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Abducted Princess Running Rampant Wielding Forbidden Magic in the Demon King's Castle


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Running Rampant
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Magic in the Demon
King's Castle


Kuro
A girl with animal ears who lives in a beastkin village. Her sword skills are honed to perfection. She's a little greedy and has often dreamed of all the delicious foods in the world beyond her village.
I can't let this human make fools of us like this!
I want to visit the outside world and eat all kinds of tasty food and lots of it!
Mary Garland
The Demon King's daughter. She had a sheltered upbringing because she was raised to be her father's successor, but she dreams of someday leaving his castle and going on adventures. Though she often hides her true feelings, she's caring and considerate.
Mil Arphilia
A princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom, and a saint with the divine powers of a goddess's priestess. It was always her dream to leave the royal capital's castle and go on an adventure.
I'd like to go to the royal capital... I'd like to learn more magic.
I wanna go adventuring. I can't stand being here anymore.
Yulia Neumann
A girl living in a village near the Demon King's Castle. Her shy personality belies an exceptional talent for magic. Her long-held dream is to learn magic in the royal capital.


It was also Mil's first time in an open-air bath. She'd never known how good it felt to soak in hot water while exposed to a cool breeze.
"We've got a bath back home, but it's just a big tub. There's no hot spring."
"Really?"
"Ooh. This feels so good. They don't have hot springs in the royal capital, so this is all new to me."
Kuro, sitting beside Mil, was surprised. A short distance away, Yulia was floating on her back with her arms spread wide.

WIELDING FORBIDDEN MAGIC IN THE DEMON KING'S CASTLE

CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

The Demon King's Castle Is Full of Wonder!

Chapter 2

Mil's First Friend!

Chapter 3

Animal Ears Are Fluffy!

Chapter 4

This Is a Bit of a Pinch!

Epilogue

Afterword



Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Prologue
4. Chapter 1: The Demon King’s Castle Is Full of Wonder!
5. Chapter 2: Mil’s First Friend!
6. Chapter 3: Animal Ears Are Fluffy!
7. Chapter 4: This Is a Bit of a Pinch!
8. Epilogue
9. Afterword
10. Bonus High Resolution Illustrations
11. About J-Novel Club
12. Copyright

Prologue

It was a wonderful day. The clear weather was especially perfect for adventuring!

Through a dense forest ran a narrow trail, and along that trail walked a young girl by the name of Mil. She'd just taken up adventuring and looked perfectly the part—clad in flexible light armor, with a one-handed sword at her waist and a bag over her shoulder.

Less common additions to this beautiful day were the cries of bloodthirsty beasts that could be heard from the surrounding undergrowth. Then there were the monstrous birds fighting for territory in the sky above, each of them big enough to swallow a man whole.

All in all, it would have been a waste *not* to go on an adventure!

Mil stretched her arms high above her head. The girl could scarcely believe she was walking through a place so full of danger! She was headed for a village deep within the forest, but Mil was planning to take her time and enjoy the journey.

"Um, young lady... Are you sure it's safe? Those monsters in the trees have been eyeing us for a while now."

The grown man nervously walking by Mil's side was a traveling merchant. He'd decided to accompany her to the village after she'd saved him from a monster.

"Yep! We're fine!" She clenched her fist in a display of strength. "If anything attacks us, I'll handle it."

Despite Mil's reassurance, the merchant looked no more at ease. And as if on cue, a monster leaped out from the undergrowth, blocking their path forward.

They were faced with a massive bear, with forelegs as broad as a man's torso and long claws that could decapitate someone with ease. Upon locking eyes with them, the beast bared its menacing fangs—just the right size for gnawing a human head.

"Oh, a tyrant grizzly!"

Mil had seen them in books. Tyrant grizzlies were giant bears that preyed on adventurers. This type of monster ranked so highly

on the danger scale that a sighting near a village would result in a hunting quest being issued by the local guild without question. If it was near the capital, a company of knights would be sent to dispatch it at once.

The tyrant grizzly's gaze was fixed on Mil as it advanced toward her, flattening the ground beneath its paws with a series of thundering steps.

"Eeek!" The merchant stumbled backward and landed on his behind.

The tyrant grizzly had closed in on Mil, and it towered over her. Its shadow covered her and the ground around her, and its face was almost directly above hers.

"It's huge!" Mil was surprised by the thickness of its fur. She imagined it would feel stiff to the touch.

"Young lady! Watch out!"

"Groooar!"

The tyrant grizzly's roar drowned out the merchant's warnings as it swept at Mil, sending its massive claws hurtling toward her.

"Eek!" The merchant beside her averted his eyes, unable to watch the gruesome scene about to unfold.

But Mil was quicker on the draw.

"Grrrooh?!"

The tyrant grizzly's claws came to a sudden stop when they hit her blade.

"Eeek...?! Young lady?!"

What an odd sight it must have been to the merchant. A frail young girl with nothing but a simple sword was effortlessly holding back a giant bear's claws.

Mil grinned as she held back the tyrant grizzly. "All right. I'm making it my pet! I'll take real good care of it."

"What?! Have you lost your mind, young lady?!"

"Grrrohhh!" As the creature let out a cry of rage, it brought down its other arm in an attempt to crush Mil's head.

"Oh. Oh, oh, oh."

Mil dodged with a simple twist of her body. The bear was so big that its attacks were easily avoided.

"This way, Mr. Bear."

"Groh!"

It attempted a few more attacks of the same sort, but Mil

dodged them all without issue.

"A-Are you really a novice adventurer...?" the merchant asked. "This is amazing."

Mil began to cast a spell while taking care not to let the monster turn its attention to the merchant. "*Slave chain*!"

A black chain rose up from the ground and wrapped itself tightly around the tyrant grizzly.

"Grrrh..."

The chain rattled each time the tyrant grizzly tried to break free, but magic bindings weren't so easily broken. That said, Mil had never put the chain's strength to the test.

"Grohhh!"

Ka-ching!

With a great roar, the monster spread its arms wide and snapped the chain. The creature was even stronger than Mil had anticipated.

But it didn't try attacking her again. Instead, it dropped on all fours and fled into the undergrowth, quickly disappearing into the forest.

"Awww. Grizzy!"

Even though Mil already had her heart set on a name, she knew she'd have to let it go. Carelessly straying from the path was a good way to get lost.

"I guess I'm not good at magic yet since I only just learned it. I'll have to keep practicing."

"Y-Young lady...?" the merchant behind her started, still stunned.

"Oh, sorry mister. Let's catch our breath, then we'll keep going!"

"Hold on," he continued. "Are you really a trainee adventurer? You clearly know how to fight. How'd you take on a monster like that with no trouble at all? I visited a fortress town not long ago, and none of the adventurers there could hold a candle to you."

"Huh? Really?"

"Weren't you scared? You said you're a trainee, but where from?"

This had been Mil's first real taste of battle, but she was finding her first adventure so exciting that she'd forgotten to be scared.

"Well..."

It was a tough question. Mil was from the royal capital, but that

was a long ways away. She couldn't pretend she'd walked that sort of distance.

