, could the two of you handle the fodder and water? I'll purchase the ores while you do that."

"Of course," Lunoa said.

"We're on it, Miss Ellie," Misha added.

I watched the two of them join the line of merchants, then I headed toward a different counter.

"Hello. I'd like to order ores. Am I at the right place?" I asked.

"Yes. Are you a member of the guild?"

"I am, although I've mostly relied on the branches in the Lebrick Margravate and the capital so far. I'm from the Traitre Commercial Firm," I said, handing him my card.

The guild employee's expression shifted in surprise, and he quickly put on his best business smile as he stood and returned my card. "I'm terribly sorry for failing to recognize you, Miss Leis. Please follow me inside."

"Thank you. Two of my employees are currently arranging for supplies over there. Could you lead them to me when they're done?"

"Of course, Miss Leis."

He quickly had another employee take over his counter and led me to one of the drawing rooms. Only nobles usually received such courtesy, but as a Special License holder, I apparently was important enough for it too.

We'd almost reached the drawing room when I heard a voice in the corridor.

"I will take my leave. Farewell."

Someone had just opened a door that had the words "Section Chief's Office" written on it. A man came out, his head still low from bowing. He turned around, stood up straight, and saw me.

"Huh?" The man froze on the spot. He was plump, had short hair, and bore a slave crest on his neck.

"Oh my. It's been a while," I said. "I believe the last time we met was at your trial, Mr. Gazaru."

The man was Gazaru Jackman, the immoral merchant whose firm I'd taken over right after arriving in the empire.

"It has been a very long time indeed, Miss Leis. Please, just call me Gazaru. There is no need for such formality."

"I certainly did not expect this," I said.

Gazaru was bowing to me respectfully. Oddly enough, I couldn't feel the slightest hint of animosity coming from him. He'd technically been the one in the wrong back then, but I'd still tricked him and stolen his company from him, and he'd ended up becoming a slave. I had always been convinced that the man loathed me.

"I've had a lot of time to contemplate my life," he replied.

"Do you work as a slave in the mines now?"

"No, I do office work."

"I see. Well, keep at it. Good luck."

After this peculiar reunion, I was able to place my order for ore. Lunoa and Misha rejoined me, and we left the guild. We didn't have anything else to do for the day, so we casually strolled through the market and workshops before returning to the inn earlier than planned.

"Welcome back," Mireille greeted us. "You're early."

I had thought I'd be able to see Gaien today, so I'd factored in time to explain my request in detail and negotiate with him. Instead, I'd just had a brief chat with Kagali.

"Mr. Gaien was absent," I said. "His disciple told me he'd be back in a few days, and I left a message with her."

"Oh, is that so? What shall we do in the meantime, then?"

"We've come all the way here, so let's do some sightseeing. This city is mostly famous for its hot springs and weapons, but there is a lot more we can experience. Dwarf cuisine is said to be delicious, and their engravings are a sight to behold."

◆

Today was the day of Gazaru's monthly report to the Merchants' Guild. After he awoke, he quickly washed up and got ready. While his living space was very small, Gazaru was lucky enough to have a private room with a well close by. He'd lived here for over a year already, so he'd long since grown used to it.

"Oh, you're up already? You're early, Gazaru."

"Good morning. Today is the day I go to the guild, so that's why," he replied politely.

The man who'd just spoken to him was the government official in charge of this particular mine—and the highest-ranking person here. He was also the one who supervised the slaves, and Gazaru knew not to defy him in any way, shape, or form.

When he'd first been brought here, Gazaru had been convinced

that he'd die before he could ever earn enough money to buy back his freedom. However, contrary to his expectations, he hadn't been sent inside the mine to work in perilous conditions.

The dwarves were of the opinion that mining was better left to *experienced* miners. Letting amateurs dig around blindly could only lead to tragedy. And so, Gazaru's job was to catalog the ores that were mined and help out with the administrative side of things. It was mostly desk work with some errands on the side. Gazaru got to eat three meals a day and his safety was guaranteed, which was more than most criminal slaves could ask for. He'd lost a little weight, but he was even healthier overall than he used to be.

"Please excuse me, sir. I must start working," Gazaru said.

"Sure."

After bidding goodbye to his supervisor, Gazaru greeted every miner and administrator he crossed paths with on his way to the office where he worked. Despite his condition as a slave, Gazaru was surprisingly fulfilled. He felt as though he'd gone back to the days when he'd first started his business, and his greatest joy was the smiles on his clients' faces—not the endless pursuit of profit.

Gazaru spent the morning dutifully completing his work. After his supervisor gave him the documents he had to bring to the guild for his report, he once again tidied up his appearance before leaving the building. He worked right next to the mine, but the city wasn't very far away, and wagons often came and went between the two places. Heading to the guild wasn't particularly difficult.

"Oh, hey Gazaru. Going to the Merchants' Guild?" a miner asked him as he hopped into the wagon.

"Yes. Sorry to trouble you."

It was the miner's day off, so Gazaru assumed he was most likely heading to the city to drink. The wagon rattled rhythmically for an hour before arriving in Hephaest. The miner headed straight for his favorite bar while Gazaru walked to the Merchants' Guild.

Gazaru stated his business at the guild's information counter. The employees, who were used to his monthly visits, immediately brought him to the man in charge of the ores.

After giving the section chief the documents and answering his

questions, Gazaru politely excused himself and left his office. When he turned around, however, he saw a woman he knew. He couldn't stop himself from freezing in place.

"Huh?"

"Oh my," said the beautiful woman with silver hair, looking at him in surprise. "It's been a while. I believe the last time we met was at your trial, Mr. Gazaru."

The woman was Ellie Leis, chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm, and the reason Gazaru was now a slave.

"It has been a very long time indeed, Miss Leis. Please, just call me Gazaru. There is no need for such formality," Gazaru answered, pushing himself against the wall to make room for her to pass. He bowed.

"I certainly did not expect this."

"I've had a lot of time to contemplate my life."

When he had first become a slave, Gazaru had deeply loathed her. However, as word of her achievements had spread, he had realized how different the two of them were. Thus, his hatred had gradually faded.

Gazaru had spent a lot of time thinking of his encounter with Ellie, and he'd eventually understood that she'd tricked him on purpose. She'd focused on snatching his client base, lured him into stealing the faulty soap recipe, and built ties with the Church of Ibris in advance to put the nail in the coffin. It had all been a carefully crafted plan. When that realization had dawned upon him, he'd understood that bearing a grudge against her was entirely pointless. If Ellie had so wished, she could have simply killed him and taken over his company in a heartbeat.

"Do you work as a slave in the mines now?"

"No, I do office work."

"I see. Well, keep at it. Good luck," Ellie said noncommittally, as though she didn't care much. She walked past him without sparing him another glance.

Gazaru watched her enter a drawing room and then returned to the lobby. He still had some time to kill before the next wagon left for the mine. He was pondering getting a meal somewhere when a

merchant walked up to him.

"Excuse me," he said to grab Gazaru's attention. "You just came from the guild, right?"

"Huh? Well, yes."

"Did you see the woman who just entered, then?"

"Are you talking about Miss Ellie Leis?"

"Yes! Yes! Her! Ellie Leis of Traitre! Did she say anything? I'd love to hear about it!"

The merchant offered to treat him to a meal, so Gazaru followed him. The two men talked while eating rather expensive food. Gazaru had no idea why Ellie had been at the guild, but considering the location of the drawing room to which she'd been shown, he figured she most likely had wanted to buy ore. He told the merchant as much.

Since Ellie Leis had a Special License, there were likely countless merchants hoping to make money off her one way or another. Gazaru realized this, so he only told the man relatively harmless bits of information and conjectures. Eventually, though, he started feeling like something was off. Although the merchant was making it sound like he was curious about Ellie's business, it seemed to Gazaru like he was more interested in her entourage. Convinced that something fishy was afoot, Gazaru wrapped up the conversation as quickly as he could and left.

◆

"Ha ha ha! Now *that's* how things should be!" Friede exclaimed, his cheerful laughter echoing throughout the room.

He raised his glass of wine triumphantly. Friede snaked his other arm around Sylvia, who was sitting next to him, and rested his hand on her waist. Recently, he'd run into monsters and bandits by chance in practically every region he'd visited, and he'd taken them all out. In the wake of these exploits, Friede's popularity among the people was now skyrocketing. This had prompted some of the nobles—who'd been waiting to see which way the wind would blow—to start supporting Friede.

"Yes, indeed! You're *absolutely* correct, Your Highness! No one else but the direct male heir of the king is fit to become our next ruler! I, Thomas, shall follow and support you every step of the way!" said the small man sitting across from Friede and Sylvia. He wore a crooked smile and rubbed his hands together as he spoke.

Friede's expression soured upon hearing the man's words. Thomas was one of the nobles who supported him, so he had to grant him an audience, but he strongly disliked the man.

"So, care to tell me what you want, turncoat who started wagging his tail for me the moment Elizabeth was gone?" Friede challenged.

Sylvia didn't know Thomas, and she tilted her head in confusion. "Turncoat?"

"You see, Sylvie, the good Count Flambant here used to follow Elizabeth around like her damned shadow, mindlessly nodding along to whatever she said," Friede spat out.

Cold sweat ran down the sides of Thomas's face as he listened to the prince's mocking tone. He wiped it off with a handkerchief, all the while keeping a forced simper plastered on his face.

"P-Please, don't say that, Your Highness. I was always devoted to you. I only ever obeyed that nasty woman because she was your fiancée."

"Hmph. I wonder."

"I swear to you it's true! In fact, I've even brought you a gift today that I'm sure will convince you of my sincerity."

Thomas started rubbing his hands together faster as he issued instructions to one of his servants, who'd been waiting by the door. The servant went out and came back moments later with a stout man. His appearance contrasted starkly with that of Thomas, who was exceedingly thin, but the two men shared the same vulgar smile.

"This is my son, Cedre," Thomas said.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness and Lady Sylvia. I'm Cedre, the heir to House Flambant."

While Cedre's introduction was polite, he practically undressed Sylvia with his lecherous, insistent gaze. Friede didn't seem to notice, but Sylvia certainly did. She clung to Friede, shrinking in on

herself.

Cedre's disgusting smile irked Friede as much as his father's did. "Get to the point," he ordered, barely concealing his irritation. "I'm a busy man. I don't have all day."

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness." Thomas turned toward his servants. "Hurry it up!"

A pair of servants worked together to carry a heavy package to the table that separated Friede and Sylvia from Thomas. Cedre swiftly opened it to reveal a sturdy safe.

"What is this?" Friede asked.

"A safe that traitorous woman, Elizabeth Leiston, left behind."

"What?! Why would *you* have that?!"

"You must be aware that she had bases of operation for her business in every territory, right, Your Highness?"

"Of course."

"Well, we found this safe in the building belonging to her former company in the Flambant County. When I heard about it, it was about to be handed over to someone else, but I retrieved it for you."

"Interesting. And what's inside?"

"We have yet to open it."

"What?!"

"It's been sealed with powerful magic. A common locksmith couldn't possibly succeed in opening it," Thomas explained.

"So you've given me a useless box I can't open?" Friede sighed in annoyance, convinced that his visitors had wasted his time.

Thomas gave a slight apologetic bow before speaking up again. "Please wait, Your Highness. That is why I brought my son along today."

"Hm?" Friede found himself intrigued again.

"Well, go on," Thomas said, looking at his son.

"Yes, father. Please have a look at this, Your Highness," Cedre said. He made a show of pulling out a key from his pocket.

"What is that key?" Friede asked.

"It's a magic item, Your Highness. A fairy key."

"A fairy key?"

"Indeed. I found it inside a dungeon. It's a relic from the Old

Kingdom, heh heh."

Despite what he'd said, Cedre hadn't actually found the key himself—nor had he ever entered a dungeon, for that matter. What he truly meant was that the adventuring party he'd hired had found it. Nobles often presented things this way; as far as they were concerned, the accomplishments of their subordinates were entirely theirs. Friede could see right through Cedre, and his irritation grew.

"I was struck with admiration at my son's bravery," Thomas said. "And the first thought that came to mind was that my outstanding heir could surely be of use to you thanks to this wonderful discovery!"

"Enough details; get on with it," Friede replied frigidly. He had quickly grown tired of listening to Thomas sing his son's praises.

"This fairy key can force magic seals to open, heh heh," Cedre declared. He pushed the tip of the key inside the lock and turned it once. There was a soft click. "Please open it and see what's inside, Your Highness."

"*You* check it," Friede retorted.

"M-Me, Your Highness?"

"Yes, you. Hurry up."

Cedre didn't seem to like the idea very much, but Friede glared at his father and Thomas elbowed Cedre in the side, urging him to open the box. Reluctantly, he did as he was bid. Inside the safe were countless documents.

"Pfft. It's not money," Cedre grumbled, taking out a wad of papers from inside.

"What do they say?" Friede asked.

"I don't really get it, but they don't seem all that valuable, do they?"

Friede took the documents from Cedre and started reading. As he did, a smile slowly replaced his aggravated expression. "Ha ha ha! This is perfect! I'll reward you for this!"

"I-In that case, would you please make my son your aide, Your Highness?!" Thomas asked, pouncing on the opportunity with enthusiasm.

"Urgh... Well... All right, all right. I'll allow it. Start coming to the

palace regularly. I'll find a use for you."

"It's an honor, Your Highness. I'll put my many talents at your disposal, heh heh."

Cedre's arrogance annoyed Friede to no end, but he simply replied, "Sure. You've done great today. You may retire."

"Yes, Your Highness. Before I go, however, if you don't mind me asking...is that handmaid over there one of yours?"

Cedre pointed at a young handmaid in a corner of the room. Under normal circumstances, a waiting maid should have been in charge of welcoming visitors to the prince's drawing room, not a lowly handmaid. However, Friede's past mistakes had led to severe cuts in his retinue. Still, he had so little regard for Thomas that he had simply grabbed an impressionable maid from a corner of the palace and ordered her to make tea for him. Needless to say, as a proud royal, Friede hadn't touched it. He'd never take a sip of tea that such a lowly girl had brewed.

"No, she's not one of mine," Friede replied.

"Is that so? I just had to ask because...she's quite charming, heh heh."

"Charming...? Well, I suppose she's not repulsive or else she wouldn't be allowed to work in the palace, but she's just a commoner."

"That only makes it better, Your Highness. There's only so much you can do to a noble girl," Cedre replied with a wicked grin.

Friede was already tired of this conversation. He sighed and turned to the maid. "Hey, you."

"Y-Yes?"

"What's your name?"

"Anna, Your Highness."

"From now on, your job will be to take care of this man. Cedre will become one of my aides and be given an office in the palace. You'll report to him whenever he's there. I'll speak to the head maid directly to put things in place."

"T-Take care of him...?"

"You'll heed his every order. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Your Highness..." Anna replied, her voice shaking.

"Now then, that'll be all for today— No, wait, Cedre. You said this key could open any lock, didn't you?"

"Heh heh. Yes, Your Highness."

"I see. Follow me, then."

Friede led Sylvia and Cedre through the corridors of the palace. They walked for several minutes until they reached the deepest part of the palace: the living quarters of the royal family.

"We're here," Friede said. He stopped in front of the crown princess's preparation room. This was the room that Elizabeth had occupied whenever she had to stay over at the palace because of her princess lessons or the duties linked to her position.

"Your Highness, what is this room?" Sylvia asked.

"The room that should have been given to you," he replied.

"B-But I received my own room when I officially became your fiancée!"

"The one they gave you used to be a guest room."

"Why wasn't Lady Sylvia given this room?" Cedre asked.

How impudent, Friede thought. He clicked his tongue but replied anyway. "Elizabeth was using this room, and she always sealed it with magic. Her jewelry, dresses, and likely the cash and promissory notes she used for her business must still be in there."

"Oh! So that's why you've brought me here," Cedre replied.

"Exactly. I should be able to buy new dresses and jewelry for Sylvie with what's inside *and* replenish my funds for the future. Open the door, Cedre."

"Leave it to me, Your Highness!"

Cedre's protruding belly shook as he took a resolute step forward. He fished out the small fairy key from his pocket and pushed it inside the lock. Layer upon layer of magic circles emerged from the door, and as Cedre twisted the key, they shattered one by one.

"Elizabeth's seals were quite sturdy, but the key still functioned, Your Highness. The door is open, heh heh."

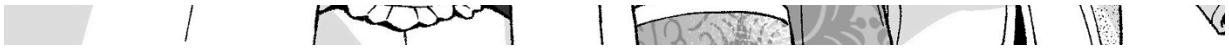
Friede clicked his tongue once more, repulsed by the way Cedre's nostrils flared as he gloated. The prince reached for the doorknob, but Cedre stopped him.

“Please wait, Your Highness! If this was the room of that foul woman, who knows what traps might await inside?”

“Hmm... All right, then. You go in first, Cedre.”

“Huh?! Me?!”





"Stop dallying. Go in."

"B-But why not ask a servant to go in instead...?"

"Do it!" Friede ordered.

"U-Understood..." Cedre grimaced as he pushed the door open and stepped in. The door closed behind him, but neither Sylvia nor Friede dared touch it. After a few minutes, Cedre returned. "Doesn't look like there's anything dangerous in here, Your Highness."

"Good. Let's go in, Sylvie."

"O-Okay..."

Friede and Sylvia entered the main room. No one had cleaned it since Elizabeth's departure, so a layer of dust had settled over every piece of furniture, but the room was otherwise tidy. On a desk lay some documents and ancient tomes that Elizabeth had likely been in the middle of deciphering. Countless more papers were neatly arranged on shelves.

"There weren't any traps in the adjoining room either," Cedre said.

"Good," Friede replied.

In the adjoining room, they found some magic items that Elizabeth had been studying and ancient records she'd pulled from the archives, as well as dresses and jewelry.

"Ha ha ha! With so many treasures lying around, I certainly won't want for money for a while," Friede said. As he looked around, he noticed that Sylvia was staring at a small box full of jewels, mesmerized. "You can pick out anything you'd like, Sylvie."

"Huh? But isn't everything here the property of either Lady Elizabeth or the kingdom?"

"Everything she owned should belong to me. I deserve at least that much in compensation for everything she's done. As for the kingdom's assets, they naturally belong to the future king, don't they?"

"Well..." While Sylvia was uneducated, she still understood Friede's current situation. Bulat calling back Adel could only mean one of two things: He'd already given up on his son, or he was considering doing so. If that happened, her position as Friede's fiancée would put her in danger too. When Sylvia reached that

conclusion, she suddenly felt as though her brain were fogging up. "Huh? Didn't I plan to talk to Her Highness...?" she whispered, confused.

"What's wrong, Sylvie?"

"N-Nothing, my prince. I'm overjoyed and was having a hard time deciding which one I liked best."

"If you're hesitating, just take them all."

In his elation over how things had gone his way, Friede hadn't noticed that Cedre, who'd entered the room first, had tucked a small box inside his pocket.

After he exited Elizabeth's former room, Friede called for Anna. He was eager to get rid of Cedre and ordered her to find him an office and show him around. Cedre grinned and put an arm around Anna's waist as the poor girl trembled in fear.

"I look forward to you showing me around, heh heh," he said with a wicked cackle as the two walked off.

Cedre followed Anna to his new office in the palace, his arm practically glued to her waist. As soon as they entered the room, he locked the door and took out a soundproofing magic item, activating it.

Anna, who'd been flushed and shivering the entire time, suddenly calmed down and bowed respectfully. "You've worked hard today, Lord Cedre," she said.

"It certainly was hard work. I wish I could have had a quiet day instead," he replied with a sigh before sitting down on the sofa. His every move was elegant, a striking contrast to his heavyset frame. "Any guards on the lookout?"

"We passed three on our way here," Anna responded. She scanned the area for hints of anyone's presence. "There's someone right outside the door and another spying from below the window."

"Do you reckon they're Her Highness's people?"

"It's likely. They started watching us as soon as the prince made me your personal maid."

"What of this room?"

"I believe it is safe," Anna said. She started skillfully brewing tea.

While he waited, Cedre took out a small box.

"Is that the...?" Anna trailed off.

"It is," Cedre confirmed. "I'm thankful the prince is such a simpleton. A little nudge in the right direction was all it took for him to let me enter first. It made retrieving this surprisingly easy. I would have had a much harder time fooling Her Highness. Anyway, you know who to send this to, Anna. Make sure to use the secret route."

"Yes, Lord Cedre."

"All right, my work here is done, then."

"Not quite. You're to remain by the prince's side and relay every piece of information you obtain."

"We have others in the palace. Aren't their reports enough?"

"Those are the orders, Lord Cedre."

Cedre heaved a sigh. "And here I wanted to take it easy in my domain..."

"There's nothing I can do about that. You've decided to serve her. You must complete the tasks given to you."

"Maybe I should betray her, then," Cedre said. "I'm not interested in sinking with that simpleton prince...but I imagine the princess could be a sound choice."

Cedre had scarcely finished uttering those words when he saw Anna's hand move. The next second, three thin knives flew at him so fast that they were practically invisible. Cedre stopped them all before they could hit him.

"Hey, that's dangerous," Cedre grumbled.

"You dared to suggest you'd betray her in front of me. There is no room for you to change your mind. You *will* continue to put your life on the line to serve her."

"My father's a fanatic, but you're not any better."

"I appreciate your praise."

"The fact that you genuinely thought I was praising you scares me even more."

Cedre knew Anna's devotion to their master bordered on zealotry, and his father was just like her. People mocked Thomas for being a turncoat, but the truth was that he hopped from one faction to the next to gather information and manipulate the nobles.

Cedre was loyal to his master too, but he wasn't blindly devoted

to her the way his father and Anna were. His loyalty was born out of self-interest.

"Oh well. I suppose I'll count myself happy as long as I receive an appropriate reward for a job well done," he said.

Thankfully, their master knew how to properly compensate others for their efforts, and Cedre decided that wagging his tail for her a while longer was worth it.

◇

On the day after we met Kagali, we went out to lunch with Tida. We were currently on our way to a restaurant she had recommended that served traditional dwarf cuisine.

"What are some of the most popular dishes among dwarves?" I asked.

"The first one that comes to mind is dwarven stir-fry! It's a hearty dish with all sorts of ingredients cooked on a huge iron plate at the same time! At the restaurant we're going to, the chefs even make it right in front of the customers!"

"That sounds interesting!" Misha exclaimed.

"I've never heard of that dish in the capital," Lunoa said.

"It's a bit of a casual dish, not the sort that would be popular in the capital," Tida replied.

In the midst of our culinary discussion, we arrived at the restaurant. The layout inside the stone building was quite unusual—a lengthy counter connected to a large, continuous iron plate. Several dwarf chefs stood behind the counter, and one of them greeted us energetically as we entered.

"Welcome! Sit wherever you'd like!"

We found some empty seats and the chefs asked us what we wanted to eat. Since most of us had never experienced dwarven stir-fry, we let Tida order for everyone.

"We'll have spicy great boa, sweet-and-salty mushrooms and vegetables...and whatever else you recommend at the moment, chef! Oh, and I'll have some dwarf liquor too! Do you want anything to drink, Miss Ellie?"

It was barely midday, yet Tida was already about to start imbibing. In the capital, most establishments did not serve alcohol at lunchtime, but this was the city of the dwarves. Alcohol was practically water as far as the dwarves were concerned, and you could buy it absolutely anywhere. There were even street vendors selling ale on the main thoroughfares. Since I was in the dwarves' land, I figured I should have a taste of their culture.

"I'll have a glass of dwarf liquor too," I said. "Could you please cut it with soda?"

"You got it," the chef replied.

"Miss Ellie, what is soda?" Lunoa asked.

"It's carbonated water. Usually, alchemists make it, but you can gather natural soda in this area."

"It turns into regular water after some time, so you can't really find it in the capital," Tida added.

"I see," said Lunoa. "In that case, could I please have mead cut with soda?"

"I'll have the same thing as Miss Lunoa," Misha said.

"I want the same too!" Alice chirped.

I shook my head. "You can have fruit juice with soda, Alice."

The little girl pouted. There was no legal minimum age to consume alcohol, but it wasn't recommended for young children. I, like the children of other eminent nobles, had been trained from childhood to withstand alcohol—as well as poison—but I'd never given Alice a single drop of either.

Merchants also typically built some resistance to alcohol to avoid being tricked into signing unfavorable deals after drinks with potential business partners. That was why I'd been encouraging Lunoa and Misha to slowly get used to imbibing ever since they'd started working for me. I'd been surprised to discover that Lunoa was great at holding her liquor; she had the perfect constitution for a merchant. Misha was average.

"A glass of wine for me, please," Mireille told the chef. She usually grimaced at anyone drinking in the middle of the day, but the atmosphere must have gotten to her too.

One of the chefs started cooking hearty great boa steaks with

herbs and spices right in front of us. He grilled both sides, and when the aroma of the seasonings started wafting through the air, he poured some strong dwarf liquor on it and set it ablaze with his magic. Once the alcohol burned off and the flames disappeared, the chef cut the great boa meat into bite-sized pieces. In the meantime, another cook was busy sautéing an array of mushrooms and vegetables in an appetizing sauce.

The chefs prepared plates of meat and vegetables for each of us to try. While this was indeed a somewhat casual dish, the dwarves were so skilled and their movements so impressive that I had a feeling the nobles of the imperial capital could very well enjoy this.

I tasted the fare. The flavors delighted my tongue but packed a punch nonetheless. From the way the dwarves seasoned their dishes, it was clear that they intended them to be most enjoyable when paired with a glass of liquor.

"This is delicious," Lunoa said.

"I agree," Misha said. "The meat is so tender."

"Mama, the mushrooms are yummy!" Alice exclaimed.

"They are," I agreed.

After that, we got to try out a smorgasbord of delicious dishes, including steel-plate-toasted bread coated in garlic paste and patties made from minced wild rabbit. For dessert, we had fruits soaked in liquor, except for Alice, who got a regular fruit dish.

"I'm going to head back to my room," Tida said as we exited the restaurant. "Let's go out for a meal again when we get the chance."

"Sure," I replied.

Since Tida was staying at different lodgings from us, we went our separate ways.

"The inn she's staying at isn't that way, is it?" Lunoa asked, watching Tida walk away.

"That direction leads to the bar and tavern district," Misha replied. "They're open from the early hours of the morning here."

It seemed like the two of them had already gotten used to Tida and her habits.

◇

On the following day, as promised, I returned to Gaien's shop to see Kagali. Today, too, she was watching over the shop, clearly bored.

"Oh, it's you, Ellie," she said. "The kids aren't with you today?"

"They went out with my daughter to look at this city's craft stalls."

"You have a daughter?"

"She's my adoptive daughter, but yes."

"I see. I'm sorry to tell you this when you've come all this way, but my master still isn't back yet."

"Well, that's out of your control. I still have plenty of time, so I'll wait for him to return."

"Feel free to do so. In the meantime, could you tell me some more about the capital?"

"Of course."

Kagali brewed tea for the both of us, and we chatted for a while. She wasn't only eager to learn more about the imperial capital; she also seemed interested in discovering the world beyond this city.

"It must be nice to be a merchant. You get to see so many different places," she said.

"You don't plan on traveling yourself, Kagali?"

"My parents are pretty strict... They wouldn't allow it—they say the roads are too dangerous. I'm not a kid anymore, though."

"They must treasure you a lot. And I have to tell you that they're right: Traveling *is* dangerous."

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely. We've been attacked by brigands several times."

"Seriously?! I hope nothing bad happened! The kids I saw last time were with you, weren't they?!"

"Don't worry. Those girls aren't so weak they'd let mere brigands best them."

"Come to think of it, you bought knives for them. Are they training to be bodyguards?"

"Not at all. The catkin girl is training to become an attendant, and the human girl aims to be a merchant."

"Why are they able to fight, then?"

"In this day and age, it's vital to know how to protect yourself at

the very least."

"Really?"

"Yes," I insisted.

Considering the look on her face, Kagali didn't seem entirely convinced. When I told her about the cities and villages I'd visited so far, however, she listened with rapt attention. Then, the sound of bells pealed from the Central Square, and Kagali practically leaped to her feet.

"Oh no! I lost track of time! Sorry, Ellie, but I still have some work to do!"

"I understand. I'll take my leave, then."

"Thanks for today," she said. "I had a lot of fun."

"Me too," I replied, waving goodbye. I was about to exit the shop when Kagali spoke again.

"My master should be back in a couple of days at most."

"Really?"

"Yep. He's actually supposed to return tonight at the earliest. I can't tell you where he's gone, but I suppose giving you a clearer timeline won't hurt."

"Thank you, Kagali; I appreciate it. I also wouldn't want to bother him immediately upon his return, so I'll come back again in a few days."

"Okay! I look forward to your next visit."

Thanks to the good news, I was in high spirits as I went back to the inn, but when I arrived, the innkeeper looked troubled.

"Oh, welcome back, Miss Ellie," she greeted me.

"Hello. Um... Is something wrong?"

"Well, actually..." The innkeeper turned around and opened a safe. She retrieved a letter and handed it to me. "This morning, while you were all away, a messenger from our lord came by to deliver this. It's for you."

I accepted the letter and scrutinized it. The ink was of fine quality, and the seal bore the crest of the marquess who ruled over Hephaest. The name of the sender was Lekius Hephaest—the current head of House Hephaest.

"It seems to be legitimate," I whispered to myself.

I was here to place a personal order rather than to do business, so I hadn't bothered contacting the marquess. What could he want with me? I was considering the matter when someone called for me from behind.

"Mama!"

"Oh, there you are, Alice. I'm glad you're here," I said, picking up the little girl as she ran into my arms.

Behind her were Mireille, Lunoa, and Misha. They'd just returned to the inn.

"Miss Ellie, did something happen?" Mireille asked, looking at the letter in my hand.

"It's from the lord of this land," I replied. "I've yet to read it."

After heading back to my room, I opened the letter. It started with polite pleasantries before praising Traitre's notoriety. It was all rather straightforward. The marquess seemed to want me to open a branch store in Hephaest's capital.

"I didn't expect the contents to be so ordinary," Lunoa said.

"I thought he'd ask you to eradicate the monsters that are said to be rampaging in the mines," Misha added.

An amused smile found its way to my lips. "He'd never ask that of a merchant."

"I doubt he's all that serious anyway," Mireille said. "It's a well-known fact that Miss Ellie has stopped opening new branches for the time being."

"Why write, then?" Lunoa asked.

"He probably just wants to get acquainted with Miss Ellie for now," she replied.

I agreed with Mireille's conjecture. "If the two of us build a relationship now, I may be more inclined to choose Hephaest when I start opening branch stores again. He's inviting me for a meal at his residence and encourages me to bring all of you, even Alice. That's his way of signaling that he doesn't intend to conduct serious business negotiations at the moment."

"What will you do, Miss Ellie?" Lunoa asked.

"I see no reason to refuse. Building connections with important nobles is always beneficial for merchants," I said.

"Um... If it's all right...could I come too?" Misha asked. Her hesitant voice betrayed her nervousness.

"Of course you can, Misha. He seems to have researched me a little in advance and clearly knows who's traveling with me. As I said earlier, he's invited our entire group."

Lekius had even specified that I was welcome to bring the carbuncle along if I wished to.

"I know, but...I'm a slave."

"That won't be a problem," Mireille said. "I've also done my own research, and it appears the marquess is not one to place much importance on status. To be honest, I believe one of his subordinates likely wrote this invitation on his behalf. From what I've heard about his disposition, he would have simply come to this inn himself instead of bothering with a letter if he'd been left to his own devices."

"Oh, so he's that sort of person," I said.

A daring and needlessly active free spirit, huh? You sometimes ran into others like him among military-oriented nobles. If they were smart and knew to listen to their advisors, these types were often wonderful lords. If they weren't, their proactive tendencies led to catastrophes. Considering the prosperous state of Hephaest, I assumed the marquess was the former.

"I'll accept the invitation," I said. "The current marquess is Mr. Gaien's brother-in-law. Getting acquainted with him can't hurt. Mireille, please send him a reply. Lunoa and Misha, I'm putting you in charge of preparing fitting gifts."

"Understood, Miss Ellie! For starters, we'll need alcohol..." Misha said. "Miss Mireille, do you have information on the marquess's family?"

"Everything is summarized here," Mireille said, handing her a memo.

"His wife and daughter will surely appreciate Traitre's products, but what should we get for his son?" Lunoa asked Misha as the two read through Mireille's notes.

I left the two girls to their discussion. Lunoa knew which products I stocked in my grimoire for such situations, and I trusted they'd do

a fine job picking out which ones to give to the marchioness and her daughter.

We couldn't possibly go to a meal at an important noble's house in our everyday clothes, though. I was considering taking out some of the dresses I kept in my grimoire when someone pulled on my sleeve. It was Alice. She'd been quietly eating a snack with Carol until now.

"And me, mama?"

"Huh?" *Oh.* I'd just assigned tasks to everyone else, so I assumed Alice also wanted to be given some sort of mission. "Hmm... I know! How about you help me pick out dresses for everyone, Alice?"

"Okay!"

◆

Lunoa woke up early the next morning. After Ellie had received a letter from the marquess, the rest of the day had been hectic. First, Lunoa had picked out presents with Misha. Then, after getting Ellie's approval, the two had tried on the dresses that Ellie and Alice had selected for them.

"It's too early," Lunoa grumbled, looking out the window. The sky had only just started brightening.

Lunoa's throat felt a little dry, so she reached for the pitcher she kept on her nightstand. She was surprised to find it lighter than she'd expected. There was barely any water left inside it.

She got up, careful not to wake up Misha, who was sleeping on the bed right next to hers, and left the room to refill the pitcher. If she remembered correctly, guests were free to take water from the large jugs in the dining hall.

Lunoa descended the stairs as silently as she could, but when she was about to enter the dining hall, she noticed a small flame. Someone was sitting at a table, writing by candlelight—her mentor and employer, Ellie Leis.

"Oh my. Lunoa? What are you doing out of bed at such an hour?" Ellie asked.

"I woke up and felt thirsty. I came down for some water."

"I see."

Ellie lifted her finger and the pitcher in Lunoa's hand suddenly got heavier. Lunoa hadn't felt Ellie's mana at all, but she'd filled it with her magic.

"Thank you."

Ellie smiled, then she suddenly seemed to remember something.

"Lunoa, do you have any plans today?"

The meal at the marquess's residence would take place the following day. They'd finished all the preparations yesterday, so Lunoa was technically free to do whatever she liked today. Misha would accompany Mireille on an errand, while Alice would stay at the inn with Ellie for her arithmetic lesson.

"I was thinking of visiting the market once more," Lunoa said. "Last time, there were many items I'd never seen in the capital."

"Regions that were ruled by different races before being incorporated into the empire, such as Hephaest, seem to have retained much of their culture. They have unique products and food."

"Many of which could catch on in the capital."

Ellie pondered Lunoa's words for a bit before standing up and walking over to her.

"You think like a true merchant now," she said. "I thought it might still be a little early for you, but it appears I was mistaken. This is the perfect opportunity."

Ellie summoned her Grimoire of Mammon, retrieved a leather pouch from it, and handed it to Lunoa.

"Um... What is this, Miss Ellie?"

"Fifty gold coins."

"Fifty?!"

"This is a loan," Ellie said. "Use the money to generate a profit. You're free to employ any means you'd like. I'll take ten gold coins as interest. As for the reimbursement deadline...one year should do."

Lunoa froze. That was *a lot* of money. And she needed to turn that sum into at least sixty coins before the year was up.

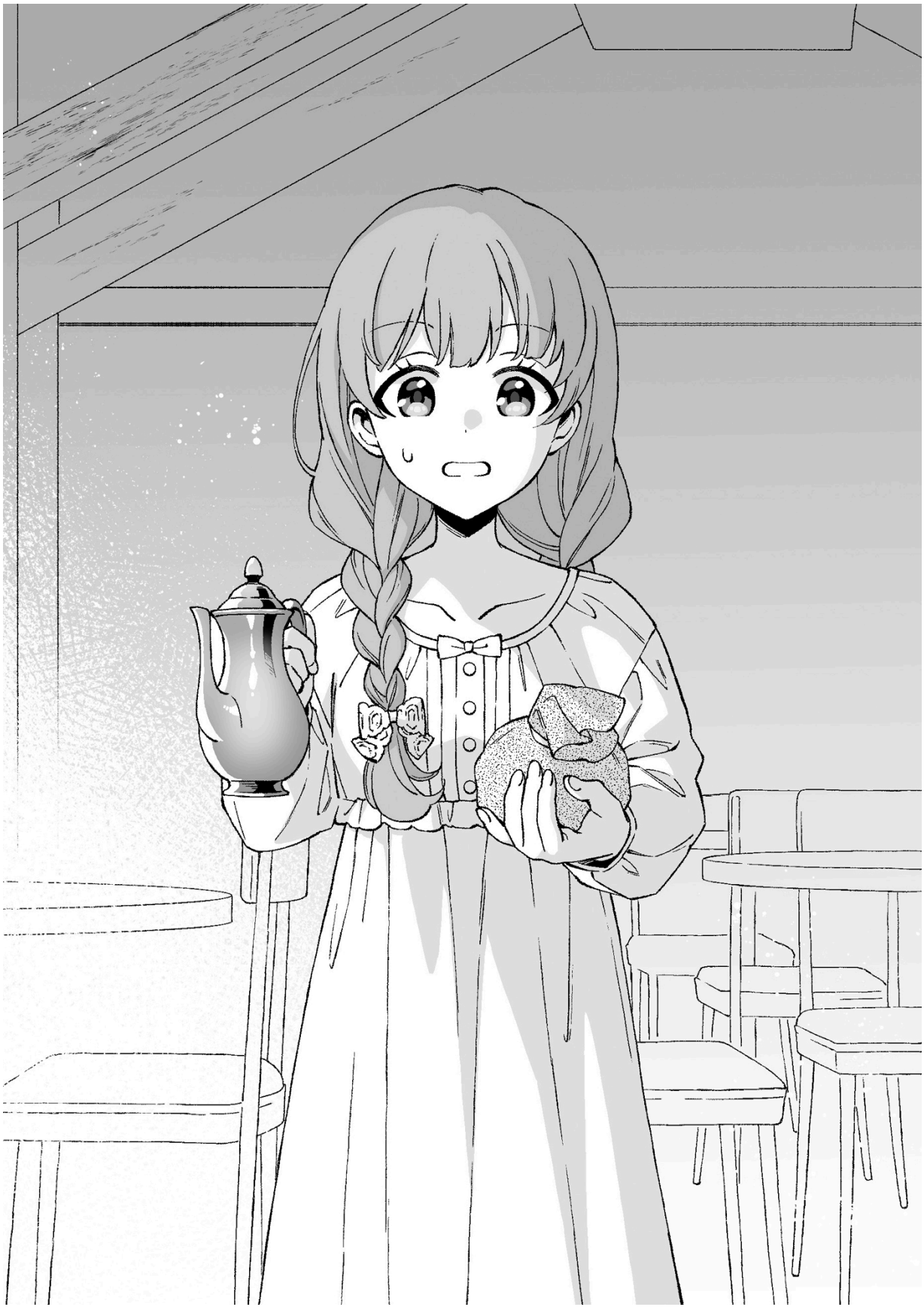
"It's all right if you never repay it," Ellie added. "But I want you to make a serious effort to increase that starting capital. I also forbid

you from taking another loan elsewhere. If you *absolutely* require additional funds, come to me and pitch your idea. I'll consider your proposal at that time."

"Huh?!" Lunoa blurted out.

Ellie seemed slightly drunk—a rare sight. After pushing the leather pouch into Lunoa's hands, she climbed the stairs with a smirk. She returned to her room, where Alice was still asleep.

Lunoa stood in silence next to the candle for a while, holding a pitcher full of cold water and a leather pouch filled with a tremendous sum of money.



◇

Two days after I sent a reply to the marquess, we boarded the carriage he'd sent to our inn. For once, we were all wearing gowns.

The marquess's residence stood near the center of the city. With its unrefined yet sturdy walls, it resembled a fortress more than a manor. In fact, it had been one of the dwarves' strongholds before their kingdom had passed under the dominion of the empire.

I couldn't help but gasp in admiration when we entered the fortress. In contrast to the plain exterior, the interior was brightly lit and decorated with fine sets of armor, weapons, and detailed gold-and-silver smithwork.

"Th-That's adamant!" Lunoa squealed, fixated on an ore that rested atop a display stand.

She must have used Item Analysis on it after wondering why a plain block of ore would be displayed alongside all of these wonderfully crafted objects.

"It's very impressive," I said. "I've never seen such a large specimen of natural adamant either."

"Mama, what's adamant?" Alice asked.

"Adamant is an alloy of mithril and orichalcum," I replied. "It's extremely rare for it to occur naturally and—" I paused after realizing that Alice hadn't understood anything I'd just said. "Hmm... Let's just say it's a very expensive rock."

"That rock costs a lot? How much?" she asked.

"Let me see... With that rock, you could buy twenty houses like the one we have in the capital."

"Really?! Amazing!"

A loud laugh interrupted our conversation. "It looks like your little lady has a good eye."

The voice belonged to a dwarf. Like others of his race, he was short in stature, but his muscles were so well trained that I could see them bulging through his ceremonial clothes. He was in his prime and exuded confidence. The servant who'd been guiding us through the fortress was so shocked to see him that he let out a

yelp.

"M-My lord?! How many times have I stressed the importance of welcoming guests in the drawing ro—"

"Oh, stop nagging me. It's no big deal! I listened to you and didn't go fetch them at their inn. That's good enough already, isn't it?" The marquess completely disregarded his troubled servant and extended his hand to me. "Nice to meet you. I'm Lekius, the head of House Hephaest."

Lekius led us through the corridors of his fortress. However, instead of taking us to a drawing room, he brought us to a dining hall. The table had already been set.

Etiquette dictated that a host should take a visiting merchant like me to a drawing room for a chat *before* any meal, but Lekius didn't seem to care about abiding by conventions.

"Everyone knows that conversations are much livelier after a glass or two," he said. "Come, let us have a carefree meal."

He'd made his stance clear enough. We all sat down as our eyes roamed over the lavish spread of dwarf cuisine on the table. Lekius —or perhaps his servants—had thought of everything: There was even a small basket full of magic gemstones in front of Alice for Carol to eat. It was a thoughtful gesture, but the level of preparedness reminded me that I couldn't leave anything to chance either.

We made small talk as we ate. After the dessert, the servants brought another course of alcohol and snacks.

Lekius looked over at Alice. "Children can't enjoy alcohol. Someone can take little Alice to another room to play. I believe we have some picture books for her."

"Misha, could you accompany Alice?" I asked.

Alice and Misha left the room with one of Lekius's servants. Then, our host turned to me.

"Now then, Miss Ellie, I hate to beat around the bush, so I'll be direct. Won't you open a store in my city?"

Sure enough, that was the point of this meeting. The Hephaest Marquessate was thriving economically thanks to its abundance of various ores, but those were finite resources. Lekius's plan to invite

influential merchants to develop other industries in his territory was a good one, but...

"I'm terribly sorry to disappoint you, but I have no plans to open any more branch stores right now."

"I'll give you tax cuts," Lekius said.

"That isn't the issue," I replied. "My firm isn't stable enough to support many branches at this moment. That's why I'd like to take my time and carefully consider any further expansions before I take the leap."

"I see. Does that mean there is a chance you'll choose my territory after this period of 'careful consideration'?"

"Why, of course, my lord. When I feel that Traitre is ready, I'm certain that your marquessate will be the first place that comes to mind."

"In that case, there's no reason for me to nag you just yet. Let's focus on a smaller business deal for now."

Lekius had backed down even more quickly than I'd anticipated. After discussing a few ore contracts with him, we got ready to go pick up Alice and Misha so we could leave. As Lekius led the way through the corridors, we heard screaming coming from the lower floor.

"As I keep telling you, our lord is busy with guests at the moment __"

"It doesn't matter! Let me through! This is an emergency!"

"What's going on?" I asked.

"It sounds like people are arguing downstairs," Lunoa said.

"Sorry about that," Lekius replied. "Something must have happened."

He headed toward the entrance, and we followed.

"What's the meaning of this?!" he asked as we arrived at the entrance hall.

There, a young dwarf woman was arguing with several of Lekius's servants.

"My lord!"

"Uncle!"

The voice sounded familiar. I peeked into the hall and saw Kagali,

Gaien's disciple, being held back by Lekius's servants.

"Kagali! I'm entertaining guests right now!"

"Wait, uncle, I—"

"I'll hear you out later." He turned to the two servants who were holding Kagali's arms. "You two! Drag her away and have her wait somewhere else!"

Lekius had made the proper decision as a nobleman hosting guests. However, Kagali seemed truly desperate, and she wasn't a stranger to me, so I decided to lend her a helping hand.

"Please wait, my lord," I said. "It seems to be an emergency. Perhaps it would be wise to hear her out."

"Hmm... Fine. Come, then."

The servants who'd been holding Kagali let go of her, and we all followed the marquess to a drawing room.

Lekius addressed us once we'd taken our seats. "First of all, let's have this fool apologize for causing a commotion."

"Yes, uncle... Ellie, I'm so sorry for interrupting..."

"It's all right," I said. "Don't worry about it."

"Miss Ellie, have you and Kagali met?" the marquess asked.

"Indeed. I made her acquaintance when I visited Mr. Gaien's store."

"I see. And I'm sure this foolish girl only introduced herself as Gaien's disciple, didn't she?"

"I'm going to take over his business when he retires! What am I if not his disciple?!" Kagali argued.

"I don't seem to recall him ever accepting you as his disciple." Lekius let out a deep sigh. "Her name is Kagali Drafan. She's my niece and Gaien's daughter." Kagali clicked her tongue in irritation, but Lekius paid her no mind. "So, what happened?"

"My master went to mine some ores, but he hasn't come back," she replied.

"Well, it's not so rare for Gaien to return later than planned, right?"

"Look at this!" She took out a brooch inlaid with a gem. There was a big crack in it.

"Is that a resonance stone?" I asked.

"Yes," Kagali answered.

"What's a resonance stone?" Lunoa asked. She regarded Kagali's brooch with a puzzled look.

Lunoa's unique spell, Item Analysis, didn't allow her to inspect objects that she had no prior knowledge of, and I doubted she'd ever heard of this particular magic item. It was fairly uncommon.

"A resonance stone is a magic item you can only craft using a special type of gem. These gems are so rare that you don't often see them sold in normal markets. When you manufacture one of these gems into a resonance stone, you let a drop of blood from a certain person fall onto it. You can then use it to track the safety of that person. A crack means that the person whose blood was used is wounded."

A resonance stone could display other changes in health too. For example, had Gaien been poisoned, the gem would have appeared cloudy. As he got older, it would gradually lose its color, and if he died, it would shatter entirely.

Kagali had noticed that Gaien was in trouble thanks to this resonance stone and had come seeking help.

"Where did Gaien go?" Lekius asked.

"To a cave in the Sacred Mountain where the fire archspirit dwells."

"The Sacred Mountain... I'm sorry, Kagali, but I can't send soldiers there."

"Why not?!"

"You *know* the reason. That area is overrun with dangerous monsters. Even if it's for my brother-in-law, I can't possibly ask this territory's army to risk their lives for personal reasons."

"But...!"

"Gaien is strong. He must have been fighting monsters to try out one of his new swords. He'll get himself home somehow."

"He's gotten hurt, uncle! He needs help!"

"Does an archspirit really dwell in the Sacred Mountain?" I asked, interrupting their conversation.

The marquess turned to me and nodded slowly. "Yes. The Sacred Mountain is riddled with caves, and in the deepest of these caverns

dwells Salamander, the archspirit who governs fire."

"I never would have thought that an archspirit would manifest here."

"Um, Miss Ellie, do spirits really exist?" Lunoa asked hesitantly.

"Well, they do and they don't," I said.

"What does that mean?" she replied, confused.

"It's not easy to explain in front of believers of Spiritanism."

"Don't mind us," the marquess said. "Hearing your opinion won't sway us from our faith."

I nodded and started my explanation. "'Spirits' is a general term people use to refer to mana clusters that form naturally. According to the latest findings from the Northern Continent's research institutions, most mana clusters usually dissipate within a few hours to ten days. Sometimes, however, energy keeps accumulating, causing these clusters to develop self-awareness. That is what we call 'spirits' in a more specific sense."

"Does that mean spirits are just mana?" Lunoa asked.

"Indeed. When they've accumulated enough energy, they depart for the spirit realm, which is ruled by the Spirit King. That's why I found it so surprising to hear that the archspirit Marquess Hephaest just mentioned, Salamander, has remained in our world."

"What about carbuncles, then? You once said they were closer to spirits than other monsters, didn't you?"

"That's because carbuncles, as well as some other monsters, are born with the ability to absorb mana."

As I finished my explanation, Kagali slammed both of her palms on the table.

"Can we focus on the fact that my master is in danger?! If you won't send soldiers, uncle, I'll go looking for him myself!"

"That's out of the question! It's far too risky!"

"Is the Sacred Mountain that dangerous?" Lunoa asked.

"Yes," Lekius replied. "With the archspirit dwelling at the heart of the mountain, the surrounding ore veins are exposed to powerful mana, which makes them some of the best possible smithing materials. However, monsters that like being in proximity to such mana also tend to gather there—flame lizards, for instance. Gaien is

used to fighting, so he'll be fine, but Kagali won't."

Kagali bit her lip in frustration. "Ellie!" she suddenly blurted out. "Please come with me! You'll allow me to go if Ellie comes, won't you, uncle?"

"I'm a proud dwarf," Lekius said. "I, too, could tell at first glance that Miss Ellie is used to holding a sword—a thin, light yet sharp blade. A rapier, I assume. But that means nothing. She's a merchant, not an adventurer. Asking her to go look for Gaien makes no sense."

"That's not all! I mean, she does seem like she'd be good with a sword, but she's first and foremost a sorcerer! Ellie, you have a Divine Artifact, don't you?" Kagali asked. I didn't reply, so Kagali continued, "You barely let any mana escape, but that only proves your control is nearly perfect! Not to mention, the density of what little mana does escape is frightening. It's quiet, but...sharp and cold... You must have water mana...and you specialize in ice spells."

"You have the Mystic Eyes of Magic Perception," I said.

"Yes, I can see mana."

"The...mystic eyes?" Lunoa asked, puzzled.

"It's a unique spell that's rather similar to a skill. There are several types of mystic eyes, and the Mystic Eyes of Magic Perception are the most common among them. However, it's very rare for someone with that spell to be able to tell the attribute of a person's mana just by looking at it," I explained.