"Are you from the fortress town?" the merchant asked. "Trainees shouldn't be this far out. And how can you be a trainee when your sword skills and magic are on par with a skilled adventurer? Where'd you learn it all?"

It was hard to answer when the merchant was showering her with questions. But Mil figured there was no point in hiding anything.

"I came from the Demon King's Castle. That's where my sword skills and magic—" Mil stopped midway through her explanation when she spotted a pack of monsters out of the corner of her eye. "Oh! Those are lupus urus! I want one!"

Abandoning the interrogation, Mil went charging down the trail after them.

"Huh...? The Demon King's Castle? Wait! Hold up! Don't leave me!" The merchant hurried after her.

If Mil Arphilia had come from the Demon King's Castle, the natural conclusion was that she was some kind of demonkin. But not only was she entirely human, she was a princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom.

Having escaped the Demon King's Castle, the long, long journey back to her home in the royal capital lay ahead. Grueling challenges awaited her as she headed for her distant home. For now, however...

"Wait! Wait!" Mil cried.

"Young lady! Don't leave me!"

After hearing so many amazing things about the adventurer lifestyle, Princess Mil was finally trying it for herself.

But why would a princess like Mil take up adventuring? It all began a month earlier...

Chapter 1: The Demon King’s Castle Is Full of Wonder!

The city of Hyrem, capital of the Holy Arphil Kingdom, was home to numerous adventurer’s guilds, and more novice adventurers gathered there than anywhere else in the kingdom. They came because the royal capital’s holy knights had already culled the region’s most dangerous monsters, and those that remained were weak enough for a beginner to handle. Thus, many adventurers knew the capital as “Starting Town.”

But the holy royal capital of Hyrem was frequented by veteran adventurers too. For them, the main draw was the Arphil Kingdom’s first princess.

“That young adventurer we just saw was full of life and vigor, wouldn’t you say Mil?” The Arphil Kingdom’s king was on his throne, stroking the curls of his white mustache as he spoke to the young princess sitting on a second throne alongside him.

Mil Arphilia—first princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom—clasped both hands before her and giggled. “Yes, father. It was riveting to hear the tales of his adventures.”

The baby-faced princess was so small and slight that she looked out of place on her great crimson throne. Her youthful appearance also made her magnificent white robes look mismatched and baggy.

His Majesty smiled. “No matter how many adventures I hear about, I never tire of them. Each one is like a chapter from a book.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m the one holding a sword and facing the monsters,” Mil agreed. “The outside world has so many different types.”

“Indeed. You’ll only find goblins and kobolds near the royal capital, but far off to the west, close to the Demon King’s Castle, it’s said there are dragons tall as mountains.”

“Dragons big as mountains?!” Mil’s body lurched forward.

“And it’s said they breathe fire. It’s a good thing none live near—”

“Fire-breathing dragons as big as mountains?! That’s amazing! I

wanna go see one!” Unable to contain herself any longer, Mil hopped off her throne and clenched her fists in front of her chest.

“Settle down now, Mil. You can’t see them anywhere near the royal capital.”

“Well I wish one would come visit us. A fire-breathing dragon big as a mountain…”

Mil slowly sat back down, her thoughts totally occupied with dragons. She pictured thick skin covered in large scales, a huge body with a long tail, a gigantic mouth with fangs bigger than herself, and massive claws that could shatter boulders. This was as much as Mil knew about them, and their exact appearance was left to her imagination.

She’d heard about dragons from fairy tales and legends, but they were scarcely mentioned outside of books. It was unlikely that even a single knight in the royal capital had seen such a beast firsthand.

“Ha ha ha. It would mean disaster if we saw one near the capital.” His Majesty held up a finger to her. “But I hope you aren’t considering slipping out of the castle to go see these monsters.”

He was right to be concerned. If the princess was injured in an encounter with a monster, he wouldn’t be the only one to panic. A calm and sensible princess would take no interest in the outside world and thus would need no such warning, but that description didn’t apply to Mil.

“What if I take guards with me? Couldn’t I go out and see just a few monsters?”

She dearly wished she could go outside. Hearing the adventurers’ stories always riled up her curiosity, and made her long to go adventuring herself.

“I think not. Even with guards, there’s still too much danger. If my adorable little girl ever got injured… No, the outside world’s too dangerous. You’re never going out there. Do you hear me?”

When Mil saw the fear on His Majesty’s face, she lost all motivation to escape the castle and go adventuring. “Yes, I understand,” she replied with a smile. Though she was still thinking, *Maybe someday…*

Mil hadn’t seen so much as a goblin or a kobold, let alone a mountain-sized, fire-breathing dragon. To Mil, monsters were just characters that appeared in stories.

“Good.” His Majesty nodded deeply, happy to know his daughter was so easily reasoned with.

“Father, was that adventurer the last one I’m to see today?”

“Ahh… There are still two more. The next is a beginner who’d like to hear about his potential.”

“Very well. Please call him in.”

His Majesty nodded then gave instructions to a member of the royal guard.

Before long, the large doors to the throne room opened, and a lone male adventurer entered.

He was only fifteen or sixteen years old, which made him about the same age as Mil. His leather armor was still pristine, and the broadsword at his waist was shining like new. He was obviously a newbie who’d begun adventuring that very day.

The poor youth was so nervous that his every step along the red carpet was stiff.

“Uh…” The newbie adventurer almost tripped over his own feet.

Mil simply smiled and told him, “It’s all right. There’s no need to be nervous.”

“Muh-My apologies!” the adventurer stuttered before finally getting close enough to the thrones to stop and kneel.

“State your name,” the king ordered.

“Y-Yes Your Majesty! I’m Rand Ulysses! An adventurer from Rolawand! I-It’s an honor to muh-meet with Your Majesty and Her Holy Highness on this day.”

The adventurer’s voice was cracking as he delivered what was probably a rehearsed line. Seeing him struggle with a new experience made Mil envious somehow.

Here goes… Mil gracefully rose from her throne and held out her hand toward the adventurer.

```
Name: Rand / Level: 1
HP: 42
MP: 8
STR: 15
DEF: 10
INT: 5
DEX: 31
```

```
SPD: 21
LUK: 12
Skills: none
```

In front of Mil appeared a status window containing text and various numbers. She was the only one who could see it.

The adventurer's name, his stats, and his skills were all listed. If Mil wanted to know more about a particular item, she just had to touch it in the window, but there was nothing she could learn from this newbie adventurer.

Mil lowered her hand. "You have unusually high dexterity, and your speed is impressive as well."

When Mil tapped the *Skills* list in the window, a new window overlayed it with more information, including that of a skill he could learn.

"It appears you have the potential to learn lock picking," Mil told him.

"Oh..." The adventurer laughed nervously and scratched the back of his head. "My dad was a lock picker. I've been watching him since I was little. I've even picked a lock or two just by copying him. That must be why."

"It's a wonderful skill," Mil assured him. "If you register as a thief, parties will be fighting to have you!"