"You're a Divine Artifact user and a skilled swordswoman," Kagali said. "You're more than strong enough to fight the monsters of the Sacred Mountain. The archspirit must have put you on my path today—it's fate! So please, Ellie, help me search for my master!"

"That's enough, Kagali! Miss Ellie is my guest, and I won't tole—"

"Ellie, please!"

Lekius was trying to stop Kagali because both courtesy and his role as marquess demanded it, but I could tell that deep down, he wanted to save Gaien too. His protests were weak.

Accepting Kagali's request would benefit me as well. I could ingratiate myself with the best artisan in the empire, his daughter, and the Marquess of Hepheast in one go. However, there was a problem.

I avoided looking at Kagali directly, instead keeping her in the corner of my eye. I picked up my cup of tea, taking a slow, deliberate sip.

"I understand what you want, Kagali, but I have no reason to help."

"If you want money, I'll pay!" she exclaimed.

"That would require you to pay me the equivalent amount of the business income I would sacrifice by not working during the time I'd spend helping you. Unfortunately, I don't believe you could cover that," I replied.

"You said you wanted my master to forge you a sword! If you help me, your order will be his top priority!"

"You don't have the authority to decide that, do you?" I asked.

Only Gaien could decide what to prioritize. Kagali had no cards to play in this negotiation. Lunoa's eyes kept darting from my face to Kagali's, and she looked bewildered.

I put my cup down on the table. "If you intend to pay, why not commission adventurers? You could surely find a party with fine abilities in magic and swordplay."

"I wanted to do that at first," she said, "but the adventurers of this city all know that the archspirit dwells within the Sacred Mountain. They're scared of the monsters, and they refused to take on my request."

"I see."

"What do you want, Ellie? What can I give you in order for you to accept?" Kagali asked, looking me straight in the eyes.

There was one way we could find common ground, but I didn't want to be the one to bring up the idea. Instead, I had to make Kagali suggest it.

"Money cannot move me," I said. "And you have no right to dictate Mr. Gaien's conduct."

"You're right... I can't make any promises on his behalf... What about *me*, then?! I'm not as good as my master, but I'm a talented artisan too! I promise to work for you until I've repaid my debt!"

My prize would be Kagali herself. That was the only thing of value she could offer me right now. I'd seen the knives she'd made in

Gaien's store—she did *very* good work. I now realized that the impressive uniformity of the mana distribution within those knives was all thanks to her mystic eyes. Gaien still produced more powerful weapons, but I had a feeling that Kagali might surpass him in the future.

I nodded my head to hide my expression as a smirk threatened to curl my lips. "Fine. I accept your request."

◆

After agreeing to help Kagali look for Gaien, Ellie returned to her inn. Considering the distance to the Sacred Mountain, it made more sense to leave early in the morning. Tida, who'd been drinking happily, saw her enter and called out to her.

"Yo, Miss Ellie! Glad to see you're back!"

"Hello, Tida."

Ellie sent Alice and the others back to their rooms. She sat down next to Tida and ordered a low-alcohol drink.

"You went for the weak stuff," Tida said. "Do you have important plans for tomorrow?"

"I'm going to dive into the depths of the Sacred Mountain to find a missing blacksmith."

"I see you've gotten yourself mixed up in something annoying again. This is becoming a regular occurrence for you, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," Ellie replied.

She turned back to the bartender and ordered two glasses of mead. When they arrived, she set one in front of Tida. Tida thanked her and was about to pour it straight down her gullet when Ellie spoke up.

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

"I know what you're getting at, and no way," Tida said.

"I see. Well, unlike last time, there shouldn't be heaps of undead monsters running rampant, so I won't insist."

"Good. I'll stay right here and pray for you, then!"

The women drank together a while longer before Ellie went up to her room to rest for her trip the following day. Tida remained at the

table and downed one more glass, then she returned to her own lodgings.

"Ah, the city of the dwarves really lives up to its name," she slurred happily as she staggered through the door. "Their alcohol's divine!"

As soon as Tida closed the door, though, the atmosphere around her changed in a heartbeat. She did not look inebriated in the slightest.

"The orders from the Grand Sanctuary were sudden, but I certainly didn't expect the situation to be dire enough for you to appear," she said.

There hadn't been a soul in Tida's room mere moments prior when she opened the door—or at least it hadn't looked like it, but suddenly, someone was there. A mysterious, somewhat frightening aura surrounded them. Their face was well proportioned and harmonious, yet so androgynous that it was impossible to tell their gender. That was not even their most striking feature, though: Four large white wings fanned out from their back, and a halo hovered above their head.

"It has been a while, Apostle Tildania."

It was clear that this was the voice of the being in front of her, but Tida felt as though she were hearing it with her thoughts rather than her ears. Just like their appearance, their voice was completely androgynous.

"It has been very long indeed, Archangel," Tida replied. She knelt on the spot and clasped her hands in front of her in prayer.

Unlike with spirits, almost no one knew that angels existed. Tida believed that the being in front of her was a servant of the God she revered.

"Heed this divine message," the angel started.

"Understood!"

"Destroy the cluster of evil that lies in the heart of the Sacred Mountain."

"As you command! Wait... Huh? The Sacred Mountain?"

"Indeed. If that threat is ignored, the world will be in great peril."

"So, um...do I *really* have to go myself?"

"Yes."

"Can't I ask someone else to destroy that...um, cluster of evil or whatever on my behalf?"

"No."

"HUH?!" Tida's face fell at the archangel's strict refusal. "I thought this mission was going to be a *fun* one. Hot springs, drinks, and rest..."

"Carry out your duty, Apostle Tildania."

"All right, all right. I got it."

"And stop drinking so much."

Tida said nothing.

"Henceforth, your snack budget shall be no more than three copper coins."

Tida's silence was deafening.

"Do you have a handkerchief with you? Don't forget your wallet when you go out. Oh, and remember to brush your teeth before bed. Make sure you have enough blankets to keep yourself warm at night too."

"Why are you acting like my mom?!"

"I shall take my leave now, Apostle Tildania. But remember, cut down on the alcohol, all right?" The solemn voice of the archangel echoed one last time before they disappeared in a flash of holy light.

"Always say the important stuff twice, huh?" Tida muttered with a sigh. She started packing her belongings so she could depart the following day. "Miss Ellie said she was heading to the Sacred Mountain, didn't she? Guess I'll tag along."

Tida was hoping to make the journey as easy as she could.

"But what will I tell her? It doesn't seem like she believes in God, so she'll never accept that an archangel gave me a divine mission. Oh well, I'm sure things will work out somehow."

◇

Today, we planned to first head to Gaien's workshop to get a detailed briefing from Kagali before heading to the Sacred Mountain. I wanted everyone to listen to Kagali's information in case of any

complications, but I didn’t want Alice to stay at the inn alone, so I was bringing her along for now. With the archspirit—or whatever that being was—dwelling in the mountain, things could get tricky, so I figured we should be as well prepared as possible.

We were about to leave the inn when Tida stopped us.

“Miss Ellie!”

“Good morning, Tida.”

“Morning! You’re about to go to the Sacred Mountain, right?”

“Yes, after regrouping with the person who hired my services.”

“I-I see...”

“Is something wrong?”

“Not really... It’s just that...”

Tida was being evasive. I looked at her in suspicion.

“If you have something to say, then say it.”

“Okay, okay. I’d like you to take me with you.”

“What’s gotten into you? You told me yesterday that you absolutely didn’t want to come.”

“Well, in the meantime, I received a divine revelation.”

“A...revelation?”

Was that her way of saying she’d gotten new orders from the Grand Sanctuary?

“You don’t believe me,” Tida said.

“Who said that? Anyway, what’s your objective?”

“Apparently, there’s something evil in the depths of the mountain. My God-given mission is to destroy it.”

“I see. In that case, we’re headed to the same place. I know you make an excellent party member, so I’d be glad to have you join us.”

Gaien’s workshop turned out to be located under the store Kagali usually tended to. After she pressed on a few spots on the wooden counter, a gap opened in the flooring and a stairway appeared. When we descended the stairs, we found ourselves in a large workspace.

“Isn’t it dangerous doing this sort of work underground?” Lunoa asked.

“Not at all. The flames we use for the furnace were bestowed upon my master by the archspirit. Just adding mana to them makes

them heat up, and they don't produce any harmful smoke."

"In other words, it's of the same nature as the fire one can create using magic," I said. "There's also no risk of an oxygen shortage, in that case."

"Are magic flames special?" Lunoa asked.

"To be accurate, only the flames that are *directly* created by magic are."

Misha chimed in. "What does that mean?"

"When you create flames using fire magic, you're not creating real fire, but rather mana in the form of flames. As a result, they do not require air to keep on burning. However, objects that come in contact with magic flames can catch on fire. The resulting blaze will consist of real fire, so you must be careful."

This was one of the recent discoveries by the researchers of the Northern Continent. I wasn't sure if Gaien and Kagali knew about it, but they must have felt it intuitively.

Suddenly, Alice spoke up. "Okay. I got it."

Just as I turned around to see who she was talking to, I heard Kagali scream a warning.

"Wait! It's dangerous!"

I'd only taken my eyes off Alice briefly, distracted by my explanation to Lunoa and Misha. During that time, she had approached the furnace and was now reaching into the flames.

"Alice!" I screamed as her hand grazed the small fire.





The flames flared up, engulfing her in an instant. I was ready to use magic to douse them, but somehow, despite Alice being surrounded by an inferno, the temperature didn't seem to have risen. The fire wasn't spreading to her hair or clothes, and Carol, who was still on Alice's shoulder, did not seem bothered by it either. I'd never seen this sort of magic.

Alice seemed surprised by the fire, but her eyes were focused on something else. She kept nodding, as though she were conversing with someone I couldn't see. After a few seconds, she nodded once more with a resolute look on her face. Then, she turned to me.

"It's all right, mama. I just need to help out for a bit. I'll be back soon, okay?"

"Kyui!"

The flames swelled once again, and Alice was gone.

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There are several cities within the empire that have large dwarf populations, but the one with the longest and richest history is, without a doubt, the capital of the Hephaest Marquessate. There, the smoke coming from the many smithies mingles with the steam of the hot springs and rises above the small stone buildings, as the delectable aroma of traditional dwarven stir-fry wafts through the air. The streets, which have retained the strong character of the Dwarf Kingdom of old, will undoubtedly evoke nostalgia within the hearts of every visitor. Once a prosperous mining town, the capital of the Hephaest Marquessate now thrives as a retreat where visitors can discover breathtaking historical sites before having a relaxing soak in the city's famous hot springs.

A writer for a popular travel magazine reread the draft he'd just written before taking a bite out of the hearty dwarven stir-fry he'd just been served. The Marquess of Hephaest himself had commissioned the article, and his editor in chief was especially enthusiastic about the project. He'd been promised a hefty bonus if this article was a hit.

Needless to say, the prospect of that extra money motivated him greatly. He started rereading from the top once again. He'd keep polishing his text until the deadline.

— A scene from the life of Claude Tyler, content writer working exclusively for the travel magazine *Empire Map*, three days before his deadline.

Chapter 2: The Sacred Mountain

"Miss Alice!" Misha screamed. She attempted to leap into the fire, but I grabbed the hem of her clothes and pulled her back.

"Calm down, Misha."

"B-But, Miss Alice just—"

I completely understood Misha's panic. I, too, would have lost my composure entirely by now if Alice hadn't spoken before being engulfed by the flames.

"Calm down," I repeated. These words were half for Misha's benefit and half for my own reassurance. I let go of her and slowly approached the flames.

"Kagali, has this ever happened before?"

Kagali was in a daze, but hearing her name seemed to bring her back to reality. "N-No, it hasn't."

"Mireille, what do you make of this?"

"The flow of the mana...very much resembled that of a teleportation spell."

"I agree. It was close to that of Gate or Transfer. However, the mana concentration was so unbelievably high that this couldn't possibly have been human magic."

"If it wasn't a person, then what could have teleported Alice?" Tida asked.

"A spirit, most likely... In this particular case, I imagine it must have been Salamander, the archspirit who gave this fire to Mr. Gaien in the first place," I said.

"The archspirit did that?! But why?!" Kagali asked incredulously.

To the rest of us, Salamander was simply a spirit with particularly strong mana. But to a Spiritanism adherent like Kagali, Salamander was a god. I had to avoid speaking badly of him.

"I doubt Salamander has any ill will toward Alice or us. While spirits have a sense of self, they're said to be genuine, innocent

beings. I imagine that's also the case for archspirits," I said.

"Th-That's true! Archspirits have always watched over us dwarves! They're not wicked!" Kagali exclaimed.

"Still, the question remains: Why would the archspirit take Alice away?" Mireille asked.

"Considering what she said, it seemed like Salamander was asking her for help," I replied.

"What should we do, then? Wait here for her to return?" Misha asked.

"Well..."

Misha's suggestion was sensible. Archspirits were likely friendly to humans, and if Salamander truly had no intention of hurting Alice, he would likely return her to this place once she had helped him. But I couldn't entirely discount the possibility that things wouldn't go that well. What if Salamander asked something too difficult of Alice? What if there was an unexpected incident, and she got hurt even if he didn't intend for that to happen? Besides, we were all just making assumptions at this point. Perhaps the one who'd taken her away wasn't even Salamander in the first place.

"Sitting back and waiting isn't a good idea," I said. "We also need to search for Mr. Gaien, so we'll head to the Sacred Mountain as planned. If Salamander is truly the one who summoned her, then Alice will be there too. However, Kagali, Tida, Misha, and I will be the only ones going. Mireille and Lunoa, I want you to wait here in case she returns."

There was a chance Alice would be teleported back here before we returned, so I didn't want to leave this place unattended. Everyone agreed with that course of action, and I confirmed the plan with a nod.

Strangely enough, I wasn't anxious or angry like I had been during Alice's previous kidnapping. I didn't know *why* I felt this way—it was completely irrational—but I was convinced the flames that had taken Alice away would protect her.

◆

After the flames flickered in front of her eyes, Alice found herself in a completely different place. The first thing she saw was a large snake whose body was made of blazing fire.

"Did you call me here?" Alice asked. She did not hear a response, but the answer to her question somehow popped into her mind.

"Yes, I did." The fiery snake's words echoed through her thoughts. "I apologize for summoning you in such a way."

"It's okay! You waited for me to answer before you brought me here!"

Right before she'd walked into the fire, Alice had felt the creature's words enter her mind for the first time. He'd told her that he needed her help.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"My words can't reach humans and dwarves, so I wish to borrow your mouth to speak. I'm in a predicament, and if my body perishes, disaster will fall upon the land I protect too. In order to avoid this, I'll need the help of humans."

"Okay, I get it! I will help!"

"Thank you, young sister."

Right after these words beamed themselves into Alice's mind, she was struck with a sudden bout of drowsiness. She lost her grip on reality, feeling as though she had slipped into a dream. Her body started moving without being driven by her own will. Was the snake moving her body for her?

Alice was in a cave. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see lava flowing like a river. It was probably very hot, but somehow she wasn't overheating. She wondered if that was thanks to the snake.

After she walked a short distance, she found herself in front of a sizable boulder that seemed like it might have fallen from the ceiling. The rock had trapped the leg of a middle-aged dwarf.

"Urgh... Is someone there?" the dwarf asked. Alice's body moved to stand in front of him, and he stared at her in surprise. "A wee lass in the depths of this cave?! Where did ye come from, child? No, that 'ardly matters! There be monsters down here! Ye must run away! Run away, ye hear me?!"

Alice—or rather the snake—ignored him and brought her hand to

the boulder. Flames flew out of her palm, disintegrating it.

"M-Magic?! I think that was spirit magic..."

The being controlling Alice's body looked down at the bewildered dwarf. "I am Salamander, the archspirit who guards this land. I am simply borrowing this body at the moment," he said through Alice's voice.

"The archspirit..."

"Dwarf, there is something I must tell you."

Gaien heaved himself to a standing position, and the two walked over to an open cavern nearby. Out of consideration for the dwarf, who was hobbling due to his leg injury, Alice took small, slow steps.

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After Alice disappeared into the fire, Kagali speedily briefed us on the topography of the Sacred Mountain and the monsters we were likely to encounter there. According to Kagali, we'd find many fire attribute monsters.

After getting all the information we needed, we set out. The air grew hotter and hotter as we approached the mountain, but I kept us cool with my magic. I expected that very few animals could survive the scorching heat around here, though.

"This is strange," I said.

"It sure is," Tida agreed. "We've run into some animals, but no monsters yet."

If there were a lot of spirits around, it meant that mana was abundant. Monsters usually gathered in such places, just like they did in dungeons.

"Is this area always devoid of monsters?" I asked Kagali.

"No. As far as I know, this is the territory of the flame lizards," she replied. "My master has always told me not to come here because it's very dangerous."

"Flame lizards are Rank C monsters, aren't they?" Tida asked.

"If you're talking about just one flame lizard, then yes," I said. "But unlike most reptilian monsters, they usually hunt in packs. A group of ten flame lizards would be considered Rank B, while a pack

of twenty of them would be Rank A."

"From what I've heard, there should be more than fifty in this area," Kagali said.

I surveyed our surroundings with my mana, but I couldn't find a single monster.

"It really doesn't seem like there's anything here, though," Tida said, having reached the same conclusion as me. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"I'm pretty sure," I said.

"How do you know?"

I crouched beside a boulder that had a conspicuous indent in it and picked up a minuscule red stone that had a jewellike luster. It was no bigger than my pinky nail.

"This is a piece of a blazing crystal," I said, raising it to eye level and examining it. It looked like the original crystal had been shattered by a powerful force. "It's essentially crystallized fire mana. Flame lizards love to feed on blazing crystals, so this shard likely dropped here after one of them ate the rest of it. Plus, look at the crack in the boulder next to me. It seems like it was left by the tail of a flame lizard."

I scanned the scene and noticed that other nearby rocks had been scored in a similar manner. Flame lizards usually left these fissures to mark their territory.

"So you're telling me the flame lizards were here, but they left?" Tida asked.

"I don't know. On their own, flame lizards are cowardly creatures, but they can be quite belligerent in large numbers."

"They like to pick fights, huh? Do you think they attacked Mr. Gaien because he entered their territory, and he killed them all instead?"

"I doubt it," Kagali answered. "My master is strong, but he couldn't defeat fifty flame lizards on his own."

"The area doesn't show any signs of fighting either," I said.

"This is all very odd," Tida concluded.

We were all on guard as we kept walking toward the foot of the Sacred Mountain, shocked by the peculiar absence of monsters

where there should have been an abundance. We soon found the entrance to a cave that led into the bowels of the mountain.

"This is it," Kagali said.

"That's a big cave," I replied.

"Have you ever been inside, Miss Kagali?" Tida asked.

"No. I've come as far as the entrance with my master a few times, but he's never allowed me to enter. All I know is that it forks into several paths."

"All right. First of all, let's all check that our equipment is in working order one last time before we enter," I said.

We sat down on a rocky outcrop next to the entrance and double-checked our gear. According to Kagali, lots of monsters lived inside the cave, including goblins. We'd likely have to fight them. Before entering, we also restored our strength with some food and water.

"It's time to venture in," I said.

It was dark inside, and we relied on the light of lanterns to advance.

"I don't sense the presence of many monsters," Tida said.

"Me neither," I replied. I did perceive the mana of some monsters here and there, but they were all small and weak, and they seemed to be hiding from us.

"There's the first fork," Kagali said.

The cave split into two paths, both around the same size.

"What do we do?" Misha asked. "Should we pick one direction at random and search that way first?"

"Wait a minute," Kagali said. She spent a few moments staring at each path intently. "We're going left."

"Why?"

"I can see mana on the right. Each individual dot is faint, but there are a lot of them. It's probably a goblin nest."

"All right, left it is, then," I said.

To ensure we wouldn't get lost, I unsheathed my blade and carved a mark on the wall. We trudged onward, relying on Kagali's eyes to find our way each time the cave split into several paths, though we sometimes hit dead ends and had to retrace our steps. By this point, we'd already been walking for several hours, but not a

single monster had attacked us.

Eventually, we reached a path that sloped downward. As we followed it, the temperature grew even more sweltering, so I intensified my cooling magic. This path was narrower than the rest, and very long. It was also somewhat steep. I couldn't measure anything precisely, but I guessed that we'd descended at least a dozen meters.

When we finally reached the end, we found ourselves in an expansive cavern. A river of lava ran down the edge of the cavern, and the glow it gave off allowed us to see without relying on the lanterns. At the very center of the cavern was a Spiritanic altar, but that wasn't what immediately caught my eye. Rather, it was the hulking snake made of fire lying down behind the altar.

I glanced at Kagali and saw that she was staring at the snake in astonishment.

"Wow! So big! Is that Salamander?" Tida questioned.

"Y-Yes," Kagali replied. "That's exactly how my master described him."

"Hey, look. There are people under Salamander, aren't there?" Tida asked, pointing at the snake.

She was right.

Kagali and I screamed at the same time:

"Master!"

"Alice!"

Alice and Gaien were sitting with Salamander, who was coiled around them protectively.

"Mama!" Alice exclaimed when she saw me running to her. She started waving happily.

"Kyuu!" Carol was still with her, perched on her head.

"Yer this child's guardian? We met in the capital, no?"

"We've met, indeed. I'm Ellie Leis of Traitre. Thank you for watching over my daughter."

"Ye've got no reason to thank me. This wee lass is the one who crushed the boulder I was stuck under *and* gave me water. She even made me wound hurt less. Who knows what state I'd be in without her?"

I looked down and noticed that one of Gaien's legs was red and swollen. He couldn't walk far in this state. It was no wonder that the simple water attribute healing spell Alice knew hadn't been enough to cure him entirely.

"Tida," I called.

"Yep. Coming." Tida crouched next to Gaien. "Heal."

As soon as Gaien's wound disappeared, he stood up. He bent and extended his leg several times, testing its strength and flexibility.

"Yer quite the healer, lass," he said.

Now that this matter had been dealt with, I looked up at Salamander.

"Why did you bring Alice here?" I asked.

The fire snake wriggled and suddenly Alice's eyes turned vacant. Carol twitched and jumped off her head, but she quickly calmed down and climbed right back up.

"I apologize for employing such means, human," said Alice. She was the one who'd spoken, but the words sounded like someone else's entirely.

I hesitated, then turned to Salamander once more. "Are you... Are you the one who just spoke?"

"Indeed," Alice—or rather Salamander—replied. "I have no shaman who can impart my will, so I've had no choice but to borrow this young girl's speech."

A shaman? If I recalled correctly, such people were said to have a profound affinity with spirits. I'd always thought that the title was only a symbolic position within the scope of Spiritanism, but based on Salamander's words, it appeared that shamans might actually have the ability to communicate with powerful spirits such as archspirits.

"Does that mean...Alice has the makings of a shaman?" I asked.

"Indeed."

This piece of information would be better off concealed. I didn't want the institutions of Spiritanism to learn about it.

"Setting that aside, why did you feel the need to communicate with us?"

The answer came from Alice's mouth once again. "To inform you

of the abnormal change my body has undergone."

"Abnormal...how?"

"Someone has left a strange trinket inside this mountain. It sucks up the energy of this land and transforms it into wicked mana. I have been absorbing that tainted mana and purifying it to protect this mountain, but I can no longer keep up with the sheer quantity of it."

All of that mana must have been accumulating in Salamander's body. In fact, I could sense an abnormal amount of mana within him.

"In other words, you need help dispersing this mana, correct? How would you like us to—"

"I'll do it," Gaien interrupted me. He seemed to have already heard Salamander's explanation.

"What do you mean, Mr. Gaien?"

"I can craft magic weapons," he said. "There be two ways to forge such weapons. Ye can either use materials full o' mana and pour yer own mana into them as ye work. Or, ye can use materials that absorb mana well and let 'em take in the mana from their surroundings. An archspirit's mana works like the natural kind—so I can trap the extra mana inside weapons if I forge 'em here."

As he spoke, Gaien used earth magic to build an anvil.

"Can any of ye create water?" he asked.

"I can," I replied. I filled the large bowl he'd just made to the brim.

"Och! Such high mana concentration. Ye make great water!" he commented.

"That should suffice to fix my body," Salamander said through Alice. "Yet the issue of the wicked device remains."

"Oh, I'll take care of that," Tida replied.

"You will?" I asked.

"Yep! In fact, I'm pretty sure that's what I came here for. God's message said I had to destroy a 'cluster of evil,' after all."

"You still insist that you heard a divine revelation?"

Tida pouted. "It's all right if you don't believe me, Miss Ellie."

"Sorry..." Even if Tida and I were close, I shouldn't have said

something like that. I'd failed to be considerate of her faith. "Well, if you're handling it, then Misha and I will act as Mr. Gaien's bodyguards while he works. I'd like to stay near Alice too."

"Yes, Miss Ellie!" Misha exclaimed.

"That is wise," Alice said. "My mana is keeping weaker monsters at bay, but once some of it drains, I fear they may approach us."

In other words, the longer Gaien worked, the higher the risk of a monster attack would grow.

"What about me?!" Kagali piped up.

"Ye just stay put," Gaien immediately said.

"B-But, master! Don't you think my mystic eyes would be a great help with forging magic weapons?"

"Shut it. There's no need for ye to forge blades."

Kagali bit her lower lip in frustration and turned her back to him. She walked up to Alice and sat down next to her on a large rock.

Suddenly, Alice started running toward me. She seemed unsteady on her feet.

"Mama..." she said weakly, jumping into my arms.

Being a host for Salamander seemed to have taken a toll on her body. She fell asleep in my arms as soon as I pulled her close to me.

"Misha," I said.

"Yes, Miss Ellie," Misha replied, taking Alice from me.

"O water, grant your serene protection: Aqua Veil," I chanted, casting a water barrier around Misha and Alice.

With that done, I looked around at the rest of my companions. Gaien was readying his working tools. Kagali was sitting away from the rest of us, but she wasn't all that far, so I figured that protecting her wouldn't be an issue. Tida had just set her bag on the ground so that she could move around more easily, and she was now checking the state of her staff.

"All right!" she exclaimed once she was done. "I'll be going now!"

"Be careful," I said. I watched her walk away, her gait as relaxed and carefree as ever.

◆

Tida ran toward the innermost part of the cave system. She knew exactly where to go—all she had to do was follow the repulsive mana she sensed. The terrain was rough and her visibility was poor, but despite these conditions, Tida was still much faster than most adventurers could have been.

"I guess I'm better off alone for this mission. Miss Ellie's a good person, but she couldn't be further from being a pious woman," she said to herself.

Tida understood why her friend lacked faith, considering her upbringing. While Tida believed that nothing else was of greater importance, as far as Ellie was concerned, faith was just another political tool. Tida knew the way Ellie thought full well, and she had no intention of arguing or rejecting her point of view for two reasons. First, she agreed that faith *could be* a political tool—that was one of the many aspects of religion. Second, denying other people's beliefs was against Tida's own faith.

"God loves everyone, regardless of what religion they follow or whether they even believe in anything." Tida paused. "Wow, I sound like a true cardinal! I should write that down so I don't forget!"

Even as she giggled to herself, Tida used her magic-reinforced staff to shatter a boulder that was about to impact her head. The gallery was shaking—an earthquake, Tida assumed. A goblin suddenly jumped in front of her, coming from God-knows-where. It must have been running around, startled by the tremors. Without slowing down, Tida crushed its skull with a single hit.

"Oops! A goblin? Hmm..." Tida saw a group of unsightly green creatures farther down her path. They seemed too big to be regular goblins. "No, they're hobgoblins, aren't they?"

The hobgoblins seemed to have finally noticed her approaching, and they readied their weapons. Tida leaped and kicked off the wall of the cave to reach the ceiling right above the monsters' heads. Then, she pushed off the ceiling and swooped down on them.

Tida's staff wasn't sharp, but whenever she reinforced it with magic, it had enough destructive power to tear through monsters' bodies. She pushed it into the chest of one of the hobgoblins, and the creature fell to the ground with a groan. Without missing a beat,

she pulled her staff back, swung it, and shattered another monster's knees.

"GUUUUH!" The hobgoblin let out a cry of pain that was quickly silenced permanently by Tida's next blow to its jaw.

Tida then skewered the skull of the last hobgoblin with the tip of her staff. She couldn't sense any more goblins around, so she relaxed her posture.

"Looks like this was a pretty small group," Tida said, looking at her staff. It was drenched with fresh blood. "Wild hobgoblins don't really put up much of a fight. Compared to the trained ones I had to deal with last time, this was a piece of cake."

With the hobgoblins out of her way, Tida started running once more. She continued on her way, lighting up her surroundings with magic and fighting the packs of hobgoblins she encouraged. Despite the repeated combat, she reached her destination in only ten minutes.

"This must be the cluster the archangel told me about," Tida said. She grimaced as she looked at the massive crystal in front of her. It was taller and wider than two adult men. "That's a spirit crystal, isn't it? How can it be so ominous?"

It closely resembled the crystal inside which Alice had been trapped before Ellie had found and adopted her. The most glaring differences were the color—this one was pitch-black—and the peculiar way in which the mana within stirred.

"I guess it doesn't really matter. All I have to do is destroy it. Divine Artifact, Harvest!"

Mana surged from Tida's palm and took the form of an oversized pure white scythe. She swung it at the crystal, but the blade bounced off its surface with an unpleasant noise.

"What?!" Tida exclaimed, astonished.

Tida's Divine Artifact, Harvest, had the ability to cut through mana itself and convert it into Tida's own mana. And even without that ability, the edge of her scythe was incredibly sharp. Tida knew that better than anyone.

"I can't believe I wasn't able to cut through it with Harvest." She slammed her Divine Artifact into the crystal several times, yet it

didn’t even leave a scratch on it.

Tida scratched her chin and studied the crystal pensively. Sinister black mana swirled inside of it. It swelled and contracted rhythmically, almost like a beating heart.

“I have no clue what this is, but it looks super-duper dangerous,” Tida whispered.

As soon as those words had left her mouth, the dark mana surged, covering the crystal entirely. Its shape shifted until it took the form of a black lion.

“Wha?!” Tida yelped. “What in the world is this monster?! Hang on, is it even a monster?!”

The instant the black lion opened its eyes, it swung a heavy paw at Tida. The lion’s movements were so swift that her eyes almost failed to follow them.

“AAAAH!” Tida shrieked, barely managing to dodge the blow.

The black lion’s paw hurtled through the space right next to her and smashed a rock to pieces. A shard flew at the nun, grazing her cheek.

“That could have been instant death,” she said. Tida twirled her white scythe as she activated Physical Boost to its maximum. “It looks like that crystal has become this monster’s core.”

The black lion pounced at Tida, and she dodged while slashing at it with Harvest. However, the lion’s fur was so thick and resilient that not even the pure white, holy scythe could cause any significant damage. On top of that, even the shallow wounds Tida had managed to inflict began closing up before her eyes.

“And it can regenerate itself instantly too. Great. Still, its body isn’t just incorporeal mana; it’s taken physical form. I could feel it.”

Tida slipped behind the lion, but its tail whipped at her. She parried the blow with her scythe before jumping back to widen the distance from her foe.

“This monster formed around this spirit crystal as though it were a magic stone, but its physical body somehow feels just like a spirit. On top of that, the entire process resembles the materialization of a Divine Artifact... Just what is going on?”

Tida cocked her head in confusion, but the black lion didn’t give

her any time to think. It was already back on the offensive, jumping at her with its sharp claws. Tida evaded, and the lion's claws dug deep trenches into the ground where she'd been standing seconds prior.

"This isn't something I can figure out just by thinking a little... Actually, if I don't do something soon, I'll die before I can understand any of it!"

Tida had hoped to solve this mystery on the spot, but she had begun to realize that her life was in serious danger. Instead of ruminating about the true nature of this lion, she had to get her head in the fight.

She roared a battle cry, leaped toward the lion, and made a flurry of cuts with Harvest. Every wound was superficial, but Harvest absorbed some of the monster's mana through it, gradually becoming stronger. This fighting strategy had allowed Tida to triumph over dragonkind monsters several times in the past, but the black lion's regenerative abilities exceeded her expectations.

"This isn't looking good for me, is it?"

In theory, the black lion should have been an opponent that Tida was well suited to fight. Its body had been formed with mana, so Tida's Divine Artifact could absorb great quantities of it with each hit. And yet, she was still struggling.

By nature, spirit crystals could suck up the natural mana that surrounded them. Since the lion had one of these at its core, it had access to a practically infinite source of energy to regenerate itself. While Tida had a similar ability—the power to heal herself with the mana she absorbed through Harvest—there was a fundamental difference between the two of them. Her healing magic could mend wounds but not restore stamina.

"If this turns into a battle of endurance, I'll collapse first."

Each of the lion's blows had the potential to be fatal, so Tida had no choice but to keep weaving out of the way. Her concentration and stamina gradually wore thin. The lion swatted at Tida in irritation, and it caught her left shoulder.

"Urgh!" Tida moaned in pain as she slammed against the wall of the cave. She rolled on the ground in an attempt to distance herself

from the black lion. Her entire body was awash in pain. “High Heal!” she managed to cast.

The powerful spell closed her wounds but didn’t do anything to mend her clothes. Tida’s skin showed through the torn fabric of her nun’s habit. The flesh was marred with peculiar marks.

“I didn’t want to use this, but it looks like I have no choice. It’s this or death.”

Tida ran her fingers over the marks that stretched across her left arm. They were her stigmata—the proof of God’s grace and the symbol that made her an envoy.

“O God, lend your envoy your strength,” she whispered.





As soon as the prayer left her lips, Tida's stigmata grew to cover half of her body. The lion groaned and was about to lunge at her neck with its fangs, but it abruptly backed off. Its survival instincts had kicked in the moment it had felt the strange power that emanated from Tida.

Tida's stigmata allowed her to temporarily borrow God's might. Some of the divine power turned into mana before gathering behind Tida's back and taking the form of four white wings. Another portion of the power twirled over Tida's head and turned into a sparkling halo of light. The halo enhanced Tida's physical abilities while continuously healing any wounds. Tida looked just like an angel.

"Keeping this up for too long will tire me out, so let's get this fight over with!" Tida spread her wings, which shone with a faint glow as her feet left the ground. Despite the narrowness of the cave, Tida could fly freely, and she rose almost all the way to the rock ceiling.

"Wings of Divine Punishment."

With a flap of her wings, Tida sent glowing feathers flying at the black lion with blinding speed. Each of them was imbued with so much mana that it pierced through the thick pelage of the lion. The beast roared, sending a wave of mana at Tida in response, but the bountiful mana that surrounded her blocked it before it could reach her.

"It's about time you went down, don't you think?"

Tida raised her holy scythe and dove toward the lion at full speed. She cut off both of its front limbs before slashing at it first diagonally, and then horizontally. After that, she got behind the monster and sheared through it again. With every blow, she made sure to send some of her mana through the wound to hinder the lion's regenerative abilities.

The lion collapsed to the ground, its body riddled with lacerations. Tida put her scythe over her shoulder before thrusting her arm forward. The halo above her head radiated light as a staggering quantity of mana gathered around Harvest. It was far more mana than a human should have been able to produce, and the pure white blade of Tida's scythe started shining brilliantly.

"This is the end! Divine Slash!"

When Tida swung her Divine Artifact for the final blow, a flash of light bisected the lion. This single slash, imbued with the strength of God, also cleaved through the spirit crystal at the core of the monster. As soon as Tida destroyed it, the lion's corpse disintegrated into a cloud of black mana before disappearing.

"Holy Cage!" Tida placed a seal around the two halves of the spirit crystal. This sealing spell also relied on God's might. It was so powerful that no human could break through it.

That should be good enough for now, Tida thought as she picked up the sealed spirit crystal.

"I should send this to the Grand Sanctuary so they can keep it sealed," Tida said. She let out a big sigh as her wings and halo disappeared and her stigmata shrunk back to its original size. Tida groaned. Her entire body ached.

"Aah, *this* is exactly why I hate using the power of my stigmata so much."

A human body was not made to withstand the power of God. Even as an apostle who bore the mark of God, Tida would suffer from body aches for days whenever she borrowed a fraction of it.

"Ouch... All right, time to hurry back to Miss Ellie and the others."

Tida started retracing her steps despite the pain.

◇

After Tida left, Gaien started working with the magic ores he'd gathered in the depths of the mountain, ones that had been altered by the accumulation of natural mana. The first step of the process was refining them. With the help of Salamander's flames and his magic-enhanced hammer, Gaien purged the ores' impurities by using mana to pinpoint and remove them. This was an alchemy technique that required a high level of precision. I'd heard that it was incredibly hard to master, but Gaien was executing it flawlessly, as though it were a walk in the park. He'd reached the zenith of blacksmithing mastery.

I was looking at him in awe when Kagali, who'd been watching him work just as intently, spoke up.

"My master has always been like this, you know? He taught me how to smith, but he won't teach me how to make weapons."

"Dwarf women don't craft weapons, do they?" I asked.

"They don't. Normally, that is."

Regardless of their actual skills, people's job options were heavily restricted by countless factors—one's gender, social class, wealth, appearance, culture, and connections could open or close doors.

During my time in the kingdom, I had been actively working to reduce such limitations. I had encouraged the employment of female knights, established new certifications people could obtain to attest their skills, and built schools to give more children the chance to receive a quality education. My hard work had yielded *some* results, but there was no denying that most aspects of people's lives were still heavily bound by norms and customs. I'd been hoping to eventually get rid of these restraints entirely, but since I'd left the kingdom unexpectedly, I'd never been able to see things through.

With its multitude of races and cultures, the empire was a lot less restrictive, generally speaking. Gender and race did not limit people's opportunities as much as they did in the kingdom.

"The empire has no laws that prevent women from crafting weapons," I told Kagali.

"I know."

"What I mean is that there is no need to limit yourself. If what you want to do isn't against the law, you can just do it."

"But even other women tell me that I should just craft tools or do engraving work, and leave the weapons to the men because forging them is a man's job. And my master tells me the same thing. He said he only taught me smithing so I could be a good wife in the future."

Kagali's words made me realize that we had entirely different viewpoints. As a stateswoman, I'd been looking at the big picture, but Kagali had been considering her personal situation.

Even if the empire as a whole was progressive, people experienced different realities based on their surrounding environment. For the majority of people, the town or village in which they lived was their entire world. Unless they left their communities, those miniature worlds would be the only places that shaped their

views and experiences.

"I remember the first time I saw my master craft a sword when I was a child," Kagali continued. "When I watched the metal slowly take the shape of a sword, I thought it was beautiful. I knew blades were frightening objects, but excitement won over fear in my heart."

Kagali's eyes twinkled with a childlike wonder as she spoke. I could see adoration in them. Not hope or the strong resolve needed to oppose her surroundings, just plain adoration.

"Is that why you taught yourself how to forge weapons?"

"Yeah," she replied. "I thought that if I proved myself, my master might accept me one day. And then, maybe I, too, could become a full-fledged weaponsmith."

"That sounds...unlikely. Small communities tend to attach great importance to traditions and cultural norms."

"What's with you? Do you really think the old geezers who insist women shouldn't be anywhere near crafting weapons are in the right?"

"Not at all. I personally think using culture or tradition as an excuse to restrict people's access to jobs based on their gender or race is ridiculous."

"Then why would you say that?! I'm working hard to prove to everyone that women can also become weaponsmiths!"

"I know you are, Kagali. I can see that. However...I don't think hard work is enough in your situation."

"It's...not?"

"Everyone makes an effort to spark change, but the cage of culture is a sturdy one—one that's been built over generations. If you keep hoping your hard work will *somehow* make *someone* free you *someday*, you'll never escape this cage."

"But then...what am I supposed to do?!"

If Kagali truly wished to make her dream come true, there was an easy solution to her problem. All she had to do was leave this city—and Gaien's side.

"You must figure that out yourself," I said. "An answer that's given to you has no meaning."

It would have been easy for me to tell her the answer. After all,

Kagali was skilled enough to have a decent shot at making it, in my opinion. But for someone who'd spent her whole life in the small world of this city, leaving her community behind and jumping into the unknown was likely terrifying. If she couldn't get over that fear by herself, Kagali was better off trying to accept the status quo.

"Think for yourself and make your own decision. If you can't do that, I think you'll be happier continuing the life you've led so far and keeping your admiration in a corner of your heart."

"My admiration..."

"To put it differently, you know how to ride a horse, but you've never prepared for the actual journey. You have no map and have never so much as asked travelers for directions. You don't even know how to saddle your horse. All you're doing is dreaming of riding to a foreign land you've only ever heard about."

Kagali pursed her lips before whispering, "I'll think about what you've said..."

If what I'd told her made her give up, it would show that she wasn't strong enough to pursue that objective from the start. I wasn't all that worried, though. Kagali seemed shocked, but a single glance at her told me she was trying to take everything in and was looking within herself for a satisfactory answer.

◆

"It has been a long time, Your Highness."

Friede was drinking wine in his room when a voice suddenly came from behind him. He didn't remember allowing anyone inside his chambers, but for some reason, he didn't mind the intrusion.

"Hmm? Oh, Crow. I haven't seen you in quite some time. What have you been doing?"

"Traveling from place to place to strengthen *your* influence, Your Highness."

"I see. Good work."

"I hear your proposal will soon be discussed in an official capacity."

"You know everything, as always," Friede said, picking up a

document from his desk and holding it out toward Crow. “Here. This is the national highway proposal.”

“I wouldn’t have expected any less from you, Your Highness. It appears the seeds I’ve sown will soon bear fruit.” As she spoke, Crow took out a piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to Friede.

“What’s this?” he asked. He looked over the long list of names written on the paper.

“These are the people who will support you from the shadows.”

“Most of them seem to be commoners.”

“That is true. However, many commoners have influence rivaling that of nobles. Most of the people on this list carry considerable weight in their communities. They’re local leaders, affluent merchants, promising engineers... All of them will be instrumental in making your proposal a reality.”

Friede hummed. “I’ll leave the details to you. Manage them however you see fit.”

“Yes, Your Highness. For now, I shall draw up the materials you’ll need for the meeting.”

“Good,” Friede said. He paused for a moment. “Say, Crow, have you seen Sylvie? She doesn’t visit me often these days. She says she’s busy.”

“Is that so...? I’m afraid I do not know Lady Sylvia’s whereabouts.”

“I see. She told me she needed to study to be a proper queen worthy of standing by my side.” Friede sighed. “Good grief. Her priority should be helping me when I need to unwind, not *studying*.”

“Most definitely, Your Highness. I’ll make sure to relay that to her.”

“Yeah, please do.”

“I shall take my leave, Your Highness,” Crow said. She bowed and exited the room silently. “The hypnosis on Sylvia must have grown weak again...” she whispered softly enough that no one would hear her. “I thought an insignificant girl like her wouldn’t be an issue, but that constitution of hers is starting to become a problem. Perhaps the time has come to get rid of her entirely.”

A sadistic smile crept onto Crow's lips.

A few days after Friede and Crow's discussion, most of the important figures of the kingdom gathered in the large meeting room of the palace for the biannual Great Assembly. It was normally the prime minister's responsibility to conduct the assembly, but since Sieg was still missing, a civil official was chairing it in his stead. The man nervously announced the beginning of the meeting.

Bulat sat at the end of a very long table. To either side of him were his children, Friede and Adel. Many of the meeting's attendees had not known that the princess had been called back to the palace and were astonished to see her, but none of them dared to comment on it.

"The first item on the agenda concerns the terror attack on the Yutear Empire last month. The empire claims to have found evidence that our delegation was involved in the attack and has lodged an official protest."

"I've heard the report," Friede said. "If memory serves me right, *you* handled all matters pertaining to the delegation, didn't you, Adel?"

"Indeed. I appointed Eiwass Leiston as the leader of the delegation. According to him, they didn't notice any signs of an upcoming attack before leaving the imperial capital."

"I'm saying Eiwass might be the culprit!" Friede exclaimed, his voice saturated with mockery. "Didn't they find a considerable amount of evidence pointing to him ordering the attack? What a stupid thing to do when we were trying so hard to foster a friendly relationship with the empire. Did he think that causing mayhem in the capital would count as distinguished service to the kingdom? Your subordinate sure is shortsighted."

"I wasn't done speaking, brother. There is indeed evidence incriminating our kingdom, but do you not find it strange? Who would orchestrate such a massive attack and yet leave evidence behind? In fact, it's clear the empire does not genuinely suspect Haldoria either."

"Why send us a protest, then?! It proves that backward country

of savages is incapable of profound thought."

"No, it simply proves that the empire is not a monolith," Adel replied. "Have you not read the protest? While it does raise some suspicions about Haldoria, it only asks questions without making any direct accusations. A document like that has no political capital. The fact that they sent this instead of a letter of accusation or a declaration of war should tell you what the emperor truly believes. They only lodged this protest to calm down the bellicists. Since we're innocent, all we have to do is reply to their questions in good faith."

"I understand why you wish to protect your subordinate, sister, but there is no point in playing these games. We should just send the criminal to the empire and let them deal with him, should we not?"

"That's rich coming from— Um, forgive me. I couldn't help but take offense to you calling him a criminal when there is not yet any proof. Anyway, since we're on the topic of offering up criminals to the empire, I suggest we focus on those who've *already* been proven guilty. What do you say, brother?"

"Tsk... It doesn't matter. The investigation will uncover the truth, sooner or later."

Adel's allusion to the counterfeit money incident made Friede back down at once, and Adel came out of the argument on top. Regardless, she made a mental note to reinforce security as soon as the assembly was over. Friede's last statement left her worried that he might try to tamper with the evidence.

The civil official in charge of leading the assembly, intimidated by the heated argument, hadn't dared to say a word. With the royal siblings' battle of wits over, he finally moved on to the next topic.

The assembly went on for a while, discussing various matters of importance to the kingdom.

"The next item is the last on today's agenda," the civil official said. He began distributing documents to everyone in the room. "This proposal was submitted by His Highness Prince Friede."

Adel read through the first page of the stack of papers and scowled. There was no way Friede had written any of this.

"Well then, I'll go over my proposal," Friede said, standing up. He made sure everyone's eyes were on him, then opened his arms dramatically for his announcement. "I'm proposing the creation of a national highway!"

Friede's subordinate stepped forward and rolled out a large map on the table.

"Haldoria is a vast and powerful kingdom," Friede continued. "While the source of our might is undoubtedly our experienced army, we also rely on other things: the food produced by the vast agricultural lands of the south, the high-quality ore mined in the east, and the magic items and monster materials found in the labyrinth city of the west. To utilize all of these assets to their fullest potential, I propose we build and maintain a safe highway spanning the entire country."

Whispers filled the room. The minister of finance spoke up, wearing his nervousness on his face.

"But, Your Highness, each region has circumstances to consider. Some houses would decline, if not collapse outright, if they were forced to pour all of their resources into maintaining the roads."

In most of the countries on the Central Continent, including the kingdom and the empire, it fell upon each lord to maintain the roads within their own territories, but not all noble houses were wealthy. If the government ordered them to maintain the highway up to a certain standard, many would risk bankruptcy.

Friede nodded. "That is why I speak of a *national* highway." He paused for a moment as he picked up one of the documents. "As I've explained here, the burden to maintain and protect the roads that will be part of the national highway will fall entirely upon the kingdom itself."

Adel frowned. "You'd essentially be stripping the nobles of their authority over their territory. I doubt many would approve."

"Sister, can't you listen until the end before you speak?" Friede said. He proudly pointed at the document. "The kingdom will bear the costs of the highway, but the roads themselves will remain the property of each lord. We will pay the lords to rent them."

"The burden on the nation's finances would be far too heavy

considering the current state of our treasury. Surely you must be aware of our recent *tremendous* expense, brother," Adel said, her stare boring into Friede.

The prince smirked, looking down on her with contempt. "Adel, the royal family can't be so shortsighted. This is an investment—an investment in the future of our kingdom. If the distribution of goods improves, noble families all around the country will prosper. This will lead to an increase in tax yields and enrich Haldoria as a whole. Can't you understand something so simple?"

Adel bit her lower lip in frustration. It was a sound argument. Friede grew giddy as he watched her.

"Your Highness, what are your plans for developing the areas bordering the highway? What of the tolls?" asked one of the other attendees.

"Each lord will develop his land as he sees fit. As for the tolls, they will remain at each lord's discretion, but unlike with other roads, we will set an upper limit."

Adel scanned the document. According to it, the tolls would be set fairly low.

"That way, merchants and adventurers will travel more, leading to the development of many areas," Friede continued.

"How will you secure the necessary funds and manpower, Your Highness?" a minister asked. He seemed genuinely interested in Friede's plans.

Friede flipped through the pages of the proposal. "We'll hire some experienced artisans to lead the work and have the new recruits of the army do some of the labor. I believe this is also the perfect opportunity to hire people from the slums in order to drive up the employment rate in the kingdom. As for the budget, I propose using part of our emergency fund and cutting back on military expenses. I'll provide whatever additional capital is needed from my private funds."

"Please wait, Your Highness!" exclaimed the minister of war. "I won't object about the emergency fund, but reducing the budget of the military is—"

"I'm only talking about a fraction of it. Besides, the war with the

empire is long over, and the recent tensions with our vassal nations have mostly subsided. There is no need for the military budget to remain so inflated."

This time, Bulat spoke up. "Friede, your proposal might indeed benefit our nation, but I cannot approve of weakening our military. Haldoria has expanded its borders time and time again because of our military might. We *must not* appear weak."

Unlike the empire, which had grown through military conquest alongside economic and diplomatic incentives, Haldoria had simply trampled over each of its current vassals with sheer strength. Bulat was not one to underestimate the forces of his vassal states. He knew that uprisings could spark the moment he showed weakness.

"Father— No, Your Majesty, times have changed. When you were young, plenty of powers fought to assert their influence, but things are different now. The Central Continent is split between our sphere of influence and the empire's, and we are at peace with one another. The threat of war no longer looms over our heads as it once did. Besides, my suggested cuts to the military budget will only be temporary."

"If I may, brother, you offered to fund this project personally. However, I believe your budget has long since been fully spent."

"What you speak of is the budget allocated to me by the state, Adel. This time, I will be using my *personal* funds."

While Friede had caused a series of problems over the years, he'd recently been staying out of trouble. He was Bulat's direct male heir and had inherited his thunder magic, which was enough to earn him the support of several conservative nobles. Adel suspected that these nobles were funding his highway project in secret.

After a few other questions, the assembly passed Friede's proposal.

After the assembly meeting, Adel returned to her office alongside Roselia.

"What do you think about all this?" Adel asked.

"I don't believe this was his idea," Roselia replied as she accepted a cup of tea from Maoran. "Do you think that one of the nobles who

joined his side came up with it?”