This was the main reason adventurers came to the throne room each and every day.

Holy Princess Mil was what was known as a goddess's priestess. She had the power to see the stats and skills of others.

Ordinarily, this power manifested in high-ranking religious officials—men and women alike—driven by intense faith. However, faith alone wasn't enough.

The power only awakened in those who'd spent a decade or more high atop the sacred mountain in Rolawand to the north, living a punishing life of abstinence and austerities. And even then, only a talented few were so lucky. As such, only one or two priests out of tens of thousands ever gained the power. But once they'd become a goddess's priest, they could use a skill known as *Goddess Eye* to see the stats of others.

But Mil was no ordinary goddess's priestess—she'd had her

powers since infanthood. When the king was blessed with such a special daughter, many called it proof that the goddess loved him, and he was celebrated by all the people of his kingdom.

What's more, her *Goddess Eye* was unique. Ordinarily, it only showed the numbered stats of an adventurer, not the skills or potential skills, and it could only be used on adventurers below a certain level. But none of these restrictions applied to Mil. Her powers continued to work for adventurers who'd outleveled the abilities of other goddess's priests. She could also advise new adventurers on how to unlock their hidden potential, and help veteran adventurers determine the strongest monsters they could handle.

And that wasn't the only power she had as a goddess's priestess.

"Th-Thank you, Your Holy Highness." The adventurer bowed his head low before Mil.

"If you'd like, I could help that skill blossom," Mil said.

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course."

Mil's other power as a goddess's priestess was known as *Blessings of the Goddess*, which could unlock new powers. In other words, she could give adventurers new skills.

For example, if a swordsman who'd gained a required amount of experience using a one-handed sword was then trying to develop spear skills, *Blessings of the Goddess* could help them achieve that goal in an instant. With Mil's help, they could learn new skills much faster than beginners.

Mil slowly rose from her throne then spread her arms wide as she spoke. "*Blessings of the Goddess—Goddess Bloom*."

Particles of faint light poured from both of her hands and flew into the air above the adventurer. There, the light then took the form of a human with white wings.

The soldiers of the royal guard whispered to one another as they looked up at the being formed of light.

"Wow... An angel."

"I haven't seen Princess Mil use her blessing in a while."

The angel slowly descended and then embraced the adventurer. For just a moment its light shone brighter, and then it exploded into small particles.

“I believe you’ve just gained the lock picking skill. Please try it out on a lock you weren’t able to pick before. It’ll feel as though you fully understand its inner workings.”

“You truly are a holy princess… Th-Thank you, Your Holy Highness.”

As this was going on, the guards continued whispering to each other.

“I heard that Princess Mil’s the only one with that power.”

“Yeah, we had adventurers here a while back who’d spent days traveling from another country just for her blossoming power.”

“Ah ha ha…” Mil looked a little embarrassed.

Although many priests could use *Goddess Eye* to see one’s stats, Mil had never heard of anyone else using the goddess’s *blessing*. The skill had featured in a handful of centuries old records, but Mil was the only one who could boast the power in modern times.

The king beside her loudly cleared his throat, and the guards quickly silenced themselves. “Is there anything more you’d ask of us?” the king said to the adventurer.

“N-No, Your Highness. This has shown me the way forward. I owe you my gratitude.” The adventurer was still nervous, but he was speaking clearly now.

“Good. Then you may leave. Send in the next one.”

The adventurer bowed one last time then left the throne room. He wore the same nervous expression up to the very end.

The next adventurer to enter was a young man dressed in silver armor. If his large shield and the equally large sword on his back were anything to go by, he was registered as a frontline fighter with the guild.

His facial features were elegant and there was a calm air about him. In stark contrast to the newbie who’d come before him, he approached the thrones with confidence.

There was murmuring among the royal guard’s soldiers as he came into view. Mil’s sharp ears caught a little of what they were saying.

“Hey, isn’t he the hero from the north? That one from a year ago.”

“You mean the one who single-handedly held back an invasion of a hundred ogres?”

The soldiers apparently recognized this adventurer with the

giant shield. What began as quiet whispering gradually grew into loud chatter.

When the disturbance was too loud for him to bear, His Majesty cleared his throat once more, and the room instantly fell silent.

The adventurer with the large shield knelt and placed his hand on his chest.

“I consider it the greatest honor to have been granted an audience, Your Majesty.”

Every word was filled with both respect and self assurance. He spoke like someone who’d grown accustomed to the presence of royalty after touring multiple kingdoms.

This was an accomplished adventurer. Although Mil had been using her powers as a goddess’s priestess to aid adventurers for years, only on a few occasions had she met people like this.

Once the adventurer was done introducing himself, His Majesty urged Mil to examine him. “Go ahead, Mil.”

Mil nodded then held out her hand, and the adventurer’s stats appeared before her.

```
Name: Ruud / Level: 42
HP: 565
MP: 235
STR: 245
DEF: 285
INT: 159
DEX: 147
SPD: 12
LUK: 58

Passive Skills: greatshield proficiency (high), one-handed sword proficiency (high), greatsword proficiency (high), axe proficiency (high), spear proficiency (high), heavy armor weight reduction, poison resistance (high), fire resistance (high), ice resistance (high), lightning resistance (high), fighting spirit, last stand, guard proficiency (high), guardian, learning, etc...
```

Active Skills: shield bash, shield activate, defensive stance, magic sword, whirling slash, ground slash, battle cry, slash end, etc...

Talents: greatshield, buckler, greatsword, one-handed sword, axe, lock picking, holy magic, enchantment magic, fire magic, ice magic, composite magic, etc...

"Wow," Mil muttered before she realized it.

The window was full of skills she'd never seen before. There were so many that they didn't fit in one window—when the first ran out of room, another popped up listing even more.

For an adventurer to master a skill, they had to continuously practice some related activity. For example, greatshield proficiency might be acquired by fighting with one for a long time, and poison resistance could only be gained after repeated exposure to the toxins excreted by monsters.

I wonder how long it took him to learn all these...

Mil tapped the names of a few skills for more details, then quietly started reading.

Learning: Skills are acquired faster.
Guardian: When guarding with a shield, elemental resistances are applied to the shield.
Slash End: Emit a shock wave when swinging a greatsword or one-handed sword.

Gripped by curiosity, Mil became engrossed in reading further, and eventually the silence became too much for His Majesty to take.

"Is something wrong Mil? Can you not see his stats?"

"Oh... Sorry. There's no problem. Could I have some paper to make a copy?"

Mil took a few sheets of blank paper from a guard positioned next to her and pressed her hand against them. The adventurer's stats and skills quickly filled the pages.

This was another power available to goddess's priests. They could magically copy down the information they'd seen in the blink of an eye. If she'd measured the same person's stats before, she could make a comparison and tell them how much they'd improved since their last visit.

Mil had no advice to give to an adventurer so accomplished. She simply made a copy of the information to give to him, as she'd done for many adventurers before.

"Here you are," Mil said as she handed paper to the guard. The guard took the paper and passed it to the adventurer.