“No, that’s not it.” Adel sounded certain of herself. This wasn’t the tone she used for conjecture.

“Do you know something about this, Your Highness?” Roselia asked.

“A long time ago, before I ever left for the Reki Empire, Elizabeth told me of a similar plan. At the time, we were still at war with the empire, so she knew it couldn’t be implemented. I think my brother found her old proposal somehow.”

“I see... So this was Elizabeth’s idea...”

“Roselia, where is Eiwass at the moment?”

“He went to meet with the empire’s ambassador to discuss the terror attack.”

Eiwass had nothing to do with the attack on the imperial capital. However, the empire’s representative couldn’t just take his word for it and leave. To save face, they at least had to spend some time interrogating him.

“I see. Tell him to report to me as soon as he’s done.”

“Are you planning something?”

“Indeed, I am. It’s time for me to make a move.”

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The First National Highway

The highway that stretches from the port city of the Dukedom of Haldoria to the capital is said to be the only positive contribution made by the Foolish Prince who brought about the collapse of the former kingdom. This national project, which he proposed and supervised himself, revolutionized the distribution of goods within the Kingdom of Haldoria, which was standing on the brink of chaos at the time. The highway helped mend the wealth disparities between the poor regions and the rich capital, and it resolved a number of social issues. According to many historians who study this period, the construction of this highway likely delayed the fall of the kingdom by a decade. However, the recent discovery of new documents has cast doubt upon the origin of the idea. There might

be cause to believe that the Foolish Prince stole someone else's proposal.

In one of the offices of the National Adel Institute, a professor was reading an essay one of his students had submitted.

"Choosing to focus on the first highway as a means to delve into this time period... That's an interesting idea," the professor mumbled to himself, as he often did while organizing his thoughts. "Bringing up recent research to question an accepted fact was a good choice, but he should have gone over that new theory in greater depth. Otherwise, there's no point. Hmm... All right, he gets a score of sixty percent."

The professor wrote some concise comments detailing the issues with the essay next to the grade before reaching for the next paper in the pile.

Chapter 3: Gaien's Disciple

For a time, the sound of Gaien's hammer striking the metal was the only noise echoing in the cave.

"I wonder if Mr. Gaien has successfully consumed Salamander's mana."

I'd only been whispering to myself, but Kagali nodded. She could most likely see Salamander's mana with her mystic eyes. She wasn't looking at me as I spoke, as her gaze was fixed on Gaien's hands.

"Miss Ellie! Monsters are approaching!" Misha suddenly yelled.

I leaped to my feet. I still couldn't sense anything with my mana, but the place was so full of Salamander's mana that it was throwing off my detection abilities. I trusted a catkin's ears far more than I trusted my own ability to locate monsters at the moment.

"Misha, take Alice and stay close to Mr. Gaien! You stick with them too, Kagali!"

"Yes, miss!"

"O-Okay!"

Misha had indicated that the noise was coming from a different path than the one Tida had taken. I focused my attention on it and, sure enough, flame lizards started pouring through the entrance.

"Flame lizards!" Misha exclaimed.

"That explains why we didn't see any outside," I said.

I couldn't help but feel like it was strange that they had hidden inside the cave if they were wary of Salamander's inflated mana. Perhaps there were so many galleries down here that they'd come from quite a distance. Flame lizards could even move freely through lava. They might have been hiding in the depths of the mountain and entered passages that were connected to this cavern.

"Misha! Older flame lizards can breathe fire! Have Heal and Water Wall scrolls at the ready!"

"Got it!" Misha left Alice in Kagali's care and started taking out

scrolls. She also held her guardian dagger at the ready.

If the flame lizards attacked one by one, they wouldn't be a threat, but if a group of them used Fire Breath all at once, they might be able to breach my defenses. Outside, I could have used a wide-area spell and killed them all at once, but destructive spells with a large radius weren't an option underground. Another issue was that ice spells weren't very effective on flame lizards. I could increase the power of my magic to freeze them regardless, but I risked harming Gaien, Alice, and Kagali since they were so close. This left me with only one option...

"I shall stick to the most reliable method."

With a flick of my wrist, the head of the first flame lizard fell to the ground. Each time Flügel sliced through the air, another corpse joined the pile. I figured the bodies would soon get in my way, so I started kicking them to the edge of the cavern as I fought. I wasn't necessarily struggling, but there seemed to be no end to the flame lizards' reinforcements.

The flame lizards had registered me as an enemy. They crowded around me, jumping at me one by one without faltering despite how many of their fellow creatures' carcasses lay on the ground.

Suddenly, I noticed the larger specimens around me lifting their heads in unison.

"Ice Sphere!"

I'd only just finished creating a ball of ice around my body when the flame lizards unleashed their Fire Breath in unison. The heat of the flames was such that, without protection, a person would be carbonized within a few seconds.

As the surface of my ice melted away, I poured more mana into the sphere to reinforce it with additional layers. After a while, the intensity of the Fire Breath finally died down. The moment it stopped entirely, I let my ice shatter and simultaneously used Quick Motion to close the distance between me and the monsters. I quickly reacquainted Flügel with their necks.

"GRAAAAH!!!" A flame lizard at the back let out a loud, shrill cry as I cut off a few more heads.

The behavior of the entire group shifted. They seemed to have

chosen retreat. However, the issue was the direction they went in. Since I'd stepped into the gallery they'd come out from to kill more of them, they didn't have the option of retracing their steps.

In this situation, younger flame lizards might have simply run off toward the innermost part of the cave where the mana concentration was dense, but I could tell from their coordination that the one leading the pack was an older individual. At their leader's signal, the flame lizards all started running toward the path that led outside—and Alice, Misha, Kagali, and Gaien were in their way.

"This is bad! Misha, use Water Wall!"

"Water Wall!" Misha activated the spell right before the monsters' Fire Breath reached the group. As the fire and water clashed, steam rose, enveloping everything.

I'd messed up. My attempt to put as much distance as possible between the unconscious Alice and the fight had led me to move too far away from my companions. With all of the vapor blocking my vision, I could only close my eyes and rely on my mana detection skills to keep killing flame lizards.

I could sense Alice's and Misha's mana behind the Water Wall. Gaien was still swinging his hammer despite the chaos, and Kagali...

"Dad!"

"You idiot!"

Kagali had just jumped out of the protection of the Water Wall to defend Gaien, who was outside of it and defenseless. The leader of the flame lizards was heading straight toward them, and Kagali's sudden movements had seemed to provoke it.

"Kagali!" I screamed.

But it was too late. The flame lizard had already opened its mouth. I tried to cast a Water Wall of my own to protect them, but I was too far away, and the flames reached Kagali before I could do anything.

"Kagali!"

I suddenly remembered an item I had in my pocket and took out a small vial, opening it in a hurry. It was filled with crystal thread, a magic item made out of aqua silk that had the properties of both thread and water. While water and ice weren't very effective against

flame lizards, a slash attack using this thread might work.

"Water Thread: Slash!"

I poured my mana into the crystal thread and transformed it into a keen blade. I'd only recently learned water thread skills, so my control was a bit off. However, using crystal thread sped up the process compared to creating water thread from scratch with my mana, and I was able to cut off the flame lizard's head in the blink of an eye.

"Water Thread: Dispersion."





I let my thread spread throughout the cavern, and I killed two more monsters. Then, I used ice magic to lower the temperature and controlled the steam to clear my field of vision. I gasped at the scene that had unfolded before me.

Kagali had fallen on her backside, but she was completely unharmed. However, Gaien was standing in front of her, and he had taken the brunt of the monster's Fire Breath before I could kill it. He'd been badly hurt.

"Mr. Gaien!"

I ran up to him and started healing him immediately with my magic and the burn-healing potions I'd bought from Yuu. While I managed to cure most of his injuries, I couldn't do anything about the most grievous one he'd suffered. Both of his arms had been entirely reduced to ashes.

"Dad!" Kagali jumped to her feet and hugged her father. "Ellie! His arms!"

"Calm down, Kagali."

"A-A-A potion!" she stammered, panicking. "That's it! We have to use a potion!"

"No. If we use healing magic or potions to close up these wounds, not even Regeneration will be able to save his arms anymore."

"B-But...Regeneration is the most powerful healing spell. How could we—"

"Tida can cast it. Mr. Gaien, I know it hurts, but please bear with the pain. Thankfully, the fire cauterized your wounds, so you're not bleeding much. With a bit of healing magic to maintain your stamina, you should be able to hold out until Tida returns."

I did not have Regeneration registered in my Grimoire of Beelzebub. While that spell was technically a holy attribute healing spell, only people with a special disposition were capable of learning it. In that sense, it was closer to a unique spell than to a regular spell, so I couldn't copy it with my grimoire.

"Stop yer racket," Gaien told Kagali, who was still visibly distressed. "This is nothing."

"I-I'm sorry... This is all because of me—"

“Stop. This was me own choice,” Gaien shot back.

Kagali’s hand had been reaching out to him, but she stopped her motion, taken aback. Gaien watched her hand linger in the air aimlessly for a moment before turning to me.

“Tsk! I can’t swing me hammer like that. Yer sure that lass of yers can fix me up when she gets back?”

“I am. She told me herself that she could use Regeneration.”

“Then I’ll wait.”

Despite the loss of his arms, Gaien managed to sit down cross-legged, cold sweat running down his body. I handed a potion and a waterskin to Kagali.

“Watch him closely,” I told her. “If the pain becomes too much for him, use a little bit of the potion, but make sure the wounds don’t close up entirely.”

“O-Okay...”

“Misha, are you and Alice all right?”

“Yes, Miss Ellie!”

“Kyuu!” Carol squeaked.

Misha picked up Alice, who was still sleeping, and walked over to me. They both seemed unharmed. As they approached, I noticed some mana swirling around Carol.

“It’s weak, but this spell seems to be Block Presence. Was that you, Carol?”

“Kyui!”

“You tried to protect Alice, didn’t you? Thank you, Carol.”

Carol was still young, so until now I had thought she couldn’t use magic. However, it looked like she was already able to cast some spells—albeit weakly. Suddenly, I felt mana surge within Alice once more.

“Ah!” Misha exclaimed, surprised, as Alice wiggled out of her arms.

Alice slowly walked up to Gaien. “You’ve lost your arms.”

“I’m sorry, archspirit.”

“No need to apologize,” Alice replied, before touching Gaien’s stumps with the tip of her fingers. Pale flames covered them.

“It hurts less...” Gaien said.

"This is soothing fire. It won't give you back your arms, but it should make the pain more bearable."

I watched Salamander cast his magic on Gaien through Alice, surprised. Fire attribute healing spells normally hastened stamina recovery or boosted immunity. I'd never heard of a fire attribute spell that could ease pain. The magic of spirits seemed to be quite different from ours.

Alice frowned, so I asked, "Is something the matter?"

"It might be because this dwarf was in the middle of transferring my excess mana into these ores, but I find controlling myself harder than usual. I'll have to focus on holding back my mana, so I'll give you back this girl's body for the time being."

As soon as Alice finished speaking Salamander's words, she collapsed. Misha caught her before she hit the ground.

"Whew! Oh, it looks like she's asleep again," Misha said.

Allowing Salamander to control her body seemed to burn a lot of her stamina.

"Misha, I'll watch over Alice, so please keep an eye on our surroundings."

"All right!" she replied, placing the girl into my arms.

I held her with one hand and took out a bedsheet from my Grimoire of Mammon. I laid it out flat on the ground. I would have liked to sit down so Alice could sleep with her head on my lap, but that wouldn't be wise. I needed to be able to move at a moment's notice in case of any further danger. Instead, I took out a small bag, filled it with fabric, and put it under Alice's head as a makeshift pillow.

Once I was done, Carol climbed onto Alice's stomach and cast Block Presence again. Meanwhile, Kagali and Gaien were still sitting, making sure Gaien's wounds wouldn't worsen.

"All we can do now is wait for Tida."

◆

While Adel had made up her mind to step forward publicly, she'd yet to make her grand return.

"The situation has become tricky," Roselia said, anxiety plain in her voice as she scanned a document. "His Highness's recent behavior has been irreproachable—on the surface at least. Many of those who've yet to hear of Her Highness Adel's return, military officers and provincial low-ranking nobles for the most part, have started supporting him."

"Even among the eminent nobles who are aware of Her Highness's presence in the capital, plenty are on the prince's side," Eiwass replied. "Some are hoping to make a puppet king out of him, while others have been taking bribes from him for the longest time. Besides, my recent scandal has done nothing to help our cause. Even some of the sensible ones have started jumping ship."

Eiwass was grinning as though he found all of this very amusing, and Roselia glared at him.

"Leaving the empire ahead of schedule was a terrible mistake. We should have stayed, regardless of our business with Elizabeth," she replied with a sour expression.

Adel waved her hand. "Roselia, what's done is done."

"Her Highness is right," Eiwass said. "You shouldn't worry too much about it."

"And you should worry more, Eiwass," Adel shot back.

Eiwass saw the reproach in the princess's eyes and shifted the topic. "Speaking of which, Your Highness, how do you plan to reveal yourself to the public?"

"I don't know. The only way to make it impactful would be to reappear with some big achievement. That might make some of my brother's supporters come to my side. Even if they don't, it should at least make them question their loyalty to him."

"The question is, what kind of achievement? I can't think of a big issue you could fix single-handedly in a short time..." Roselia said.

"Getting rid of monsters or brigands like His Highness has done would certainly lack impact. His Highness has already established his reputation as a strong warrior. Surpassing his renown by playing on the same field will prove difficult," Eiwass added.

"Not to mention that, until now, Haldoria has always given preference to male heirs," Roselia said. "Women have sat on the

throne in the past, but only when the next male heir has been too young to rule—and they've always abdicated in the heir's favor as soon as they've come of age. That's why some of the nobles who are the most conservative and attached to traditions have refused to question our idiotic prince's right to inherit even during the worst of his foolishness."

"That's true," Adel said. "Tell me, do you think Elizabeth might get in my way?"

Adel usually never lost her composure, but this specific question was one that truly worried her. After the deal she'd made with Roselia, Elizabeth was far less likely to hurt the people of Haldoria, but magic contracts had loopholes. Besides, she was perfectly free to interfere with Adel's plans. Adel didn't think Elizabeth had any reason to hate her personally, but if she thought that Adel was a hindrance, she might try to get rid of her nonetheless. Adel knew that Elizabeth could be ruthless.

"There's no way to be certain that she won't," Eiwass said. "She's soft on her people, but she's merciless to those she's deemed her foes. And even if she doesn't think of you as her enemy, she isn't one to hesitate to make sacrifices for the sake of her goals."

"As I thought, I should stay clear of the Yutear Empire for the time being. In that case, I still think a feat of arms is my best chance. Most civil officials are either on my side or neutral, while my brother has the support of military officers and provincial nobles. I must show off my strength in order to appeal to them."

"But what will you do? As Lord Eiwass said, subduing monsters and brigands won't leave much of an impression on people's minds."

"I agree," Adel replied with a nod. She turned to Maoran, who'd been standing quietly next to the wall after serving tea to everyone. "Maoran, could you bring us a map?"

"Yes, mistress." Maoran fetched a map from a shelf and spread it over the table around which Adel, Roselia, and Eiwass were sitting.

"I've decided on this place," Adel said, pointing.

"Wh-What?! Are you serious?!" Roselia exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha! Now that's interesting," Eiwass said. "It's also very unlikely that Elizabeth would interfere there."

“This is no laughing matter!” Roselia retorted. “This is indeed an urgent matter, but the one to take care of it should be His Majesty, with the support of the knights!”

“With the prime minister dead, it shouldn’t be too hard to get His Majesty to delegate the matter to Her Highness.”

“Perfect. I’ll leave that to you then, Eiwass. Get permission from my father.”

“It’ll be my pleasure, Your Highness. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Borrow five hundred soldiers for me— Oh, and four knights to lead them. I’ll need them to handle the communications with the neighboring villages and the defense of our base of operations, so their loyalty matters more than their skills.”

“Understood.” Eiwass nodded and immediately started scribbling notes on a piece of paper.

“You’re being awfully cooperative. I thought you’d try to set some annoying conditions before agreeing.”

“Why would I? I’m your devoted servant, Your Highness.”

“My devoted servant, huh? I don’t think I’ve ever heard a description that fits you less.”

◇

“Huh? Did something happen, guys?” Tida’s carefree voice echoed through the cavern before she emerged from the same gallery through which she’d left.

“Thank goodness you’re finally back, Tida,” I said.

Tida let out a little scream when she noticed Gaien’s arms. “Your arms are completely gone!!! What in the world happened?!”

“We were attacked by flame lizards,” I said.

“My dad protected me from their Flame Breath and... Please, Tida! Fix his arms!” Kagali wailed. She jumped on Tida, throwing her arms around the woman’s neck.

“Urgh! G-Got it. I’ll do it, so...let...go!”

“Kagali, she can’t breathe,” I warned, pulling her back.

“I thought I was done for...”

"Knowing your strength, you could have easily peeled her off," I said.

"Actually, the thing I went to deal with was a lot harder to handle than I'd expected. I had no choice but to use my trump card, so I'm out of commission for a while. I can't fight right now."

Now that she mentioned it, Tida did seem exhausted. However, the mana I could feel coming from her hadn't decreased all that much. Perhaps her "trump card" had nothing to do with magic. Despite her usual shenanigans, Tida was a cardinal of the Church of Ibris—the most influential religion in the world. She surely had a few tricks up her sleeve that did not rely on mana.

"Understood. I'll protect you on the way back. You seem to have a lot of mana left, but will you be able to heal Mr. Gaien in your current condition?"

"Sure. I can still cast healing magic just fine. Regeneration requires some preparations, though, so he'll have to wait a bit longer."

Apparently, Regeneration required a magic circle and an altar. Kagali and I drew the circle while following Tida's instructions, and after building an altar out of earth, I put down offerings on it. Thankfully, I always had wheat, fruit, and magic stones in my grimoire.

Gaien sat down in the center of the circle, facing Tida, who began to quietly pray. After roughly five minutes, she waved her staff, then thrust it down onto a specific part of the circle. That spot served as the conduit for the absorption of mana from both Tida and our surroundings. The magic circle turned the mana into light, which gathered around Gaien's stumps and slowly took the shape of his two missing arms. When the radiance disappeared, his arms were back without so much as a scratch left.

"Phew, that should do it," Tida said, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

"Thank ye so much. Ye have all me gratitude."

"Don't mention it. Extending a helping hand to those in need is only natural for a devout servant of God. If you really want to thank me, a nice bottle of liquor would be more than enough."

"I'll find one for ye as soon as we get back."

Tida beamed at the promise of alcohol. Kagali also thanked her profusely.

"Now that me arms are back, I'll finish taking care of our lord archspirit's mana," Gaien said.

"Master! Let me help!" Kagali pleaded.

Gaien rebuffed her as he got ready to resume his work. "Out of the question. Stay quiet in a corner, and stop calling me master," he grumbled with a sigh.

"But you *are* my master! Everything I know about smithing, I learned from you!"

"I only taught ye that so ye'd be able to craft pots and kitchen knives. Ye started making weapons all on yer own!"

"And what's wrong with that? I'm the daughter of the best weaponsmith in the empire!"

"That ye are. But I refuse to accept ye as a weaponsmith. Ye don't have the resolve it takes."

"The resolve it takes... What does that even mean?"

"The fact that ye can't answer that yerself is all I need to hear."

The merry atmosphere after Tida had fixed Gaien's arms hadn't lasted long. The father-daughter pair were already fighting. I sighed as I watched them in silence.

"I'm a proper weaponsmith! And I can forge swords!"

"No means no, Kagali."

Kagali clenched her fists in anger. I was about to intervene to stop their fight from escalating when, against all expectations, Tida beat me to it.

"All right, all right, let's all take a step back, shall we?" Her voice carried unusually well. "I couldn't help but listen to your argument, and it seems the two of you don't see eye to eye. Mr. Gaien, can I ask why you're so opposed to Miss Kagali becoming a weaponsmith? Children wanting to follow in their parents' footsteps is quite natural, and I'm not sure I see the issue."

"Dwarves believe crafting weapons is a man's job," I said.

Gaien snorted. "As if I believe that nonsense. If ye can forge good weapons, gender matters not."

Gaien seemed to be surprisingly open despite the general consensus among dwarves.

"Why, then?" I asked.

"It's not a matter of skills—or gender. Kagali doesn't have the resolve it takes, that's it."

"You're still going on about that? What do you even mean by 'resolve'?!" Kagali shouted, slamming her fist into a nearby rock.

"Exactly what the word means!" Gaien shot back, striking the stone with his own brand-new hand.

These two truly were father and daughter.

Tida stepped in between them to create some distance and defuse the tension. "Mr. Gaien, sometimes others can't understand us without a full explanation."

Gaien was about to retort, but he stopped himself and let out a sigh instead. He couldn't argue with Tida after what she'd done for him. After a lengthy pause, he spoke.

"Weapons exist only to *kill*. Folks make up all sorts of reasons for it, saying they need to do it to eat or to protect what's dear to 'em, but all those excuses don't change the truth. When we swing a weapon, it's to kill, plain and simple." He looked straight into Kagali's eyes. "All weaponsmiths must be ready to bear the weight of the lives taken by the weapons they've crafted. I see none of that resolve in ye. Yer forging swords with the same mindset ye'd use to craft a pot. If ye go on like that, the day will come when the weight of these lives crushes ye. That's why I refuse to recognize ye as a weaponsmith."

"I... I won't..."

"Ye won't let it get to you? Are ye sure of that, Kagali? What will ye do when a knife ye've made cuts the throat of an innocent child? Can ye shoulder that responsibility?"

Kagali's eyes darted left and right as she stuttered, "Th-That's..." She couldn't give Gaien a straight answer to his question.

"Let me tell ye a story from several decades ago," Gaien continued. "Despite his talent, my master was a nameless smith. He wasn't a greedy man and was content just crafting the weapons he was asked for. He often said that, though he was too weak to

protect others, he could forge blades for those who could. If he hadn't been such a recluse, I'd probably be known as the disciple of the best blacksmith of the empire."

I hadn't expected Gaien to start talking about his own master out of the blue. Kagali seemed torn between her nervousness and her curiosity. This was clearly her first time hearing about any of this. Her gaze, which had been wandering around, was now fixed on Gaien once more.

"One day, a man who'd gotten my master to make him a magic sword burned down an entire village. The lad wasn't all that strong—but the sword my master had made for him was. The village's guards were no match for it, and the lad killed everyone, even the women and children." Gaien rubbed his brow, unable to hide his anguish at the memory. "When he heard the news, my master took his own life. He was kind and talented...but he was weak. That's when I realized that resolve is the most important quality for a weaponsmith."

I understood Gaien's point entirely. The issue wasn't whether Kagali could—or would—take responsibility or not. Rather, it was the fact that she had never even considered the question. It didn't matter whether she answered that a weapon was only a tool and the responsibility fell entirely upon the one who used it, or that she thought the blacksmith was responsible but she had decided to shoulder these sins and live on, or something else entirely. What mattered was that she didn't have an answer at all. No amount of skills could prevent someone's mind from breaking down—just like Gaien's master's had.

During the entirety of Gaien's speech, a benevolent smile remained on Tida's face, and she nodded gently several times. "I understand your feelings now, Mr. Gaien," she said before turning to Kagali. "Miss Kagali, as you've heard, your father doesn't think you're unworthy of being a weaponsmith. He's simply worried about you. I'd like for you to understand that."

"I... I do understand."

Tida gave another light nod. "Now then, Miss Kagali, do you still wish to become a weaponsmith after listening to your father's

concerns?”

“I do. I may not fully get what the ‘resolve’ my dad mentioned is all about, and it’s true that I’ve never thought about the fact that the weapons I craft for people to protect themselves could be used to hurt others instead. Even so...I want to be a weaponsmith! I want to forge weapons that will save people’s lives, just like my dad!”

Gaien looked at her in silence, and Kagali continued.

“After talking with Ellie and learning just how small my world is, I’ve come to understand that I’ve behaved like a spoiled kid. If I want my life to change, I have to forge it with my own two hands. I’ve made up my mind. I *will* be a weaponsmith. I’ll do whatever I need to do for the sake of that goal! And one day, I’ll surpass you, dad!”

This time, Gaien didn’t object. After seeing the blaze of courage in her eyes, he might have realized that Kagali was more serious than he’d previously thought.

“Mr. Gaien, I hope you will not make light of your daughter’s need for your approval. Besides, while she may not have an answer to your question yet, I’m sure you understand now that she takes this very seriously.”

“I do,” Gaien replied with a nod.

Tida bobbed her head too. “You may be father and daughter, but you are still two unique people with different views and opinions.” Tida’s voice was gentle yet firm, like that of a priest delivering a sermon. “You can’t understand each other if you don’t *talk* to each other. I know people sometimes like to speak of tacit understanding, but more often than not people never come to truly understand one another without exchanging words.”

Tida concluded by encouraging them to share their feelings with one another more often. “Anyway, sorry for taking up all that time!” she said, glancing at Salamander. She was back to talking like she always did. “Taking care of Salamander’s mana is our first priority at the moment, isn’t it?”

“Yer right,” Gaien replied. “Kagali, bring me those catalysts over there.”

“O-Okay!”

With that, Gaien continued his preparations. Once he was mostly done, he grabbed his hammer. After hesitating for a few moments, he called for Kagali again.

"Even though me arms grew back, they don't feel the same as before."