"I am grateful to benefit from your powers, goddess's priestess." The adventurer stood up. "Please call upon me if I can ever be of service. I intend to stay here in the royal capital for a short time."

"Yes, I'm sure we can count on you," His Majesty said. "Now if there's nothing more you'd ask of us, you may leave."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The adventurer bowed once more and then left the throne room.

Mil sank deeper into her throne and sighed. "Whew..."

That had been the last adventurer for the day. Despite starting in the morning, she'd been busy until the sun's red glow was beginning to disappear below the horizon.

"Ahh... Mil, you worked hard again today. Is it tiring?" His Majesty asked.

Mil was shocked to realize she'd shown her exhaustion. "Not at all! Sorry, father. I'm quite all right. I had fun seeing so many different sorts of adventurers today." She did her best to act lively. She hadn't meant to drop the act while she was still in the throne room.

"Are you sure? If you're feeling unwell, you should say so. If anything happened to you, Shaela would be just as worried as I'd be."

That was the name of Mil's mother, the queen. She loved Mil every bit as much as her father did.

"Father, I wanted to talk about my outing next week."

"You wanted to go out into the streets didn't you? Hmm..." His Majesty had a troubled look on his face. Much less the capital, he didn't even fully approve of Mil leaving the *castle*.

"I...can't go?"

“If you’re eager to go out, then I don’t want to stop you. It’s just… What was it you wanted to ask?”

“It’s about the guards I’m taking… I think a hundred is a little too many.”

Mil was scheduled to visit the streets near the castle to go shopping in a week’s time, but His Majesty had insisted she take a hundred members of the royal guard. And several heralds too. In addition, the city would be placed on high alert. In short, he was being overprotective.

All of his efforts would have been sensible if there were monsters around, but Mil had no use for a hundred escorts in the city streets.

“I’m honestly not sure it’s enough,” His Majesty said. “I’ve been considering assigning another hundred soldiers.”

“Um… I’m not attending a ceremony or anything. It’s all a little much.”

The kingdom was peaceful throughout, and the holy royal capital Hyrem was especially safe. Though His Majesty’s concerns weren’t entirely baseless, he took less than half as many guards when he went out himself.

“You never know when you might be targeted by visitors from outside the kingdom. That reminds me, I really should set up checkpoints on the roads and temporarily close the gates.”

“You really don’t have to go so far.”

It had always been this way. He’d once gathered priests capable of healing magic from all across the kingdom just because Mil had tripped in a corridor, and another time he’d asked a dozen guards to accompany her while she explored their own castle. There were countless more examples besides.

“And…I was wondering if I could visit the adventurer’s guild while I’m out. I want to see more adventurers so badly.”

“Mil, I keep telling you.” His Majesty’s voice was gruff as he said the same thing as always. “You’re a princess. You can’t go adventuring.”

Mil was about to argue, but she resisted. “I understand. I’d never do anything as irresponsible as sneaking out of the castle to go adventuring. It’s just that I enjoy seeing adventurers. I’m so curious about their guild.”

“Then I suppose it’s fine. If anything ever happened to you—no,

I already said this, didn't I?" His Majesty stood up. "Dinner should be ready soon. Go rest in your room. I'll send someone to summon you when the time comes." He left the throne room, his worries alleviated and his steps light.

Adventuring…

For a while Mil didn't get up. She simply stared at the throne room's ceiling. She thought about her status as a princess and her power as a goddess's priestess.

If she declared, "I'd rather be an adventurer!" and slipped out of the castle, His Majesty would probably need three days of bed rest to get over the shock.

I wish I could just try it…

Mil dragged her feet as she headed back to her room.

✧✧✧

Mil had dinner with her mother and father, and then, when this short-lived family moment was over, she returned to her room as she did every evening.

There wasn't much of interest in her room. A double bed with a canopy lay in the middle of the vast space, and in the corner was a desk and a bookshelf made of oak, but the simple room had no other furnishings worth mentioning.

It wasn't that Mil wanted more. There was enough enjoyment to be had reading the fairy tales, stories of heroes, and accounts of knights in her books.

She adjusted her long white dress as she stared out the window, her head on her hand while her elbow rested on the sill.

Night had fallen, and stars had dotted the black sky. The moon was among them, shining brighter than any star and casting a dim white light on everything around her.

She'd seen a variety of adventurers that day. They came to see her almost every day, but rarely had a new adventurer and an accomplished adventurer visited at the same time.

She wondered… If she hadn't been born into the royal family, if she hadn't been a goddess's priestess, if she'd been an ordinary girl in a town somewhere, would she have taken up adventuring too? Would there be tales told about her, like those the royal guard's soldiers had whispered when the accomplished

adventurer entered? Would she be overcome with nerves in the presence of a king, just like the newbie? Imagining these things made her smile.

“Fire-breathing dragons big as mountains… A hundred ogres…” The things she’d heard that day inspired new fantasies.

She decided she’d probably use a one-handed weapon. She wouldn’t want to carry heavy equipment. She’d wear enchanted items infused with mana, and take on powerful enemies using a holy sword or magic blade that she carried at her waist.

Naturally, she’d be a frontline swordsman or spellsword. She’d have girls with her serving as mages, maybe another swordsman to join her at the front, and perhaps someone from another race such as an elf or beastkin. Then they’d all take on massive foes as a team.

When the battle was over, she’d speak her name. The townspeople would thank her and build a statue in her honor.

“Heh heh, eh heh heh.”

Her fantasy was getting out of hand.

She always looked up at the sky like this at night. Then, based on everything adventurers had told her that day, she’d imagine what her own adventures would be like. She considered what she’d do when faced with a giant creature, or how she’d dive into a den full of monsters. It was the most fun part of her day.

After indulging in these thoughts for a while, Mil said to herself, “I should write them down again.”

She took a notebook out of her desk and carried it to the window. It was already full of fantasies based on what she’d heard from on previous days, and now she had new ideas to add to the collection while they were fresh in her mind. She was on to her third notebook.

Once she was done, she closed the book with a thump. “Haah…”

She was only allowed to enjoy adventures in her head, and to gaze down from her window at the sprawling streets below.

What are my stats right now…? She slowly lifted her hand to her chest.

```
Name: Mil / Level: 2
HP: 48
```

```
MP: 21
STR: 19
DEF: 15
INT: 25
DEX: 16
SPD: 13
LUK: 7

Passive Skills: fast learner

Active Skills: fire magic, ice magic, lightning
magic, healing magic
```

She'd fall to a monster in no time if she left the castle with stats like these.

Since she could see her own stats, she'd tried various things to increase them. For example, she figured strength was related to her muscles, so she'd tried working out each day before bed. Unfortunately, it had only raised her strength by 2 after half a year of training.

She'd also reached level 2 after training with the castle's soldiers in the training hall. Once again, she had to train for over half a year, for several hours each day, to gain just a single level. Given that adventurers often reached level 2 right after they started adventuring, fighting monsters had to be a much quicker way to level up.