"What?! Are you okay?!" Panicked, Kagali looked to Tida for help.

"Well, these are brand-new arms, after all. I don't think there are any issues with him physically, but his mind might need some time to catch up with what's happened. I wouldn't be surprised if his reflexes and sensations were a bit off for a while. He'll get used to it within a few days."

"I see... I'm glad to hear that," Kagali said, reassured by Tida's answer.

Suddenly, Gaien held out his hammer to her.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"I can't risk handling our lord archspirit's mana in this state. But this can't wait, so ye do it."

"B-But..."

"If ye want to be a weaponsmith, stop chickening out. If ye've got no resolve, make up for it with guts!"

Kagali looked down at her father's hammer for a few seconds before making up her mind and taking it.

As I watched them, I whispered to Tida, "Does Regeneration really have those side effects? I've never heard of that before."

"Nope, that's not a thing. Casually reattaching a severed arm might have those symptoms, but I've performed the full ritual with the magic circle and altar to boot. His arms are just as they were before the attack."

So this is all a ploy to get Kagali to swing the hammer. "I see. The ends justify the means, huh? It was kind of you to play along."

"Why, of course. What else would you expect from an amazing, considerate woman like me?"

I shrugged, and my gaze wandered back to Kagali, who was hard at work under Gaien's guidance.

"He's already treating her like his disciple," I said.

"They both have such troublesome personalities," Tida replied.

"Here, please take this. You've both worked hard," Misha said, approaching us with waterskins.

"Oh! Is that alcohol?"

"It's water, obviously," I said. "Still, you surprised me earlier, Tida. You were almost like a true clergywoman."

"You'd be hard-pressed to find a more devout clergywoman than me, you know?"

◆

Kagali was far more stressed than she'd ever been in her life as she faced the unexpected responsibility of taking over Gaien's work with Salamander. Gaien watched her closely, giving her detailed instructions on the timing and angle of her swings, and Kagali did her best to follow them. She smelted the ores over Salamander's flame and sucked in some of his excess mana little by little. Every time her hammer struck the metal, a clear, pleasant ring echoed in the cavern.

"Ye can't just spread the mana evenly when yer making weapons. Fifty percent for the blade, forty in the core, and ten for the tang. That's the correct ratio."

"U-Understood!"

Gaien made it sound easy, but this wasn't something that just anyone could get right on their first try. Dividing mana correctly was one of the most advanced blacksmithing techniques, and it required years of training. However, Kagali had mystic eyes, which meant she could *see* mana. Unlike other smiths, who had to rely solely on their intuition, Kagali could check what she was doing in real time. That incredible advantage made up for her lack of experience.

"HAH!" Kagali roared as she excitedly hammered away.

It had been years since her father had last given her smithing lessons. Ever since he had taught her the very basics when she was a child—which for dwarves was considered basic education and not artisan training—Gaien had never agreed to give further instruction. As a child, though, Kagali had misunderstood his intentions and had assumed he intended to make her his successor. Perhaps that was

what had motivated her to start chasing her dream.

For the next few hours, Kagali swung her hammer again and again under Gaien's guidance. She carefully divided the mana throughout the sword with her own magic and trapped it in place with her hammer. As Kagali worked, Salamander's mana slowly altered the nature of the sword. Kagali was surprised to find that she could feel every step of that process.

Although she was heavily relying on her father's support, Kagali had undoubtedly taken her first step into the realm of world-class weapon smithing. The thought mesmerized her. She wished this moment would never end. She wanted to engrave every sensation into her mind. Little by little, her technique evolved, and Gaien found that he didn't have any more advice to give.

"Kagali..." he whispered, astonished.

His daughter didn't even seem to hear his voice anymore. Her concentration had narrowed her current world into one where only she and the ores she was forging into a weapon existed.





The moment after Kagali's final hammer strike felt like forever and yet only an instant. Either way, it suddenly came to an end. After one last high-pitched metallic noise rang out, the sword sucked in Salamander's colossal mana, which had been swirling around Kagali, all at once.

"How?!" Gaien shouted, shocked.

This was his master's secret technique—one that he thought had been lost to the world with his master's passing. It allowed ores to truly merge with mana. After years of pursuing this process, Gaien had only begun to partially understand it. And yet, Kagali had just achieved it. Gaien couldn't tell whether it was by chance or whether her extreme concentration had brought about a miracle. Either way, it didn't matter; Kagali had done it.

"The day ye surpass me might not be as far away as ye think," he said to himself as he caught Kagali's collapsing body in his restored arms. She'd lost consciousness upon completing the sword.

"Miss Kagali!" Tida exclaimed, rushing over to them.

"Don't ye worry. She just passed out because she was too focused for so long," Gaien said.

He himself had experienced the same thing—the euphoria of the sudden total understanding of a technique, followed by a debilitating wave of exhaustion. Now that she'd felt it, Kagali would surely grow tremendously as a weaponsmith.

Gaien had always wanted his daughter to live a peaceful and quiet life, but now that he'd witnessed her awakening with his own two eyes, he was starting to think that watching her walk down the path she'd chosen might not be so bad.

◇

It was obvious at a glance that the sword Kagali had crafted with Gaien's help was incredibly powerful. Salamander's mana, which had become one with the sword, seemed to have given it the power of spirits. I doubted a human could use it to its full potential considering the tremendous quantities of mana that had been imbued into it.

"This could very well be classified as a national treasure," I said.

"S-Seriously?!" Tida exclaimed. "Say, how much do you think it's worth?"

Tida hadn't seemed even slightly interested in the sword before, but the moment I'd uttered the words "national treasure," her eyes had started sparkling.

"It would be difficult to put a price tag on such an incredible sword," I replied. "But if I really had to give an estimate... Well, I imagine a few thousand holy gold coins at the very least."

"A-A few *thousand* holy gold coins?!" Tida approached the sword and reached out to touch it, but a flash of light erupted from it, causing her to draw her hand back. The weapon quite literally sparkled.

"This sword has so much mana inside that even yer naked eye can see it," Gaien said.

Gaien explained the details in Kagali's stead, since she was still passed out. According to him, there was fire attribute mana within the sword, and it could burn the average monster to ashes with a single blow.

"Ellie Leis, take this sword," he abruptly said.

I couldn't simply accept a gift of such value. "What? But—"

"I've made up me mind already. If ye won't take it, ye can throw it away. When we return to the city, I'll add the hilt and deliver it to ye."

"Mr. Gaien, I cannot use a fire attribute sword to its full potential," I argued.

"Then give it to someone who can. Or sell it to the empire."

I didn't think Gaien would change his mind.

"All right. I shall accept it, then. Thank you very much." It certainly wouldn't be enough to repay him, but I resolved to regularly send him bottles of the good stuff as a sign of my gratitude.

"When we get back, I'll have a request for ye," he added.

"What is it?"

"Nothing hard. Though to be honest, I'm not sure I want to share it yet."

"Okay..."

I was slightly confused, but I nodded nonetheless. Gaien was being evasive on purpose, and it was clear he was doubting himself at the moment.

Under Tida's care, Kagali regained consciousness in a few hours. In the meantime, we'd cleaned the altar where Kagali and Gaien had worked, gathered our belongings, and prepared for the trip back. We were about to depart when Salamander borrowed Alice's body one more time.

"You've done me a great favor, dwarves," he said.

"It has been an honor to be of use to you, archspirit," Kagali replied.

The two dwarves bowed deeply.

"I'm also thankful to my young sister for her help," Salamander added.

These words gave me pause. "Your 'young sister'? Are you talking about Alice?"

"Indeed."

"But why do you call her that?"

"Are you not aware that this child isn't human? She's a spirit."

"What?!"

"To be precise, her essence lies somewhere between that of a human and a spirit. I have existed for a very long time, but I have never seen any other being like her. Her body is almost identical to a human's, but her soul resembles that of a spirit."

"Her soul..." I didn't know much about souls—or astral bodies, as some called them. This topic was almost exclusively studied by necromancers. "Alice is a spirit..."

How was that possible? My first encounter with Alice had been peculiar, to say the least, but she had always looked exactly like a regular human child.

Alice, or rather Salamander, spoke again. "Hmm... I shall give her some of my power to thank her."

"W-Wait!"

Before I could stop Salamander, light surrounded Alice's body,

then quickly vanished. I couldn't see anything different about her.

"She will likely sleep for several days while she adapts to my power, but you needn't worry, human. Now then, I bid you all farewell."

Alice collapsed, and I caught her as she fell.

I'd always heard that it was impossible for humans to understand spirits, and that had turned out to be true. I'd initially thought that Salamander was a rational being with whom it was possible to converse, but he hadn't left any room for discussion before doing what he'd wanted.

I had a lot on my mind between the matter of Alice's true identity and the strange power Salamander had said he'd bestowed upon her, but we couldn't stay here. I resolved to think about everything later, and we finally departed.

Misha took over carrying the still unconscious Alice while I stayed alert in order to protect our group—especially Tida, who was unable to fight—in case anything happened.

Thankfully, Gaien was strong enough to protect himself, so he helped me fight off the goblins and flame lizards we encountered along the way. We managed to leave the Sacred Mountain without too much trouble.

"The sun will set soon," Tida said.

"We should camp out for tonight," I said. "We can return to the city in the morning."

"There be too many monsters around here," Gaien warned. "There's a spot I sometimes use when I need to camp out. It's just a little farther, if ye follow me."

Gaien led us to a small cave near a river.

"Most monsters wouldn't fit in here," Misha said. Her ears twitched as she scanned the area for potential threats.

"This is a good spot, indeed. Let's rest here," I said.

We had a simple dinner with the food I carried in my grimoire before deciding on the order for lookout duty. Once that was done, I closed my eyes and fell asleep immediately.

I woke up in the middle of the night to relieve Misha, who'd been

keeping watch. Alice was lying down next to me, asleep. She looked the same as always. I hadn't felt any ill will from Salamander, and I didn't think he'd done anything that could hurt her, but I still couldn't help but feel uneasy. I gently caressed Alice's hair a few times and fixed her ribbons, which were slightly crooked, before getting out from under my blanket. We were already a small distance away from the Sacred Mountain, and the chill of the night had set in.

"Good work, Misha. I'll take over now," I said as I walked to the entrance of the cave.

"Thank you, Miss Ellie."

"We're far enough from the Sacred Mountain that the air is cold. Make sure to sleep under the covers."

"I will."

I watched Misha crawl under the blanket, and then I directed my attention outside the cave. I kept my senses alert while listening to the soft crackling of the fire we'd started earlier. Suddenly, I felt someone approaching from behind—there was no malicious intent, though.

"Why are you up, Kagali? You're not on watch yet."

"I couldn't sleep." Kagali sat down next to me. She picked up a few twigs and threw them into the fire. "Are you all right, Ellie? That thing about your daughter—Alice, was it? That must have come as a shock to you."

"I'm fine. I can't give you the details, but I always knew she was special. I never would have imagined she was half spirit, though."

"I don't think anyone would have."

"They certainly wouldn't." I paused for a moment. "Kagali... About Alice..."

"I won't breathe a word about any of this to anyone. And you don't have to worry about my dad running his mouth either. We're both devoted believers in Spiritanism. We'd never betray someone who has helped our lord archspirit."

"I see. Thank you."

Since we didn't have anything better to do, I decided to brew us some tea. I created some water with my magic, filled a pot, and put it over the fire.

"Come to think of it, Kagali, you've stopped calling your father 'master.' Was that a conscious decision?"

"Yeah. You know, I... I used to call him that in the hope that he would recognize me as his disciple, but I don't think I need to anymore." Kagali's cheeks flushed in embarrassment, and she fixed her gaze on the campfire. "Thank you, Ellie. Without you, my father and I would have never come to understand one another."

"You should be thanking Tida, not me," I said.

"I'm very grateful to her too, of course, but without that conversation I had with you, I think I would have spent my entire life admiring the imperial capital from afar. I was able to face reality thanks to you."

"I haven't done anything. *You* found your own answer. I just shared my opinion on the matter with you."

"Well, your opinion is what helped me see the bigger picture—that I needed to escape the small world in which I'd trapped myself."

"I see. If that's how you feel, I'll accept your thanks. So, Kagali, have you decided what your next step will be?"

"I'm not sure yet. I've now accomplished something I'd always wanted to do, but I don't know what my father will have to say about it. Maybe we'll end up in yet another fight as soon as we get home."

"If that happens, keep communicating until you understand each other."

"I will. Although we might just end up speaking with our fists."

"That's not exactly how I envision a discussion."

"You're good at it, though, aren't you? Speaking with your sword and magic."

"I can't deny that," I replied.

Kagali and I looked at each other and laughed. Our quiet chuckles merged with the sound of the water boiling before disappearing into the night.

The following morning, we returned to the capital of Hepheast. It wasn't all that far from the Sacred Mountain in the first place, so we departed at dawn and reached the city gate just past noon. As soon

as we got there, the guards invited us into the guardroom for tea. Lekius had apparently asked them to do that, and a carriage would arrive for us soon.

We all had tea together as we waited. Mireille and Lunoa ended up arriving from Gaien's shop before the marquess's carriage came. Misha and I exited the guardroom to meet them.

"Miss Ellie, Misha, are you both all right?" Mireille asked.

"We are. It was a bit of an ordeal, but we weren't hurt," I said.

Lunoa hesitated for a second. "What about Alice?"

"She's okay. A lot happened and she's asleep at the moment, but she should wake up in a few days."

"I'm glad to hear that," Lunoa replied, looking relieved.

As Misha was informing Mireille about what had happened, the marquess's carriage arrived. There was a lot I wanted to discuss with Mireille—especially the matter of Alice's identity—but I couldn't do so in such a public place. I decided to leave that until after I reported back to Lekius. I went back inside the guardroom to pick up Alice and entrusted her to Mireille and Lunoa. Misha and I boarded the carriage to accompany Kagali and the others to the marquess's residence.

"Gaien! Kagali! You're all right!" Lekius exclaimed as soon as he saw them. He rushed to them and slapped their shoulders, smiling broadly.

"Sorry for worrying ye, brother."

"That hurts, uncle!"

"Lord Hephaest, I'd like to give you my report, if that's all right," I said.

"These things can wait! First, time for the banquet!"

"Huh?" Misha and I let out in confusion.

The marquess ignored our outburst while the servants, clearly used to their lord's tendency to throw banquets at the drop of a hat, began to make preparations.

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A woman with tan skin was on her knees, her face lit by the

flickering flames of the candles that illuminated the room. Scorpion, as her comrades called her, extended her prosthetic arm and held out a small box.

"Is that what we discussed?"

"Yes, young master, it just arrived from the kingdom," Scorpion replied.

"Good work. Leave a few agents in the kingdom and have the rest retreat."

"As you command." With great interest, Scorpion watched her master inspect the small box she'd just given him before she addressed him once more. "One last thing, young master."

"Yes?"

"I have a message from Crow: 'The crown prince's fiancée, Sylvia, is highly resistant to hypnosis. She distrusts the people we've sent to his side and has attempted to approach Princess Adel several times. Her presence has started to get on my nerves, so I humbly request permission to get rid of her.'"

"Who was Sylvia, again? Ah, right, that's the name of that mistress of his, isn't it?"

"It is," Scorpion replied. "Baron Lockit played his part perfectly, but with Elizabeth Leiston out of the picture, I believe that Sylvia has outlived her usefulness. Besides, if she successfully gets in contact with Adel Haldoria, the princess may uncover our plans. Isn't it high time we disposed of Sylvia and the ministers and officials who played a part in breaking off the prince's engagement to Elizabeth?"

"You have a point, but no. I may no longer have use for them, but to Elizabeth Leiston, Sylvia represents the prince's treason, while the ministers and officials are turncoats who repaid her goodwill with spite. They're all targets for her revenge."

"The kingdom is filled with other targets she could focus on. Doesn't she even loathe the citizenry?"

"Elizabeth did resent the people, but I don't believe she ever intended to harm them on purpose. She simply didn't care if they ended up being collateral damage. However, she's recently stopped fanning the flames of popular revolt. While she's still undermining nobles with economic attacks, she isn't throwing entire territories

into chaos anymore."

"Does that mean she's forgiven the people?"

"Adel Haldoria's subordinates got in contact with her during the empire's festival. They must have made some sort of deal with her."

"Adel Haldoria and Elizabeth Leiston are working together?!" Scorpion exclaimed.

"No. For now, it simply looks like they've agreed not to fight. If they do team up in the future, though, it'll spell trouble for us."

"Do you think that's possible, young master? Them joining hands."

"I doubt it. Elizabeth Leiston has completely forsaken the kingdom, while Adel Haldoria is trying her hardest to restore it to its former glory. Even if they choose to walk side by side temporarily, their paths will inevitably diverge in the end."

Scorpion nodded. His prediction was in line with the information they'd gathered thus far.

"At any rate, anything that can catch Elizabeth's attention and rekindle her anger—such as the prince's mistress getting closer to Adel—is good for us. There's also a chance it'll weaken Adel's position. Let Crow know."

"Yes, young master."

Scorpion's magic prosthetic arm, which had replaced the arm she'd lost, creaked. She considered the man in front of her worthy of ruling over the world, and even that exceptional man was wary of two people: Elizabeth Leiston and Adel Haldoria. She had to prevent them from joining forces at all costs.

"I shall deliver your orders at once," Scorpion said.

"I'm counting on you."

Scorpion stood up and turned to leave, but her master stopped her.

"Wait. While you're at it, relay these orders to Phasmid as well."

"Where is he?" Scorpion asked. "He has a new face and name every time I see him, so I'm afraid I have a hard time keeping track."

"He's posing as an elven merchant in the empire. His current name is Lotton Flywok."

"Lotton Flywok? I see he chose to be quite the big shot this time."

"Isn't that nice? It should make finding him easy."

After being entrusted with this mission, Scorpion nodded and left the room.

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Two knights walked through the treasure house. They were in charge of managing the most valuable items of the Dukedom of Haldoria. One held a magic lamp to light the way, while the other checked each item against a list. He also examined the state of the objects to make sure they weren't damaged. The pair had been at it since the early hours of the morning and had only taken a few short breaks. They decided it was time for a longer break so they could have lunch, although it was already a little late in the day for that.

"Whew... We've finally reached the thirty percent mark," one of them said.

"If we're too hasty and damage something ourselves, our heads will roll, so we have no choice but to take it slow," the other replied.

"Well, national treasures are more valuable than our lives."

"Say, do we really not have to check the stuff beyond that door?"

"Yeah. Apparently, the objects they keep in there are a little special. The archduke looks after them himself."

"I wonder what could be in there for the archduke to do that in person."

"It's only a rumor, but I've heard they're the personal belongings of the first archduke. They say there are his memoirs, an enormous spirit crystal...oh, and a priceless sword imbued with the powers of an archspirit!"

"For real? That's a little intimidating, but I wish I could see that sword with my own two eyes at least once."

The other knight laughed. "Same. Anyway, enough chitchat. Let's go back to work and do one more shelf before the next guys get here to relieve us."

"Sure."

Chapter 4: Reunion

"Nngh..." As soon as I awoke, the strong scent of alcohol filled my nose and I opened my eyes. "Where am I...?"

I was at a loss for a few seconds, but the memory of what had happened quickly flooded back. I was currently in the main hall of the marquess's residence. I'd fallen asleep on one of the sofas.

"How could I fall asleep in such a place? How careless of me," I whispered.

I noticed that Tida was lying on the ground by my feet. I turned her body around. Her face was flushed red from alcohol, but she seemed to be happily asleep, a bottle tucked under her arm. I looked around and spotted Gaien and Kagali too. Everyone had passed out drunk.

"O water, purify my body: Antipoison."

The spell purged my body of the leftover alcohol. I arose and picked Tida up before laying her down on the sofa.

I sighed. "I'm acting like an idiot."

After successfully relieving Salamander of the excess mana he'd accumulated due to the abnormal spirit crystal, we'd accompanied Gaien and Kagali to the marquess's residence. I'd hoped to speak to Lekius, but he'd insisted on holding a banquet to celebrate the safe return of his brother-in-law first.

I'd sent Misha back to the inn, but I'd missed my chance to make my escape. I'd ended up being one of the guests of honor at the banquet, along with Tida, Gaien, and Kagali—which meant we'd all been given countless drinks. Dwarf culture deemed it rude to refuse alcohol offered to you during celebrations, so I'd been forced to drink way too much. In the end, I hadn't even been able to have a discussion with Lekius.

I should have used Antipoison yesterday...

"The marquess doesn't seem to be here," I whispered, scanning

the room once more. There were plenty of other people passed out on the sofas or on the ground holding bottles or jars, but the marquess wasn't among them.

I left the main hall to look for him. As I walked through the corridors of the mansion, I noticed that traces of last night's boisterous banquet had yet to be cleaned up. Then, I sensed the presence of some people inside a nearby room and stopped in my tracks. There was a servant waiting in front of the door. Most noble mansions shared a similar layout, so I could easily guess that this was most likely a drawing room—to be specific, one designed to host guests of a lower rank than Lekius.

Since there was a servant standing there, I imagined Lekius was currently seeing guests. He'd also drunk his fair share of alcohol the night prior, but he undoubtedly knew his limits and had made sure he could fulfill his obligations the next day like a proper lord should.

I was about to go wait somewhere until Lekius was finished with his guests when the door opened and someone left the room escorted by a maid. At the moment, I was still a mere merchant, so I stuck to the wall and lowered my head.

Unexpectedly, Lekius's guest called out my name. "Miss Ellie?"

I lifted my head and immediately recognized the woman. "Miss Arte?"

The guests turned out to be Arte, one of the investigators for the legal department of the Merchants' Guild, and her younger brother, whom I'd met during the festival. I bowed to him and kept my head lowered once more, as was proper when greeting the head of a noble family.





"Please lift your head. It has been a while, Miss Ellie."

"It has been a while indeed, Lord Nestart."

The last time I'd crossed paths with the boy, I hadn't greeted him properly. That was because Arte had introduced him to me as her brother before I'd learned he was the head of his family. Now that we had met again in the mansion of another nobleman, I made sure that I followed all the rules of etiquette when addressing him.

"What brings you to Hephaest, Miss Ellie?" he asked.

"I'm hoping to have a new sword made," I replied.

"I can understand why. The weaponsmiths of this city are very renowned." Nestart's way of speaking and general behavior were far more mature than last time. "We've come here for trade negotiations," he continued, "though they've fallen through..." He smiled, clearly trying to conceal his disappointment.

"You negotiated with the marquess?"

"The Barony of Hilgardie used to be part of the kingdom, so it has very few ties with the other territories of the empire. Forging trade agreements with the Hephaest Marquessate would bring prosperity to our territory, but the marquess refused because he believes he won't profit enough."

"I see."

Lekius appeared wild at first glance, but he was still a high-ranking nobleman and the descendant of a royal line. He would never agree to a deal that wouldn't profit his territory, even to help out a young and inexperienced lord such as Nestart.

"Ah, forgive me for taking up so much of your time, Miss Ellie. You must also have business with the marquess," Nestart said.

"We have negotiations with several other merchants planned, so we'll remain in this city for some time," Arte said. "Let's share a meal when you have time, Miss Ellie."

"I'd love to," I said. "I'll send you an invitation."

After giving me the address of their lodgings, Nestart and Arte left with the maid in charge of guiding them.

"The Barony of Hilgardie, huh..." I muttered.

It was one of the territories that had been given to the empire by the kingdom after the counterfeit money incident. Most of its

inhabitants had been citizens of the kingdom until recently, so they had stronger ties to Haldoria than to the empire.

If I open a branch there, I might gain some influence over the kingdom...

"I suppose I'm starting to see the limits of what I can do as a mere merchant, though. I'll need to get Mireille's advice on this..."

I watched Nestart and Arte walk away, then I knocked on the door of the drawing room and gave my name to the servant in charge of relaying messages. He hurried inside and came back out almost immediately to tell me that Lekius would see me.

"Excuse me, my lord," I said as I entered. I saw Lekius looking at documents with a glass of distilled liquor in his hand. "I had a most pleasant time yesterday evening. Thank you very much for inviting me to this banquet and—"

"Enough of the pleasantries," Lekius said. While he'd interrupted me, I sensed no hostility in his tone. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"My employees are waiting for my return, so I was about to leave. I just wanted to greet you before I did."

"Oh, I see! You've done us all a great service. Thank you."

"Thank you as well for your hospitality," I replied.

"That's far from being enough to repay you! You helped our lord archspirit and rescued my brother-in-law. Is there nothing you want from me? Anything you wish for?"

"Something I wish for?"

"Yes, yes. Anything! As long as it's within my power, it's yours."

"In that case, I'd like your permission to trade restricted ores. There are some ores found only in Hephaest that make great ingredients for cosmetics."

"Ores...? Sure, you've got it. You'd normally need to submit paperwork and get approval from the empire too, but since you're a Special License holder, my permission will be enough. I'll fill out everything that's required on my end by the end of the day."

"Thank you, my lord."

"I know you refused the other day, but since we've just concluded another deal, I'll try my luck again. Would you agree to open a

branch in my territory? If you plan to buy ores regularly, having a store that could double as your base of operations here would be helpful, don't you think?"

"Well..." I said, considering it. Lekius was an aristocrat through and through. He was trying to turn the reward he'd given me in his favor and hadn't wasted a second before making his move. "You're right in saying that a base of operations in this region would make handling regular transactions easier for me."