As for her skills, she learned to do household chores, and studied languages and history, but none of that ever appeared in the list. Apparently, *Goddess Eye* only revealed the powers that the goddess Arphil gave people for the sake of adventuring. Anything unrelated to combat didn't show up.

It seemed the only way to increase her stats was to fight an actual monster. After trying what she could, Mil's main conclusion was that she couldn't accomplish much without leaving the castle.

Her *fast learner* skill was something she was born with, and its description said "Allows various skills to be learned more quickly than normal." She'd found this power helped her learn the fundamentals of each form of elemental magic while secretly

reading spell books in the castle's library, but actually casting the spells had proven impossible. Someone at her low level could memorize them, but lacked the stats to actually use them. After using *Goddess Eye* to determine what requirements she lacked, she found she'd need higher intelligence for casting.

All this would quickly change if she went adventuring and defeated a few monsters, but alas.

"Even if I was at a higher level..." Mil sighed to herself once more.

It wouldn't matter in the end. Even if she was strong enough to leap from the window and go off adventuring at that moment...

"If father found out, he'd probably faint," she concluded.

She could just imagine him passing out on the spot and then needing at least a week to recover before he could get out of bed again. He did what he could to give Mil freedom, but not if it meant exposing her to the slightest amount of danger.

She was glad that her father cherished her, but she wished he didn't treat her like she'd die if she so much as broke a nail. He made it a huge deal every time she simply stepped outside.

Adventuring would be... No, I shouldn't ask for so much.

Mil knew she was blessed with the life she already had. She had far more freedom than those walking the streets below, who wondered whether they'd have anything to eat the next day.

She shook her head. "O, Goddess Arphil. I apologize. I wish for too many things."

Her father was constantly telling her that a princess had to set an example for others and show great restraint.

Mil turned her gaze back to the night sky, clasped her hands together, and offered a prayer to the goddess Arphil. *I'm happy to be where I am. And so I should be.*

"Are you the holy princess, Mil Arphilia?" said a low-pitched voice from somewhere above.

Mil opened her eyes wide with surprise and looked outside.

There was a person floating in the air right in front of her. Though not the sort of "person" who typically lived in the Holy Arphil Kingdom. He was a man of medium stature and build, wearing ceremonial robes that blended in with the darkness outside. If there was nothing else unusual about him, Mil would have assumed he was a noble, but he clearly wasn't human. Two

black wings, like those of a bat, protruded from his back, each wider than a human arm span. From his head extended a pair of horns that curved backward over his hair.

He was a demonkin. She'd read about them in tales of heroes. They were humanoid creatures with wings and horns, and some, referred to as higher demonkin, could even speak human languages.

"Who are you…? How do you know me?" Mil slowly backed away as the man folded his wings in and entered her room.

"Well… I didn't expect you'd be so calm. I thought you'd scream at the mere sight of a demonkin."

"So you *are* a demonkin." Mil grew even more wary.



The man put a hand to his chest and bowed his head. “Firstly, I hope you’ll forgive me for dropping by unannounced. I’m awfully sorry. This was the only way to get close to you.”

“You’re here to…see me? That’s why you’re here?”

“Exactly. Now, how do I explain…” He put his hand to his chin and his expression grew pensive.

It was her first meeting with any kind of demonkin. At first she’d been afraid, but this demonkin was such a gentleman that he couldn’t be evil.

Maybe I should be calling for the guards. At the very least, he was an intruder, and the appearance of demonkin in the royal capital was a major incident. *But then the guards will storm in and try to grab him. He’ll probably resist, and then he or the guards might get hurt.*

Mil didn’t want a fight to break out, so she decided it was better to let the demonkin be as long as he wasn’t trying to harm anyone.

“Sorry, I’m bad at explaining things. I’ll just have to be blunt.”

The demonkin paused to clear his throat.

“Mil Arphilia, I’m here to abduct you. You’re coming to my castle with me.”

The demonkin’s words brought Mil’s thoughts to a complete stop. “Huh…?” *Abduct…?* “You’re abducting me? You mean you’re kidnapping me?” *But then he’d be kidnapping a princess. Isn’t that a major incident? And what castle is he talking about…?*

“Oh, pardon me.” The demonkin man had noticed the confused look on her face. “I’m Demon King Alvin Garland. My castle is the one known as the Demon King’s Castle.”

“Demon King…? Did you say *Demon King*?!”

This was an even bigger surprise. Mil knew that only a high-level demonkin could sneak deep enough into human territory to reach the royal capital, but this was the highest of them all.

Mil often saw it written in tales of heroes that “the royal capital lies in the east and the Demon King’s Castle in the west.”

Unintelligent creatures like goblins and kobolds were known as monsters, while humanoid creatures with enough intelligence to understand speech were known as demonkin. The Demon King ruled over both demonkin and monsters alike. He was a powerful being who could send an army of monsters flooding into a human

settlement with a single command. Any adventurers who defeated him would forever be remembered as heroes of the Holy Arphil Kingdom.

"Princess?" asked a voice from outside the door. "Is something wrong?"

Mil recognized it as her attendant. She must have overheard the conversation or some noise within the room.

"Things will get complicated once people know I'm here. Sorry, but it's not a matter for discussion."

"Uh, what?! Huh?"

The Demon King—Alvin—grabbed Mil tightly. She had no power to resist.

"Princess?! Is someone with you?! I'm coming in!" The door burst open. "Princess?!"

Securing Mil under one arm, Alvin leaped from the window, and with a beat of his broad wings he took flight, high into the night sky.

"Ahh!" Mil cried as they cut through the air.

The attendant made it inside just in time to see the abduction at the moment of success. Mil thought it might really be a major incident when the news spread the next morning.

"I'd hoped to be more gentle," Alvin said. "Well? Have I scared you now?"

Dangling from Alvin's arm, Mil could feel the cold night air across her entire body.

Far below, she saw a row of brick houses with light leaking from their windows. She'd never seen the city streets from directly above like this. If Alvin were to change his mind and drop her, she'd be seriously hurt.

"Sorry, but you won't be going home for a while. No matter how much you scream, I—"

"This is..."

"Yes?"

"This is *amazing*! I'm flying in the sky!" Mil's eyes went wide and she began kicking her feet. "I never knew the outside world was so big! Wow, look how small the people are! The streetlights are all so pretty!"

After so long spent looking out at the world through a narrow window, she was seeing it from the sky, and could barely contain

herself.

"Aren't you scared? You're not worried about what'll happen to you?"

"My chest's sure pounding, but I don't think it's fear. I've never traveled so far before!"

She couldn't calm her racing heart. A moment ago the sprawling city had been beneath her, but it had abruptly given way to open fields. She was in the sky above the world beyond the city.

"You humans are strange. Or maybe it's just you?"

"I wouldn't know... Oh, why are you taking me to your castle anyway?" *Why me?* Mil wondered. There had to be some reason he'd come all the way to the human world for her.

"Can't you guess? There's only one reason I'd want to abduct you."

"Hmm..."

To do housework? I'm good at cooking, but I don't even know what foods demonkin like. Oh, but he wouldn't choose me for that. My servants are much better at it.

Maybe it's for a ransom? If you ever want to see the princess again, you know the rest... Is that it?

Oh! I hope he's not going to roast and eat me!

"You really don't know?" Astonished, the Demon King shook his head. "Humans mustn't be very intelligent after all."

Mil shrank within his arm. "Please don't eat me... I doubt I'll taste good..."

"Where'd you get that idea? No, I want you for your power."

"My power...?" That made a little more sense.

"You're a goddess's priestess. Isn't that what the humans call you?"

"You want my power? But I don't think I can give it to someone else."

"No, I'm not trying to take your power away. There are many demonkin in my forces, and I need a goddess's priestess—you—to take a look at them."

"Demonkin...? What kinds?"

"Well, there are alraune, lamia, and demons like myself. And there are several lower demonkin such as orcs and trolls."

It turned out there were a lot of demonkin types. The highly intelligent ones skilled in combat were known as higher demonkin,

while the lower ranked ones were known as middle demonkin and lower demonkin.

"Alraune... Lamia..." The sound of these names alone made Mil tremble.

"Terrified, are you? You needn't worry so much; they won't harm you unless—"

"This is *amazing*! Those are the ones from the heroes' tales! I'm really gonna get to meet them!"

"What...?" Alvin reacted with disbelief. And no wonder. Most adventurers would be paralyzed by fear just knowing they were about to face demonkin.

Mil, however, was overjoyed to hear of the creatures Alvin was taking her to see.

"You're an odd life-form," Alvin commented.

"You don't know how long I've been dreaming about them! I've always wanted to know what they look like. I still can't believe I'm going to see them... Wow, I can't wait! I've heard that alraune have glistening ivy, and I wanna know how much of a lamia's body is like a snake and how much is like a person! Do trolls really smell?!"

"Calm down. And keep still. You keep getting stranger. Aren't humans afraid of demonkin?"

To Mil, meeting demonkin was like meeting a character from a story. She only knew them from books she'd read. Now she was going to see them for real. She'd already started to fantasize about how they'd greet her.

Alvin groaned and stopped looking at her. "I can't figure you out. But it's all the same to me."

"Uh heh heh. Uh heh heh heh." Left to her fantasy, Mil was giggling and squirming in his arm.

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Mil wasn't sure how long the journey had taken, but it had been more than a full day. They'd stopped once to rest overnight, then took flight again in the morning and kept going until night had fallen once more. All the while they'd been flying through the air at a speed Mil had never experienced, so they had to be a long way from the royal capital.

Their current location was presumably the throne room in the

Demon King's Castle.

Compared to what Mil was used to in her own castle, this place looked sinister. Or perhaps nightmarish was a better word.

The ceiling was high and the room itself spacious enough that she could have run laps inside. Much like the royal capital's throne room, there was a crimson carpet that led from the large entrance doors to the throne. On either side of the carpet were demonic statues, and stained glass windows featuring bats were positioned at regular intervals along the walls.

"You're the first human to enter this room," Alvin said before directing Mil to sit on the throne.

The throne was similar to those in the royal capital too, except it was embellished with gaudy decorations made from gold, and full of little details. It was so big that three people Mil's size could have sat on it side by side. She must have looked like a doll sitting right in the center.

"Wow. So this is the Demon King's Castle."

Feeling like a tourist, she wondered what more there was to see. There might be treasure vaults, libraries, and maybe some rooms that the royal capital's castle didn't even have.

"I know you only just arrived, but I'd like you to use your powers right away. I've already explained what you need to do during our flight."

"First I wanna meet an alraune and an orc!"

"Calm down. It's already late. You'll look at just one of us as a test. The rest of the demonkin can wait until tomorrow."

"Aww. Well, all right..."

Since it was already bedtime, Mil knew it would be selfish to insist that all the demonkin wake up for her sake. "Patience, patience," she whispered to herself.

Alvin put his hand to his forehead and shook his head. "They didn't tell me the princess was going to be like this."

"Someone told you about me?"

"There are demonkin loyal to me concealed in the royal capital. That's all."

There are demonkin disguised as humans? Mil had no idea such spies existed.

"Okay... So who am I going to look at?" Mil asked.

"Let me ask one question first. Does *Goddess Eye* work on

demonkin?”

“It should. *Goddess Eye* works on living things, and some other stuff besides.”

“Ah, so your power really does work on weapons and enchanted items?”

“You already knew?”

“Didn’t I just say? I have demonkin positioned in the royal capital.”

All there was to know about *Goddess Eye* must have leaked out already.

Mil’s power wasn’t limited to use on humans. For example, if she used it on weapons and items, she could see their enchantments, as well as the nature of any curses placed on them. If she used it on a spell book, she could see what spell it contained.

“Now, here’s what really interests me. I’ve heard you have another power: You can help others learn new skills related to their existing experience.”

“You mean *Blessings of the Goddess*...?”

“This skill awakening power...will it work on our kind?”

“Hmm...” Mil wasn’t entirely sure. It certainly worked on adventurers, but she’d never tried it on any other life-form. If demonkin were similar to humans, then there was a chance.

“Well, we’ll know when we test it,” Alvin said. “Let’s not waste time.” He snapped his fingers, creating a sound that echoed through the spacious throne room.

The large doors opened immediately and a demonkin entered. “I am at your service, Sire.”

“Come closer. The goddess’s priestess is going to test her powers on you.”

“As you wish.” The demonkin approached the throne and then knelt.

This demonkin looked similar to the Demon King, except his wings and the horns on his head were smaller. He was clearly another higher demonkin.

Mil was about to raise her hand, but then stopped.

“Go on Mil. What’s wrong? You can’t be getting scared now.”

Mil made a point of pausing to clear her throat before replying. “I’ll do it on one condition,” she announced in her most

ceremonious tone of voice.

"Oh?" Alvin replied with a bemused smile. "You'd make demands of me? I don't think you understand your situation."

"I do, but I won't use my power for you unless you accept."

"Let's hear it."

"It's about your horns…"

"My horns?"

"I wanna touch your horns!"

"Huh?" Alvin's jaw dropped. His expression said, *She can't be serious.*

"You've been making sure I couldn't touch them this whole time! I tried so hard to grab them while we were flying!"

"Of course I won't let you touch me however you please! So that's why you kept creeping over to me while we were resting?!"

"I thought you'd at least let your guard down while you're sleeping!"

"You want to touch my horns that badly?"

"Of course! It's my first time seeing a demon's horns with my own eyes! Are they bumpy? Smooth? And the surface of your wings looks so rough! Let me touch the wings too! Do they have hair growing on them? Are they fluffy? Or maybe they're slimy?" Unable to hold back any longer, Mil hopped off the throne and started walking toward Alvin.

"Wait! Calm down! All right! If a chance to touch a demon's horns is all it takes to make you agree to use your powers for the sake of demonkin, then I'll allow it."

"Really?!"

Alvin then pointed to the demon he'd called in and asked, "But can it be his horns instead of mine?"

The other demon bowed his head. "If that is your wish, Sire."