"Indeed. I promise you the most favorable treatment I can possibly give when it comes to taxes. Besides, if you're sourcing ores for manufacturing cosmetics, I doubt there's any better place than this city to get the job done right. You might as well set up an entire production base, don't you think? I can help you find the perfect location, and I'm happy to assist you with financing if you need it."

"That's a wonderful idea, but I'd like to take some time to discuss it with my people and collect my thoughts before making such a big decision, if that's all right with you."

"Of course. Let's resume this discussion on another day."

"Thank you. Well then, I shall take my leave for today." I stood up and was about to leave when Lekius stopped me.

"Wait, there was something else I meant to ask. Are you acquainted with Baron Hilgardie? I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you talking in front of the door."

This was the residence of a high-ranking nobleman, not a cheap hotel. I doubted the walls were thin enough for speech from the hallway to reach the marquess. I used Physical Boost and noticed that I could sense the presence of the servant in front of the door much better than I could before. Had this room been built to allow people to eavesdrop if they used that skill?

"Lord Nestart and I are acquainted," I replied after a pause. "I met him through his sister who works for the Merchants' Guild."

"I see. I feel for him. So young and yet already the head of his house. Unfortunately, while I do sympathize, I can't possibly help him at the cost of harming my territory's interests."

"I believe that is only natural, my lord."

"I suppose so," Lekius agreed. "At least, I certainly can't help him

with such a shallow plan." He held out a document to me.

"Are you sure you don't mind me looking at it?"

"Not at all. It'll never come to fruition anyway."

"In that case, I shall take a look." I skimmed the document and quickly realized that Lekius was right. The Hephaest Marquessate couldn't possibly take such a deal. "It *is* a naive plan. If he were a merchant, I'd give him a passing grade, but for a lord responsible for the lives of his subjects, this is unacceptable."

"You're a tough judge, as I expected. Still, you have to admit he has good intuition. He picked the right thing to focus on."

"You really are kind, my lord."

"I certainly am not. I just laughed at a poor young lad who came to present his plan in earnest," Lekius replied with a sad smile. It was plain to see that he wanted Nestart to succeed.

I bade Lekius goodbye and finally left his estate. As I walked toward the inn, I suddenly recalled something.

"Ah! I forgot Tida! Oh well... She'll manage."

Tida wasn't a child; she knew how to take care of herself. Besides, Lekius's residence was filled with countless kinds of alcohol. To her, his mansion might as well have been paradise.

After I got back, Mireille made us tea, and I filled her and Lunoa in on everything that had happened. We were the only three people in the room, as Alice was still sleeping and Misha was staying at her bedside.

"So she's a spirit? Or rather, a half spirit...?" Mireille asked.

"According to Salamander, 'her body is almost identical to a human's, but her soul resembles that of a spirit.'"

"Her soul... The study of souls is almost taboo. Looking into that might be dangerous."

"I'd like to know a little more, but I'm not thinking of investigating the matter thoroughly," I replied. "No matter her origins, Alice is still Alice."

"You're right," Mireille said. She took advantage of a pause in the conversation to pour everyone another cup of tea from a beautiful metallic teapot with intricate engraving. She'd likely bought it here.

"What about the marquess?" Mireille asked. "Did you talk to him?"

"That man certainly is an interesting character," I said. "Despite what his appearance and personality led me to believe at first glance, he's actually a very capable man. I think I will end up opening up a branch in this city after all."

"I suppose we shouldn't have expected any less from a descendant of royalty."

"Indeed."

I told Mireille and Lunoa about my chance encounter with Arte and her brother, and my subsequent conversation with Lekius.

"It sounds like you'll need to meet with Baron Hilgardie once more while we're here," Mireille said, once I was done speaking.

"I will. The proposal the marquess showed me was full of issues, but with a bit of refining, it could be a very good deal for Hilgardie and Hephaest alike. Furthermore, if we set up a branch here, we'd reap the benefits too."

"But Miss Ellie, why did the marquess show you the proposal to lure you into helping Baron Hilgardie? Couldn't he have just pointed out and corrected the flaws himself?" Lunoa asked, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

"Factions are an important facet of the world of the nobility," I replied. "Until very recently, the members of House Hilgardie were nobles of the robe, which means they likely did not belong to any faction. If Marquess Hepheast extends a helping hand to Baron Hilgardie, there is a high chance that other nobles from his faction will interfere or try to get involved. After all, they might see this as a threat to their vested interests."

"And nobles from other factions might try to sabotage the deal altogether," Mireille said. "It's not easy for noblemen to seek change before they've established and strengthened their position—especially for those of a low rank."

"Only high-ranking nobles, or those with enough power and influence, can act as they please without depending on the dynamics of factions," I added.

"I'm not sure I understand what part he wants you to play in all

of this, though...” Lunoa said.

“If I help the baron amend his proposal so that it becomes perfectly fair, no faction will be able to comment on the marquess’s choice to take the deal or interfere.”

“Nobles have it hard just like the rest of us...” Lunoa replied with a sigh.

“Low-ranking nobles certainly do,” I agreed. “Ordinary people may not realize it, but many of those nobles lead much harsher lives than wealthy commoners do.”

Lunoa had a conflicted expression on her face. I smiled and handed her a letter.

“Could you deliver this to the lodgings of the Hilgardie siblings? I’m using a meal invitation as a pretext to talk to them.”

“Understood, Miss Ellie!”

“As for you, Mireille, I’d like you to start looking for staff in the city. We’ll likely keep the employees of whatever workshop we purchase, but we’ll need to fill management roles.”

“All right. I’ll select suitable individuals. Still, this goes to show that we should never underestimate the marquess.”

“Indeed, he’s a force to be reckoned with. If this deal with Baron Hilgardie succeeds, the stagnant economy of the marquessate will welcome a new boom. If the proposal falls through again, he will suffer practically no losses,” I said.

“And yet, we and House Hilgardie are both set to profit, so we have to go along with him,” Mireille replied. “I wouldn’t want to have him as an enemy.”

“I-I’ll go deliver the letter!” Lunoa blurted out. She ran out of the room.

Mireille watched her leave. “She doesn’t seem to like his methods. Well, the marquess played this like a true high-ranking noble. He’s taking the least amount of risk while being on track to benefit the most.”

“Lunoa’s feelings showed on her face a little, but she didn’t comment on them. That proves she’s growing up, don’t you think? I’m sure in a few years she’ll be able to face the dark world of the nobility with a smile on her face while securing her own profits,” I

said.

"Do you really think so?" Mireille asked. She seemed to be picturing Lunoa's timid expression.

"She will," I replied assuredly. "I'll see to that myself."

"We meet in two days. Mireille, make arrangements for the meal," I said after Lunoa returned with Nestart's reply.

"You can leave it to me, miss."

I had Lunoa deliver another letter saying I agreed to the proposed date and time, and then I took the rest of the day off. After our excursion to the Sacred Mountain, I'd gone straight to the marquess's banquet and hadn't had a moment to rest since.

I entered my room, where Alice was still sleeping.

"Ah, Miss Ellie, welcome back," Misha said. She was sitting on a chair next to the bed, reading a book.

"Hello, Misha. I'm done for the day, so I'll watch over Alice. You should go get some rest."

"I will. Thank you, Miss Ellie."

Misha returned to her own room without delay. She, too, must have been exhausted.

I changed into comfortable loungewear and stared at Alice's sleeping face. The fact that her appearance hadn't changed one bit reassured me a little, and I slipped into bed beside her. There wasn't any alcohol left in my system, but sleepiness finally caught up with me anyway. As I closed my eyes, my consciousness quickly faded away.

The next day was filled with preparations for the meal with the Hilgardie siblings and preliminary inspections of buildings that could become my new store or production base. When Alice opened her eyes, however, we put everything on hold and rushed to her side. Despite our worries, she seemed just fine.

"Alice, how are you feeling?" I asked.

"Good!"

Alice was surprised to learn that she'd slept for three days. Carol jumped on her, practically begging for her to give her mana.

However, when Alice tried to feed her pet as she always did, powerful fire mana emerged from her hand instead.

"Ah! What was that?! Aaah!" Alice yelped. Thankfully, she stopped herself before the mana could turn into a spell and burn anything, but she was completely taken aback.

"Are you okay, Alice?" I asked.

"Y-Yes, mama. I was surprised, but I'm not hurt."

"Was that the power Salamander gave you?" I asked.

"I think so," she said. "I feel a loooot of mana inside me."

"He must have amplified your fire attribute mana. It looks like you'll need to train a little to learn how to control it."

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House Hilgardie was a relatively recent noble family, as Nestart's grandfather had been the first to be conferred a peerage. The title had passed from father to son, but through the years the family had always remained civil officials in the imperial capital without owning land. The Hilgardies' status had finally changed after Haldoria ceded some of its territory to the empire and the emperor granted them land.

If one only knew about the family's recent turn of fortune, one might expect everything to be going smoothly for them. However, the death of the former Lord Hilgardie had since thrown their lives into disarray. The young and inexperienced Nestart was now head of the family, with brand-new responsibilities and land to manage.

"It didn't go well this time either..." Nestart said.

"It sure didn't."

Nestart and his sister both let out sighs as they returned to their lodgings after meeting with the Marquess of Hephaest. Nestart glanced at Arte's face; she looked worn out. Arte had stepped up as the adolescent lord's guardian, but even she was quite young and inexperienced at dealing with cunning noblemen and their endless attempts to exploit the smallest opening for profit.

"I truly thought this was my chance to grow our territory's economy..."

“It couldn’t have been helped,” Arte said. “The marquess was right, after all. There wasn’t enough in the deal to benefit him. The fact that he told you that honestly and refused any contract instead of trying to take advantage of you was already very kind.”

“That’s true. Miss Ellie was also about to see him. Do you think she made a deal with him?”

“Most likely. She’s a very skilled merchant. She must have considered every last detail in order to build a mutually beneficial relationship with him.” Arte had replied without giving much thought to what she had said, but her words made her brother think harder.

Nestart paused for a few moments before finally opening his mouth again. “Don’t you think we should join a faction?”

“That won’t be easy. The territory our house was given used to be part of the kingdom. Many people in the empire don’t like the land or its people. Besides, the heads of our house have only ever been civil officials, which means we have no credibility as feudal lords. We have no backing either.”

“Well...”

“I suppose our first step should be finding someone to support you. Preferably soon.”

“Sister! Do you mean—”

“I know; that’s our last resort. But we have no idea how long the other party will wait. Maybe it’s time to play our final card.”

In the world of the nobility, there was one easy, natural, and surefire method to secure ties with another family—political marriages—and it just so happened that House Hilgardie had an unwed daughter. She was already a little old as far as noble marriages went, but Arte was attractive and there was a potential groom who had sought her hand in marriage.

“And you’d be fine with it?!”

“My opinion doesn’t matter. This might be necessary to ensure the prosperity of our house and the well-being of our people. Besides, the one who has the right to make this decision is *you*, not me.”

“But, I...”

Nestart was very much against sending Arte to this family, and he

had already expressed that. He hadn't told her why, and Arte hadn't asked. She'd tried to respect his decision and hadn't brought up the matter again—until now.

"I know you have your own reasons to oppose this wedding, but I think it's about time you made your final decision."

"I'm sorry, sister, but I'm very tired. I think I should go rest."

"Nestart!"

Nestart returned to his room after forcefully cutting the conversation short.

Arte's shoulders slumped in defeat, and she asked the maid for a cup of tea. A waiting maid, rather than a regular maid, should have been in charge of pouring tea for a noble lady such as her, but House Hilgardie wasn't wealthy enough to hire many servants. The only two people accompanying the siblings on this trip were this maid and their coachman, who doubled as a bodyguard.

After drinking her tea, Arte washed up with some hot water and soap her maid had brought. She'd just finished when the coachman knocked on her door to announce that a guest had arrived. He said that the visitor was there on Ellie's behalf, and Arte immediately agreed to see them.

"I-It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Lunoa Carlton, one of Traitre's employees."

"I'm Arte Hilgardie, the guardian of the head of House Hilgardie." She could tell that her guest was nervous, and she smiled in the gentlest way she could muster to put her at ease. "Please, make yourself comfortable, Miss Carlton. Although I've returned to my house temporarily, I've lived as a commoner for quite some time before that. Feel free to call me Arte."

"Thank you. You can also just call me Lunoa." With the introductions out of the way, Lunoa pulled out two letters. "These are from my boss, Miss Ellie Leis. This one is addressed to Lord Hilgardie, and this one is for you, Miss Arte."

"Pardon me while I read mine." Arte opened the envelope with a paper knife. "This is..."

At first glance, Ellie's letter was a simple invitation to a meal in celebration of running into an old friend in an unexpected place.

However, there seemed to be something deeper to it. Arte had picked up small hints here and there in Ellie's wording.

"Miss Lunoa, I'm sorry to ask you this, but would you mind waiting here for a few moments? I'd like to show this to the head of my house at once."

"Please do. I don't mind at all," Lunoa replied.

Before leaving the room, Arte asked the maid to bring out more sweets for Lunoa and refill her teacup. Then, she knocked on the door to her brother's room.

"Nes? Nes, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Please, can we have this conversation another day?" Nestart asked through the door.

"It's not what you're thinking. I'm not talking about that at all. Miss Ellie sent someone to deliver letters to us. I read the one addressed to me, and I think you should read yours immediately."

The door cracked open, and Arte walked in to give Nestart his letter. He opened it quickly and read through it. Once he was done, he read it again from the top.

"May I ask what she wrote?" Arte asked.

"Of course. She's not saying this directly, but it sounds like she wants to help me with the proposal I made to the marquess."

"Then we must make time to see her."

"I agree. If we cancel every meeting that isn't an absolute necessity, when's the soonest we can offer?"

Arte brought her hand to her chin and thought for a moment. "In two days. We can't afford to reschedule our meetings with the Merchants' Guild or large firms."

"Understood. I'll write a reply immediately."

During the two days after entrusting their reply to Lunoa, Nestart and Arte attended meetings with the Merchants' Guild and a few important businesses. While the meetings weren't entirely a waste of time, the siblings did not achieve any major results. Despite working for the Merchants' Guild, Arte wasn't a merchant. The legal department to which she belonged did not have much sway in commercial affairs.

Finally, the day of Ellie's invitation arrived. Nestart and Arte headed by carriage to the address Ellie had written in her letter.

When the carriage stopped, Nestart spoke up. "Hmm... Sister... Is this really the right place?"

"Well... That's what the letter says."

"But this is a high-class hotel exclusively reserved for high-ranking nobles, right?"

"I'm sure Miss Ellie knows what she's doing," Arte said. "Besides, I told you about her, didn't I? On paper, she's only invited us to share a friendly meal, but don't let your guard down, Nes. You must be as careful as when you're dealing with a high-ranking noble, not a merchant."

"Yes, sister."

Through her contacts at the Merchants' Guild, Arte knew Ellie's true identity, and she'd made sure to warn her brother accordingly. As soon as the two disembarked the carriage, an employee approached them.

"Hello. You must be Lord Nestart Hilgardie and Lady Arte Hilgardie," he said.

"We are," Nestart replied.

"We've been expecting you. Please follow me."

The man bowed politely and led them inside. There wasn't a single soul in the large lobby and everything was quiet. Nestart found it strange, and his discomfort must have shown on his face because the employee spoke up.

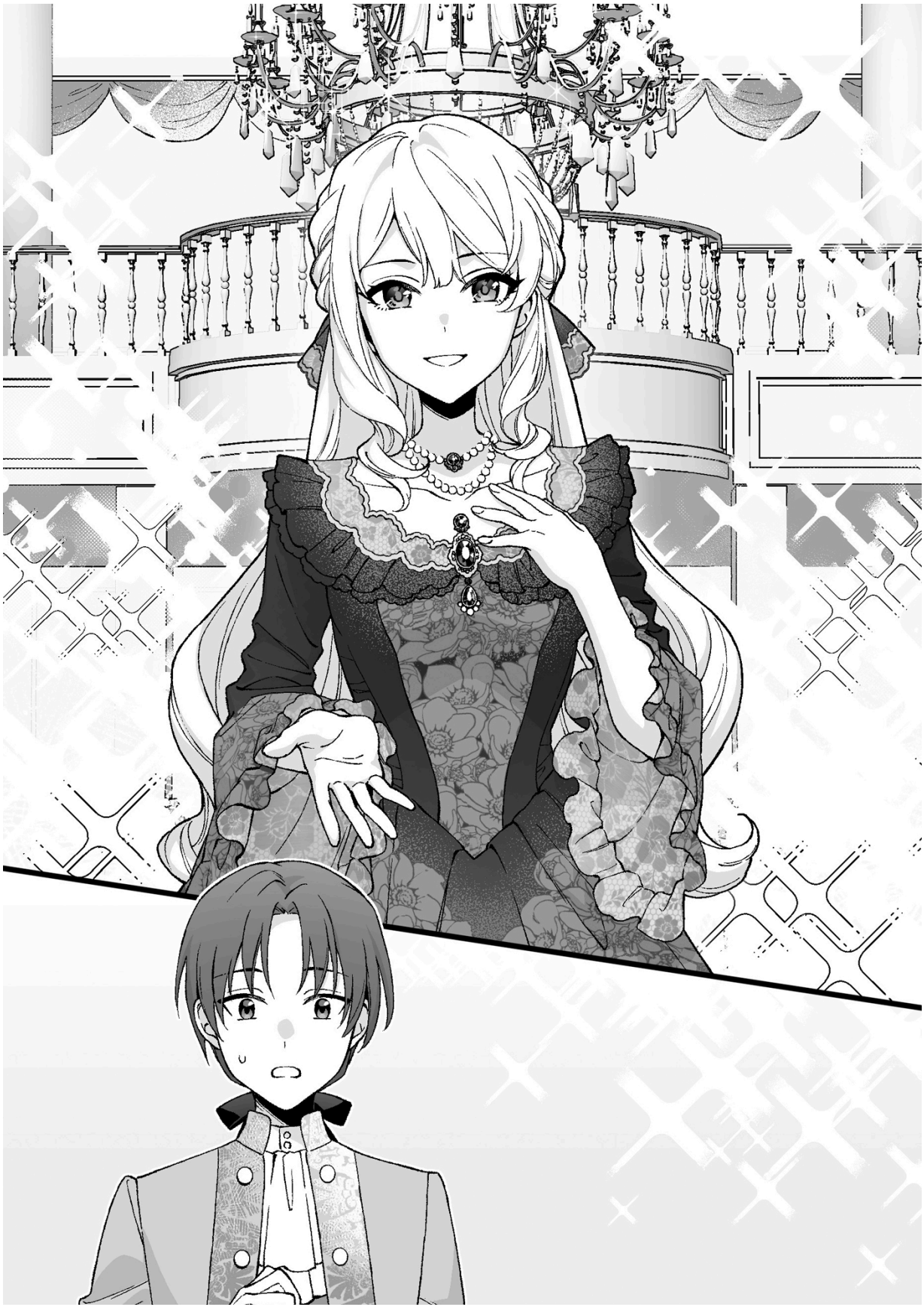
"The Traitre Commercial Firm has reserved our establishment for the day."

Nestart audibly gasped while Arte looked around in bewilderment. They couldn't fathom the cost of renting such a place. Obviously, there was the price of all the rooms for the day, but what of the noblemen already staying at the hotel? Ellie would have needed to negotiate with all of them and compensate them. Why would she spend such a tremendous amount of money merely to have a meal with them?

The hotel employee pushed open a large door, revealing a hall with countless sumptuous dishes laid out. It felt as though a fancy

soirée were about to start. Inside the hall were Ellie and her group, dressed to the nines.

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Nestart and Arte both seemed completely overwhelmed by the extravagant party I'd prepared. I performed the refined curtsy I'd learned during my princess lessons and greeted them.

"Welcome, Lord Hilgardie and Lady Arte. I hope you will enjoy this meal."

"M-Miss Ellie?"

"Is something the matter, Lady Arte?"

"No, it's just that... Well... What are you..." Arte appeared so confused that she couldn't even finish her sentence.

I scraped the practiced noble smile off my face to let out a small laugh. Then, the friendly smile I'd always used with her took its place.

"Come on, just go along with it."

"O-Okay."

It had taken them a minute to get used to this atmosphere and my current behavior, but Arte and Nestart were nobles, so they quickly adapted. There were only five of us in this room: the Hilgardie siblings, Mireille, Lunoa, and me. Alice and Misha were enjoying a relaxed meal in another room.

When it came time for dessert, we had exhausted all of the small talk. I signaled to Lunoa that it was about time to broach the main subject. She slipped out of the hall to prepare another room and quickly returned.

This was my cue. "Well, that was a delightful meal, but what would you say to sitting down for a more relaxed conversation?"

"It'd be our pleasure," Nestart said. He seemed stressed, and I could tell he'd been anticipating this moment.

"Follow me, then."

The room I led them to was one you could always find in high-class establishments: a small, private space designed for business negotiations. Arte, Nestart, and I sat on the sofas while Mireille prepared tea for us. Lunoa stood next to the wall and simply observed.

"Now then, Lord Nestart, do you mind if we go back to speaking more casually with one another from here on?" I asked, returning to my usual demeanor.

"Not at all," he replied, looking relieved.

"Miss Ellie, could you explain what this is all about?" Arte asked. She appeared to have been wondering that the entire time.

"Simply put, I wanted to show you one of the main reasons why you've been struggling so far."

"Huh?" the siblings let out in unison.

"Tell me, how did my hospitality make you feel?"

"Well...to be honest, we felt a little overwhelmed by your money and influence," said Arte.

"And that's the issue. Nobles do not display lavish lifestyles for no reason. The point is to flaunt their financial power and authority to make others understand that they are superior. The two of you brought only two servants to this city, right?"

"Yes."

"That's too few. The lord of a noble house should always have at least ten people in his retinue. The same goes for the lodgings you selected. You should not be staying at such an average place. You need to show you can afford luxury."

"The problem is that we *can't* exactly afford it..."

"Nobles must at least know how to give an illusion of grandeur. As a nobleman, you can surely get loans from the Merchants' Guild. Besides, you don't need to buy a nicer carriage or hire skilled servants in the long term. You can rent transportation and hire commoners temporarily."

"But that'd leave us saddled with debts!" Nestart exclaimed.

"Would you rather let your territory sink and bring down your people with you? Picture yourself as the lord of a large territory or as a wealthy merchant. Two nobles come to you with business proposals. One rides in an old carriage, sleeps at cheap inns, and has merely a couple of servants. The other arrives in a beautiful carriage, stays at a nice hotel, and has a proper retinue. With whom are you more likely to partner?"

"Well..." Nestart started.

"The latter," Arte finished.

"Exactly. I apologize, but I've also looked over the proposal you gave to the marquess. It was naive, but it wasn't terrible. Some

merchants might have taken you up on it."

"In other words, we failed not because of the contents of our proposal, but because people can tell at a glance that we're not worthy of partnering with them?" Nestart asked.

"Image is *everything* in the world of the nobility," I said. I paused briefly to pull out a document. It was roughly the same proposal they'd given the marquess, but this one was adjusted to balance out the benefits equally among the two parties. "The marquess will surely accept these terms. You won't profit as much as you would have with your initial draft, but if you think long-term, you'll find your benefit is likely to increase with time. You might even be able to diversify your activity."

"So that's...good, right?"

"It is," I confirmed.

"Miss Ellie... Why would you do so much for us?" Nestart asked.

"I simply followed the marquess's suggestion because I knew it'd benefit me too," I replied.

I relaxed my posture as much as I could, and Nestart naturally followed my lead—although he only loosened up slightly. He'd been so tense this entire time that watching him was almost painful. He truly lacked experience.

"To tell you the truth, the marquess was very keen on taking your proposal. However, he couldn't help you amend it himself lest the factions involve themselves. That's why he used me after luring me in with another deal altogether. If you're wondering what I'm after... Well, as someone who's about to establish a production base in this city, I will greatly benefit from your plans to develop river transportation."

Baron Hilgardie's plan was to invest in distributing goods through waterways. There were many rivers in his territory, and they were connected to several major cities within the empire. When the land used to belong to Haldoria, it couldn't have become a hub that connected all these major cities, but with the change in dominion, there was a new opportunity. While the profit potential was immense, Nestart and Arte's planning wasn't good enough.

"The rivers stretch across several territories, which means you

need to negotiate tariffs with each of the lords and get their approval. You have to check where the riverbed needs to be lowered and plan the work accordingly. And you also need to have a clear plan to protect the transiting goods from monsters. Without first clearing these three hurdles, you're looking at a risky pipe dream."

Their original proposal completely neglected to touch upon these issues. If you only mentioned the positive aspects of a plan, people naturally would become wary and start focusing on the drawbacks.

Arte and Nestart lowered their heads after receiving my criticism, but Nestart carefully placed the document I'd given them in his bag as though it were a treasure. Then, the siblings stood up and bowed to me.

"Oh my. Are you sure you should be lowering your head to a commoner like me?"

"I'm well aware that a noble should protect his pride. However, I'd lose my pride as a man if I couldn't bow to a person I'm indebted to," Nestart replied.

The pride of a noble, huh? I had long since thrown that away, so his words hit a sore spot.

"I shall accept your gratitude," I said.

"I swear to repay this debt one day."

Nestart held out his hand, and I shook it. Arte watched us pensively before nodding once to herself, as though she'd made up her mind. She dropped to her knees and lowered her head.