"I'd prefer your horns, Alvin," Mil said.

"Keep complaining and I won't let you touch anyone's horns."

"Aww… *Fine*, I'll do it." Mil decided to resist their horns a little longer, and slowly raised her hand to read the demon's stats.

I wonder what powers he'll have. She'd never examined a demonkin before. It was another exciting new experience.

A status window appeared in front of Mil.

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Name: Graun / Level: 125
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HP: 2250
MP: 760
STR: 1370
DEF: 1389
INT: 1761
DEX: 1580
SPD: 1666
LUK: 630

Passive Skills: demonkin, demon eye, mana replenish,
one-handed sword proficiency (high), poison
resistance (max), dark magic resistance (max), curse
resistance (max), awaken

Active Skills: dark magic, illusion magic, demon
slash, lacerate, dark cry, dark mist
```

“Oh! Wooow!”

She’d never seen a three-digit level or a four-digit stat. He didn’t have many skills, but he probably hadn’t been trying to learn a wide variety the way that human adventurers did.

“Oh? Are his stats really that impressive?” Alvin asked.

“I’ve never seen anything like it in the royal capital!”

Mil had heard that monsters were stronger the closer they were to the Demon King’s Castle due to the effects of the Demon King’s miasma. Demonkin could supplement their mana with miasma, and they had more of it the stronger they were. Demonkin also tended to be drawn to places where the miasma was at its greatest. This explained why opponents near the royal capital were weak, but stronger and stronger foes could be found as one moved closer to the Demon King’s Castle.

Even so, Mil hadn’t expected the demonkin in the Demon King’s Castle to be quite this powerful. An adventurer considered heroically strong in the royal capital would be a weak little baby around here. That included the level 42 adventurer Mil had met the other day.

“Well? Can you awaken any new skills in him?” Alvin asked.

Mil tapped her way through the windows and saw “ice magic”

listed as a skill ready for awakening.

"Looks like it. Here goes…" Mil cleared her throat then held out both hands. "*Blessings of the Goddess—Goddess Bloom*."

As she spoke the incantation, light poured from her hands and took the shape of an angel.

The Demon King beside her expressed admiration. "Oh… Magnificent… Now I see why you're known as the holy princess." It was moving to know that even the Demon King was impressed by the divine.

The angel of light embraced Graun before suddenly scattering as particles of light.

"Is it over…?"

"Yes. You should be able to use ice magic now."

"Wow." Graun looked down at his own body in amazement. "I'm picturing forms of magic that I've never even seen before! So this is the goddess's priestess's power."

"Show me," the Demon King urged.

Graun pointed at the ceiling above and fired a lump of ice. He'd just cast an elementary ice spell known as *ice bullet*.

Alvin was disappointed. "How weak. You're no better than a trainee warlock."

"His ice magic's still weak because it only just awakened," Mil explained. "Skills grow more powerful with constant practice. I'd expect someone with Graun's stats to master advanced ice magic in under a month."

Graun narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "How do you know my name?"

"I saw it while viewing your stats. I can even get your full name."

Mil tapped "Graun" in the status window, causing Graun's surname to appear.

"It's Graun Newman, isn't it?" Mil bowed her head. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh, and you as well," Graun replied with a bow. He sounded embarrassed.

Mil had expected him to make a fuss, but after seeing his bashful reaction, she found him cute.

"Now we know your power's real," Alvin said. "Rest for tonight, Mil. A room has been prepared for you."

"Will I be doing this again tomorrow?"

“There are many demonkin in my forces. You may meet hundreds of them.”

“There’s that many?!” Mil’s eyes sparkled. *That’s right! I’m gonna meet even more demonkin! The same ones I heard about in hero’s tales!*

“You shout too much, but I suppose it’s just as well you’re energetic… Your work begins tomorrow. Rest well tonight.”

“But one thing first.”

“What’s that?”

“We had a deal. I get to…touch Graun’s horns.”

“Ah…” Alvin sighed.

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“This is unbelievable! It’s like a fancy dress party!”

The next day, Mil was made to sit on the throne again while the room filled up before her eyes with orcs, ogres, giants, and alraune. Each was a form of demonkin she’d heard about in the heroes’ tales.

Obviously, they weren’t just humans in costumes. These were real demonkin.

“Just as you wished, I’ve brought many of the varieties of demonkin that exist in my forces. I’ve also prepared paper, so once you’ve read their stats—”

“They’re just like in the books! Ogres have such long tusks! I think orcs actually smell kinda like fowl. And the alraune are super sexy!”

“Okay… Just use your power to examine them then record the results on the paper. If you can awaken a skill, then do it.”

“Got it. Though I do have one condition.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve told them to let you touch them once you’re done. Do as you like.”

“Thanks! I’ll do my best!” Suddenly, Mil was bursting with enthusiasm. With so many demonkin to see, she’d have to give it her all.

“I have other things to do. I’ll be back around sunset. Finish your work by then.”

Once the Demon King had left the room, his minions formed a line in front of Mil while she sat on the throne.

“Um… Okay, let’s take a look.”

Mil soon lost count of how many demonkin had come to her to be touched—examined, rather. Mil took note of their diverse skin textures and fang—uh, their impressively high stats.

Not a single one was below level 50. Some were as high as level 90. The people back in the royal capital paled in comparison. Any one of these demonkin would knock an adventurer down with a mere flick to the forehead. And the ones with skills ready to be awakened left the room even stronger than when they came in.

Still, none of them were as high-level as Graun, the first person she’d examined here. He must have been special somehow.

After Mil was done examining the final orc, she was left alone in the throne room.

“Whew,” she sighed.

“Good work. Return to your room and rest.”

“Oh! It’s you, Alvin.”

Mil was surprised to realize Alvin was standing beside her while she slumped on the throne. He had to have entered through the large doors, but she hadn’t even noticed them open.

“You’ll be seeing just as many tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow too?”

“Is it hard work?” Alvin asked with indifference.

Mil shook her head vigorously. “Not at all! What types of demonkin will I meet tomorrow?!”

“I thought you might say that… Well, that’s fine. But go rest so you don’t collapse from exhaustion.”

Mil took Alvin’s advice and left the throne room.

As she was walking along the corridor, she thought about home. *I wonder what father’s doing right now*.

Her attendant had seen the Demon King kidnapping her, so news of it was sure to have reached her father. She imagined how he’d panic and wondered whether he was putting a search party together that very second.

She was being treated well despite technically being a prisoner. She’d eaten a good meal that day, and the bed they’d given her was soft and fluffy. She just wished she could tell her father there was no need to worry.

“Lady Mil.”

Mil made it back to her room with her home still in mind, and

was greeted by an unfamiliar woman standing by the door. The curved horns on her head and black wings on her back marked her as a demon. She had a beautiful face and stood about a head taller than Mil with strikingly straight posture. Her hair was a sleek black and fell to her waist.

Her clothing was the same type of black-and-white maid outfit that Mil was used to seeing her own servants wear. Although it hid the shape of the wearer's body, Mil couldn't help but notice the demon woman's narrow waist and large breasts. She had a good figure and there was no hiding it.

"Who are you?" Mil asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