"Miss Ellie—no, Lady Elizabeth Leiston. I beg you to forgive such an impudent request when you've already given us so much, but would you please consider teaching my brother how to behave as a proper nobleman?"

"S-Sister?!"

"Recent events have made it abundantly clear that I'm lacking as his guardian," Arte continued. "I'm not sure how much our house could compensate you, but we'll give you anything we can. Please consider it, Lady Elizabeth."

Nestart knelt next to his sister and bowed his head too. "P-Please, Lady Elizabeth!"

This made things a little awkward for me. I expected Arte to

know who I was, considering her background, but I was still surprised by her request. I'd assumed that at the most she'd ask me for advice.

What's the best choice I can make right now?

"Raise your heads," I said. "I threw away my title when I abandoned my country. As a noblewoman, there is nothing I can teach someone capable of bowing to a commoner for the sake of his people."

The two of them clenched their fists in defeat.

"However," I continued, "I can give you advice on how to best deal with fellow nobles and merchants—speaking as a merchant, that is."

"Does that mean you're willing to become my advisor as a merchant?" Nestart asked.

"If that's enough for you, yes."

In the empire, the role of advisor was a proper position. It involved giving counsel to a young lord, and in most cases it was fulfilled by an experienced vassal who'd long served the previous head of the family, or to a local influential figure. As the name suggested, an advisor could only advise. They had no right over the noble house they served and could not give orders to their lord's vassals, nor could they push their opinion against their lord's will. They were simply expected to assist, which fit my current situation perfectly.

"Thank you so much, Lady Elizabeth," Nestart said.

"I'm not a lady anymore. And please, call me Ellie Leis," I reminded him. I stood up and put a hand on Lunoa's shoulder to pull her out of her thoughts. Witnessing what had just happened had left her completely frozen. "Now then, since I rented out this hotel, let's make the best of it. Shall we enjoy the hot spring?"

◆

Cedre was in the office given to him in the royal palace, signing one paper after another. He'd managed to become Friede's aide by handing over the documents Elizabeth had left behind, but that

meant he now had to do part of the prince's work for him.

"Good grief. Why do I have to take care of such insignificant matters?"

"There's no point in complaining. This is necessary to control that foolish prince's moves," said Anna, the maid Friede had assigned to him. Her tone was cold.

"You do know I'm not overjoyed at the prospect of working long hours just because it'll serve *her* cause, right? I don't blindly worship her like you or my father do."

Anna flashed her knife in front of Cedre's face and smirked. "Does that mean you intend to betray her?"

"Calm down. It was a joke. I've been promised a fitting reward after she ultimately triumphs," Cedre said. He glanced in the general direction of Adel's office. "What do you think Her Highness will do about the national highway project?"

"I wonder. The prince's superiority is clear at the moment. Many people don't even know that Her Highness Adel is back yet. In fact, I suspect most have no clue that a fight for the throne is happening at all."

"That's true. Her Highness will most likely need to make her presence public if she wants to challenge him."

"Do you think she will?" Anna asked.

"While Friede was still considered an incompetent fool, remaining in the shadows and growing her influence slowly was effective, but the situation has changed now. From here on out, hiding will be detrimental to her."

"I agree. I also think we're bound to see a reaction from her soon. I have no idea what she'll do, though. Her Highness is *very* careful. Personnel she hasn't personally approved of, including me, cannot step anywhere near her."

"That's the complete opposite of the prince's quarters, where every spy in the world can come and go as they please," Cedre joked. "The funniest part is that this idiot's camp is more or less kept afloat by the spies doing his job for him."

The two kept chatting as Cedre trudged through his work. Then, a knock on the door interrupted them. Cedre immediately pulled

Anna to him. He had her sit practically in his lap with his arm draped over her shoulder before telling his visitor to come in.

"Pardon me for interrupting," said a feminine voice.

Friede's fiancée Sylvia stepped into the room. As soon as she saw Anna on the verge of tears and Cedre's vulgar smile, she glared at the latter in disgust.

"I wasn't expecting you, Lady Sylvia! What can I do for you?" Cedre asked.

"I heard you'd be at the castle today," she answered. She stood confidently but said nothing further.

"I see. Well, I'm sorry I didn't visit you to offer you a proper greeting earlier," Cedre replied with a loathsome laugh. "I should have been the one to come to you."

"Y-You should have," Sylvia replied, "but I shall forgive you."

Cedre watched as Sylvia clumsily pulled out a folding fan to hide her mouth like a fancy lady would. He tried his best not to laugh at her. Instead, he lowered his head politely.

"S-So, tell me, what do you think of His Highness the prince?" Sylvia asked.

"That he's the worthy successor to our great king, of course!" Cedred replied immediately. "He's even inherited his thunder! That proves the purity of his blood!"

"And...what of Her Highness Adel?"

"The princess? Isn't she studying on the Southern Continent? I'm sorry to say that I've never had the chance to meet her. I heard she's very pretty, though—an oriental beauty. Truth be told, I'd love to see her, heh heh heh."

Cedre's lecherous laugh disgusted Sylvia, and she couldn't stop herself from glaring at him, but she still asked one more question.

"What about Crow?"

"Crow? Who is that again? Ah! That secretary who waits upon His Highness nowadays! People say she's competent, but that doesn't change the fact that she's some lowly commoner. His Highness needs us, his noble supporters, much more than he needs her."

"Don't you think we ought to get rid of this woman, then?!" Sylvia exclaimed.

“No. She’s good at her job, isn’t she? Nobles should know how to use talented commoners to their advantage, but... Well, she is beautiful, so I can see why you might feel jealous, Lady Sylvia. You needn’t worry about her, though. She’s a mere commoner. What threat could she pose to you? She’s a toy to His Highness at most, heh heh.”

Cedre grabbed Anna’s chest to drive the point home. Sylvia clicked her tongue and spun around to leave immediately, grumbling an angry “Good day to you” on her way out.

Anna waited until she couldn’t feel Sylvia’s presence anywhere near the room before she broke free from Cedre’s hold. “What did she even want?” she asked.

“I guess she’s desperate to secure her position. She lost all her relatives during the insurrection in her father’s territory. On top of that, the prince can’t give her much attention because of his power struggle with Her Highness Adel and the chaos left by the prime minister’s disappearance. It wouldn’t be all that surprising for a young lady with no backing like her to be thrown out of the palace at a moment’s notice.”

“I’m not sure I get how showing up here helps her case, though,” Anna said. “Besides, she’s just a baron’s daughter at the moment. Her attitude toward you, the heir of a count, was anything but appropriate.”

“She might be trying to assert herself as the prince’s fiancée and show she can’t just be pushed around. From what I know, though, she hasn’t been attending her princess lessons at all, so I bet she’s just clueless. Why else would she mention the princess whose presence in the palace is still under wraps?”

“Her biggest worry seemed to be Miss Crow.”

“At least she seems to have good instincts. Or perhaps she’s simply not as stupid as the prince. Come to think of it, maybe she came to me looking for an ally who might protect her if push comes to shove.”

“What a hassle... Should I do something about it?” Anna asked.

“No, don’t. We’ve been told not to make any bold moves. Our job is to monitor the prince and keep track of shifts in the palace.

Someone else must be watching Sylvia, I assume.” Cedre reached out for a piece of paper. “I’ve already made arrangements to sneak spies into the national highway project. There’s a different person we must be wary of now: Her Highness Adel.”

The document he was holding concerned the hiring of a large number of foreign workers from vassal countries to work on the highway. He signed it and handed it to Anna.

◇

I exhaled a deep, satisfied sigh, my breath merging with the steam that rose over the hot spring. As expected of a high-class hotel, the bath was very large. There were quite a few of us bathing, but there was still room to spare in the water.

“Look! Carol’s asleep!” squealed Alice.

“I heard there’s mana from the Sacred Mountain in the water. It must have felt so pleasant to her that she fell asleep. Be careful not to let her fall into the bath, Alice,” Mireille told her.

Mireille and Alice were washing Carol in a bucket together. The little girl was overly excited about bathing with everyone, but since Mireille was watching over her, I didn’t have to worry that she’d inadvertently hurt herself or Carol.

“Your hair is longer than I thought, Miss Lunoa.”

“You think so? Say, don’t you want to grow out your hair too, Misha?”

“It might get in the way when I move...”

“But it’d suit you so well!” Lunoa exclaimed. Misha had just finished washing Lunoa’s hair. “Wait! Misha, I’ll wash yours too!”

“Huh? N-No, you don’t need to—”

“Come on, stop arguing!”

“Miss Lunoa... My ears...”

Lunoa was having fun helping Misha wash up, but the foam tickled Misha’s ears, and she tried to get away from the sensation. She didn’t seem to really hate it, though, so I didn’t think I had to step in.

“This soap foams up so nicely. The smell is very pleasant too,”

Arte commented.

"It's one of our most recent prototypes," I said. "It has faint healing properties, so it improves the condition of your hair and skin. The best apothecaries and alchemists in my employ teamed up to produce it."

"It's sure to cause quite the commotion among high-ranking ladies when it comes out," she replied.

"That's not all. They're still in the process of verifying this, but I'm told it might promote hair regrowth too."

"The gentlemen *will* fight each other for it, then."

"We're using very rare medicinal herbs, so it will fetch quite a high price too, I expect." I was currently looking for a place to cultivate more of these herbs, which required a very specific climate to grow.

"Aah, there really isn't anything better than a nice drink while lounging in the water!" a woman exclaimed as she settled in the bath. "They call this feeling *miyabi* on the eastern archipelago, you know? It means 'refinement'!"

"Why are *you* here?" I asked.

Tida and Kagali were sitting next to each other with a bucket floating in front of them. A bottle and glasses rested inside.

"I went to your inn to see you, and they told me where you were! I can't believe you held a private banquet and rented this wonderful hot spring without inviting me!" Tida whined.

"I-I also visited your inn with my master to see you. We didn't want to intrude, but Tida dragged us along and..."

"Oh well, it's fine," I said. I'd been planning on inviting them to a meal at a later date, but I supposed that this worked too. "So, Kagali, what did you need me for?"

"The sword is ready for you. My master will give it to you once we get out of the bath."

"I see. I look forward to it."

When I asked what Gaien was doing in the meantime, Kagali told me he was in the men's bath with Nestart.

That's just as well, I thought.

◆

Only two people sat in the luxurious and spacious bath, surrounded by clouds of steam from the hot water. They didn't know one another, and a bit of an awkward silence had fallen.

Gaien spoke first. "So, lad, yer the head of yer house at this age, huh?"

"Y-Yes!"

"Well, yer a man before being a kid, so make sure ye protect yer sister."

"I-I will..."

"What's with that weak answer? Yer not feeling confident ye can?"

"No, that's not— Well, yes, you're right. All I ever do is make her worry about me..."

"I see." Gaien remained silent for a few moments before crossing his arms and turning to Nestart. "But since yer a man, yer gonna have to become stronger. I'll give ye a sword later, so ye'd better train diligently."

"A sword you've made?! I couldn't possibly accept something so expensive, Mr. Gaien!"

"I made it to get me senses back, so it's not worth much. Don't worry about it. If ye wanna thank me, send me a bottle of whatever alcohol they brew in yer territory."

"I will! Absolutely! Thank you so much!"

◇

After getting out of the bath, I met with Gaien.

"This is the sword imbued with the archspirit's mana," he said, handing it to me.

I could feel the tremendous amount of mana trapped within it. I doubted there existed a more powerful fire attribute magic sword anywhere in the world.

"Are you sure you want me to have it?" I asked.

"Yes," he confirmed. "And I've got a request for ye, Miss Ellie. Of

course, ye can refuse if it's too much."

"You did mention that the other day. I will at least hear you out."

Gaien hesitated for a few moments before finally opening his mouth again. "I want ye to take my daughter with ye."

"Huh?! What are you saying, dad?!" Kagali shouted.

This was exactly the request I'd been expecting. Kagali, on the other hand, was flabbergasted.

"Ye should leave this city and see the world—live through yer own experiences! That was yer wish too, wasn't it?"

"Well, I..."

"I hear Miss Ellie's been gathering skilled artisans and researchers in Milista. Ye could learn a lot there."

"Milista?" Kagali repeated.

"It's a village in the Sarjas Region, the former Haldorian vassal state that was recently incorporated into the empire," I said. "You must have heard of the name, at least." I paused for a second. "I called Milista a village, but in reality, it's grown so much under the empire that it's practically a city now. There are even regular carriages going back and forth between it and the imperial capital."

"I see..." Kagali replied. She seemed to be deep in thought.

"Yer already pretty much as skilled as me when it comes to technique," Gaien told her. "All ye need to surpass me is experience."

"But are you sure I should leave *now*? I haven't even found my answer to the question you asked me yet!"

"Yer answer might not be in the city, Kagali. Ye might just find it elsewhere."

"Dad..."

"Besides, it's high time ye stopped emulating me. Ye won't get any better by studying what I do. Ye gotta find yer own style."

"But I—"

"Do ye think a copy of meself can surpass me? If ye wanna call yerself my disciple, ye'd better learn to swing yer hammer better than I do!"

Surpass him, huh? Kagali had been the first one to bring that up, but now Gaien had seemed to fully accept the idea.

"You're right... Ellie, please say yes!" Kagali begged.

"All right," I replied. "I'm always happy to welcome skilled artisans. I'll set up a workshop in Milista for you, Kagali."

"I'm in yer debt," Gaien said. "And there's something else I wanted to ask ye. Would ye agree to let Kagali craft that rapier ye wanted? With her mystic eyes, she's better equipped than me to forge magic weapons."

"Well..."

I couldn't help but hesitate. As Gaien had said, Kagali's potential certainly surpassed his when it came to magic weapons. However, at the moment Gaien was still more skilled than she was.

Should I pick the best at this point in time, or the one with the potential to outshine him?

"All right, I'll trust you with it, Kagali."

Bulat Haldoria was a true monster. If I wanted to defeat him, I needed to have the most perfect weapon in existence.

Now that I'd made my decision, I'd need to provide Kagali with the best environment. I'd come to this city to commission a weapon, and I definitely hadn't expected to nurture a weaponsmith from scratch instead.

"Thank you, Ellie. I'll make you the best rapier in the world."

"I expect nothing less."

This day, which had ended up being a lot busier than I'd expected, finally drew to an end.

Over the next few days, I met with Lekius to finalize our deal, and with Nestart and Arte to discuss our future plans. I also shared a few glasses with Tida. Then, it came time to leave Hephaest.

After bidding everyone farewell, we left the inn and got ready to depart. In the near future, I'd need to spend a lot of time at the Hilgardie estate, so I'd have to make preparations for my work to follow me there. I expected to be very busy in the coming days.

"Are you sure you don't want to travel with us, Tida?" I asked.

"Yup. I'll make a detour up north before returning to the capital," she replied, a bottle of alcohol in hand as usual.

"All right. I'm sure you don't need me to tell you this, but be careful on the way."

Nestart, Arte, and their two servants had already departed the day prior. We planned to first go back to the capital before joining them. Lunoa and Misha had already gone to the carriage to load our belongings, and I was walking there myself when a voice stopped me.

"Miss Ellie Leis."

"Gazaru?" Once again, I'd run into my former rival firm owner, who'd been sentenced to slavery for the crimes he'd committed against me. "Is something the matter? I imagine you didn't just run into me by chance."

"No, you're right. I asked for permission to come see you because I heard you'd be leaving the city today."

"What do you want with me?"

"To give you this," he replied, handing me a small note. "I know I was given a relatively comfortable position here because you asked for it. This is my way of repaying you."

"You want to repay me? I thought you resented me."

"At first I did, but not anymore. I stopped when I noticed I'd been dancing in the palm of your hand the entire time. You're far better at everything than I am—business and scheming alike."

"So, what is this about?" I asked, pointing at the memo.

"I met a man asking a lot of questions about you in this city."

"That's not a particularly rare occurrence." I was a Special License holder. Plenty of people flocked to me seeking profit.

"It's not what you think. He definitely wasn't a merchant looking for easy money. He did a decent job of hiding it, but he didn't actually seem to be after you. He seemed particularly interested in that girl, Alice."

"What?!"

"I mostly gave noncommittal answers, but I got curious, so I looked into it. That man's not investigating you for his own sake. He's doing it for his employer—a big shot at that."

I silently awaited his next words.

"The famed Lotton Flywok, the Clairvoyant, of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council," Gazaru declared. My eyes narrowed immediately, and he added, "I see you expected him to be behind

this. Well, I suggest you be careful. I wrote down the names and addresses of all his subordinates I was able to track."

I unfolded the piece of paper and read through it. I'd already found several of the listed names and addresses while investigating Flywok, but there were some I'd never seen before. I was impressed. Gazaru had taken his investigation this far in such a short time—and as a slave at that. He used to be a corrupt merchant who didn't have anything on his mind other than money, but he'd still managed to build up his firm to a remarkable size before losing it to me. It looked like despite everything he was a much more competent man than I'd assumed.

"Thank you for giving me this," I said.

"Sure," Gazaru replied before immediately excusing himself.

I turned to Mireille, who was next to me. "Look up how much money he still has to repay."

"Are you going to buy his freedom?"

"I could use his intelligence-gathering skills. If he can take even a fraction of the work off of Barl's plate, it'll be well worth it."

At the moment, Barl was in charge of gathering information, mediating with the underworld, handling the firm's security, and much more. He handled all this because there was no one else with the skill set to replace him. If Gazaru could do some of it, Barl wouldn't have to shoulder so much alone anymore. Now that I'd witnessed how effective Gazaru could be, I definitely wanted him to work for me.

"Understood. In that case, I'll see that he's released from his slave status and hire him."

"I'll leave it to you."

◇◆☆◆◇

There were three big turning points in my life. The first was when I decided to follow in my father's footsteps and become a merchant. The second was when, after losing myself to my obsession with money, I was defeated by the most fearsome and beautiful devil in the guise of a merchant. And the third was when that beautiful devil

lifted me up again.

— Excerpt from the memoirs of Gazaru Jackman, Head of the Intelligence Department of the Traitre Commercial Firm.

"Who do you think that 'beautiful devil' he refers to is?" a business student asked his friend between bites of his sandwich.

"Huh? Ah, you're talking about Gazaru Jackman's memoirs. Our Information Science prof mentioned him earlier, right?"

The second student finished his own sandwich and washed it down with a glass of milk before grabbing his friend's Information Science textbook. Gazaru Jackman was famous for combining two fields that used to be thought of as completely separate: intelligence and economics. His writings were part of every business program's basic courses.

"Apparently, the leading theory is that it refers to Lunoa Carlton, the Merchant of the Wilderness. She created a brand-new trade route across the center of the continent by killing countless monsters herself, and she specialized in delivering goods. This says that she had a bit of a wild personality too."

"I'm sure she did. You know, she's the one who beheaded a dragon that was blocking a road. She also once called forth a tornado so powerful that it razed a bandit group's stronghold to the ground. But according to the sources we have left from that time period, their ages don't seem to align, so I'm not sure the person Gazaru talks about is her."

"Yeah? You know what? Why don't we pick that as our research topic next year?"

"Sounds like a fun project."

— A conversation between two students sometime before they created a stir within the historical studies community.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, new readers. It's been a while, old readers. I'm Hagure Metabo.

Thank you very much for picking up this sixth volume of *A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires*.

Writing about the multiculturalism of the empire was surprisingly difficult!

Without further ado, allow me to jump straight to the acknowledgments.

First of all, to my dear illustrator, masami-sama: Thank you so much for drawing for this series time and time again. Your art always enhances the charm of the characters, and I was overjoyed to see Lunoa a little more mature and Tida cooler than ever!

Thank you, Oonoimo-sama, for adapting my work. I always greatly enjoy reading the manga version. In fact, I liked your depiction of Arte in the manga so much that I wanted to bring her back into the story from the moment I saw her. I've finally been able to allow her to make her grand return!

Thank you, S-sama, my editor. I'm sorry for making you worry every time by cutting it so close to the deadline.

Last but not least, I'd like to express my unending gratitude to everyone involved in the process of making this book, and to you, my dear readers!

From the bottom of my heart, thank you!

Bonus Story: Foreign Bath Culture

After soaking in the hot water while discussing frivolous and important topics alike, we finally got out of the bath and dried ourselves off with towels.

"Hot springs sure feel nice," Arte said. She tied a small towel around her shoulders to catch the droplets dripping from her wet hair.

"I agree," I replied. "Did you know that there didn't used to be baths like this one on the Central Continent?"

"Really?"

"Yes. For ages, the Central Continent has been a cultural crossroads because people on the other continents use it as a relay point when trading with each other. Soaking in hot springs was originally a custom of the eastern archipelago. Also, the shape of this bath is actually inspired by the traditional steam baths of the Western Continent."

"I had no idea. To think we came to Hephaest for negotiations without knowing any of this... I really should have studied more."

"It's fairly obscure knowledge, so don't beat yourself up over it," I reassured her. "I also only just learned about it while brushing up for this trip. Alice, dry yourself off first."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Alice trying to wrap her towel around Carol. Her own body and hair were still dripping wet. Misha and Lunoa reacted immediately.

"Come here, Miss Alice. I'll dry you," Misha said, taking out a new towel and tending to the little girl.

At the same time, Lunoa put her hands over Alice's hair and summoned a soft breeze. "I'll do her hair!"

"Is she using magic to dry your daughter's hair? What adroit control."

"Lunoa is even better at these sorts of convenient yet precise

everyday spells than she is at combat magic," I said.

In theory, it was more challenging to cast magic with controlled power at a consistent strength than it was to just blast large quantities at enemies. However, the caster's temperament also mattered. Although Lunoa's nature made her more proficient with practical magic, she wasn't bad at offensive spells, so the skill gap wasn't a problem at all.

Tida, who'd been gone for a few minutes, suddenly reappeared. "You're amazing, Lunoa! Can you do mine too?"

"Of course."

While we'd been talking, Tida had already changed into one of the bathrobes provided by the hotel.

"Couldn't you have dried off your hair a little better before changing?" I teased.

"Don't they say water enhances beauty?"

"*Hydration* does, Tida. Being soaking wet has nothing to do with it."

"Wait... Seriously?!"

While we spoke, Kagali was vigorously massaging her hair with a towel.

"Kagali, if you do it that strongly, you'll damage your hair," I warned her.

"I don't really care..."

Mireille concealed her presence as she crept up behind Kagali. Suddenly, she put her hands on the dwarf's shoulders. Kagali's neglect of her hair didn't seem to sit right with Mireille, and she dragged her to stand in line behind Tida.

"That's no good. You have such pretty hair. You should take better care of it. Lunoa, do Kagali's once you're done with Tida's," she said.

"Got it, Miss Mireille!"

"Come to think of it, you used to comb my hair *very* often in the past, didn't you, Mireille?"

I'd known Mireille for quite a long time, but I hadn't realized that she had strict standards about hair grooming until now. This was just one of the many new facets of her personality I'd discovered

since we'd left the kingdom. Back then, I hadn't even known her favorite food or perfume.

"Leaving truly was the right choice..." I whispered to myself.

Arte heard me, and she let out a confused "Miss Ellie?"

"It's nothing. Don't mind me."

I was about to change the topic when the door opened.

"Pardon me." One of the hotel workers entered with a cart. "I've brought your order," she said.

"Our...order?" I didn't remember ordering anything.

"I ordered it!" Tida exclaimed.

"*You* did? Let me guess, more alcohol?" I asked.

"Couldn't you have waited until *after* you returned to your inn?" Mireille added.

"What do the two of you take me for?" Tida protested with an embarrassed glare.

"A depraved sister?" I suggested.

"Yes, that sounds about right," Mireille agreed.

"They're bullying me!" Tida clung to Lunoa and Misha while pretending to cry.

Lunoa and Misha flashed her awkward smiles, but I knew that their opinion of Tida didn't differ much from mine.

"What's a dee-praved sister?" Alice asked.

"Huh? Hm... It's a sister who doesn't do very good things," Kagali explained, trying to be tactful.

Alice looked at Tida and nodded as though it made perfect sense. "Ah," she said, seemingly convinced.

"Even little Alice is mean to me!"

Alice's reaction seemed to come as a real shock to Tida. Her shoulders drooped as she walked over to the worker to accept her order.

"Is that...milk?" I asked.

"Yes, it *is* milk," Tida confirmed.

"Why milk? We're in the middle of changing."

"Heh heh." Tida puffed out her chest and proudly launched into an explanation. "In the homeland of hot springs, the eastern archipelago, people drink milk right after a bath."

“I’ve never heard that before,” I said. “Where did you learn about it?”

“Miss Yuu told me!”

“Oh my. It must be true, then,” I replied.

Tida pouted. “How come you trust her and not me?!”

“Maybe you should ask yourself that question,” Mireille shot back.

Mireille took the pitcher from Tida and started pouring glasses of milk for everyone. By the time Mireille had made her way around the group, Tida was done being depressed. She started happily telling us more about the customs of the eastern archipelago that she’d learned from Yuu.

“All right, so first, we have to all stand in line! Your left hand goes to your hip—yes, good. Hold your glass at this angle—perfect! And now, we gulp it down in one go!”

At Tida’s signal, we all emptied our glasses. The milk was refreshing, and striking this peculiar pose all together was sort of fun.

“So, what’s the meaning behind this?” I asked.

“Who knows?” Tida replied.

While it had been fun, we were all a little confused by this custom.



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A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires Volume 6
by Hagure Metabo

Translated by Rymane Tsouria
Edited by Adam M. McCann

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Original Japanese edition published in 2024 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2025