The woman bowed her head low. "I'll be attending to you from today onward, Lady Mil. My name is Crowell Newman."

Newman...? "Do you have a brother, perhaps?"

"Ah, yes. My younger brother serves in the royal guard. Have you met him already?"

"I used my *Goddess Eye* on him. I couldn't believe how strong he was!" *His name was Graun, wasn't it?*

"I'm sure it would please my brother to hear that. If you are ever in need of anything, please call upon me. His Majesty said that you should be allowed to roam freely within his castle."

Mil was glad about that. She'd been hoping to explore the place as soon as she got a spare moment.

Crowell bowed her head once more. "I will leave you now, but I will only be in the next room, so I will hear if you call for me."

Crowell resumed her straight posture and then retired to her own room.

She's like a refined lady, but really strong at the same time. If she's anything like her little brother, I'll bet she's really powerful. I wonder what level she is. She might be the most powerful demonkin I saw today.

Mil entered her room, closed the door softly behind her, then rested her back against it.

Power...

After seeing nothing but impressive stats all day, she couldn't help but feel a little down about her own. She checked and, to no surprise, found she was still level 2.

Could I get as strong as they are if I really worked at it?

After failing to level up much in the royal capital, she'd given up

hope of ever being strong, but seeing the people here made her wish she could improve herself just a little.

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The next day was more of the same.

"Please take a look at me today, Lady Mil."

"Me next."

"Could ya awaken a skill for me, maybe?"

Almost thirty orcs were packed into the throne room for Mil to look at. She used *Goddess Eye* on each one, followed by *Blessings of the Goddess* to awaken any skills she could. Along with a few breaks here and there, it took her the whole day.

Fun as it all was, this same pattern then repeated for the rest of the week, and Mil's days grew boring and repetitive.

Before long, Mil found there was barely anyone left in the castle with skills for her to awaken. As the number of demonkin seeking her *Blessings of the Goddess* dwindled, she had increasing amounts of free time to do as she pleased.

On an otherwise uneventful afternoon, Mil decided to go exploring the treasure vaults, library, and training hall within the castle. This became a new source of enjoyment.

Mil was excited to find a treasure vault full of magic swords, enchanted items, and cursed armor like nothing she'd ever seen. Likewise, the library was filled with spell books far superior to anything in the royal capital's library. Sadly, Mil's level was too low for her to actually use any of the weapons or learn any of the spells.

After another week passed, she could no longer find anything new within the castle grounds. She'd explored almost everything there was to explore.

Each morning she'd awaken skills for a few demonkin in the throne room, then she'd go sightseeing in the castle to kill time for the rest of the day. It was quickly turning into a dull routine. The excitement of new discoveries was fading, and each day was much like the last.

By the time she finally got fed up with it, a month had passed.

"I'm so booored!" Mil yelled out the window from her room in the Demon King's Castle one night. She followed it up with a heavy

sigh.

In the sky outside, the moon was a great circle accompanied by an abundance of stars. It was the exact same sky she'd seen above the royal capital.

It had all been so exciting when she first arrived. Life was full of new experiences and unfamiliar types of demonkin. It had all been fresh. But it had been a month already, and nothing could stay new forever. As every aspect of her daily routine lost its thrill, Mil's life grew dull.

Back in the royal capital, she had royal duties to perform, diplomatic missions to meet, parties to attend, and other tasks that kept her occupied. Life in the Demon King's Castle, however, was surprisingly uneventful.

"It's no better than back home..." Mil sighed for the umpteenth time as she gazed at the night sky.

She recalled the faces of adventurers she'd seen in the royal capital. Each one filled with excitement as they imagined the caverns they'd explore, the monsters awaiting them, and treasure they might find. When parties decided how they'd work together and where they'd go, it always looked so fun.

"I still wish I could go adventuring," she muttered softly.

I wanna go outside. I wanna experience more than what this little castle has to offer.

But Mil was a princess. As leader to the common folk, such selfish desires were... *Wait a minute.*

Mil reconsidered her situation. She wasn't in the royal capital anymore, and her royal duties were going unfulfilled no matter what she did.

In fact, her father would be worried if she didn't arrive home soon. But it was looking highly unlikely that anyone would arrive to rescue her*. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I* did *sneak off and go adventuring?*

But then Mil remembered that she was a prisoner.

The Demon King wouldn't want me to go... But do I really have to stay here just to keep him happy? He kidnapped me without asking, so why should I ask him for permission to do what I want?

"But my level's too low..."

Mil was too weak to stop demonkin from carrying her straight back to the castle the moment she left.

If only I could raise my level. But I already tried that in the royal capital. Without monsters to fight, I can't… Oh!

Mil remembered that the Demon King's Castle was different. There were no monsters here, only demonkin, but if she wanted to raise her level, there was no shortage of opponents.

"The demonkin here are all really strong…"

Fighting higher level opponents was the fastest way to level up. At just level 2, Mil had the potential to grow rapidly.

If only I had weapons to fight with. But how am I supposed to find any if I can't go out exploring…? Oh!

"What if I took a good weapon out of the armory?"

If she could find a way to level up, all kinds of powerful weapons would be available to her. And with good weapons, she'd be able to defeat any demonkin who got in her way.

Could I escape? She wondered.

She remembered all the enchanted equipment she'd seen in the treasure vault. If she would be lacking for anything, good gear wouldn't be it.

"Hmmm…" Then it dawned on her. *I might actually have a chance!*

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"Weapons. ♪ Weapons. ♪"

Mil skipped down the corridor imagining the adventures that might await her.

Although she'd explored most parts of the castle over the past month, she was yet to check out the armory because she hadn't thought ordinary weapons would be interesting.

But now it was different. She might find a trusty weapon that would be at her side during all her upcoming adventures. Mil wondered whether adventurers felt this same feeling when they visited a weapons store.

When she arrived at the armory door, she opened it without any hesitation. "Don't mind me… Oooh!"

As one might expect in a demon king's castle, the armory was enormous—even bigger than the one in the royal capital.

Against the entire length of one wall was an array of battle axes and spears. Elsewhere there were shields and helms, and the floor

was covered in boxes packed full of cannonballs, suits of armor, and other bits and pieces.

The long narrow room was so cluttered with equipment that Mil had to make her way in slowly and carefully.

“I wonder what’s in here… Oh.”

In a barrel in the center of the room were several iron rings large enough to fit an orc’s wrist.

Mil tried lifting one out “Ugh. That’s heavy…”

Mil needed both arms just to lift it. Looking more closely, she noticed text inscribed on the inner surface of the ring. She couldn’t read it, but she had a better way of examining items.

Mil put the ring on the floor and held out her hand. “Now if I use *Goddess Eye*… It worked!”

```
Enchanted Item: Sorcerer’s Ring
Required Stats: none
Description: Tear through your enemies with
thunderous bolts of lightning.
Abilities: Fire a lightning spear.
```

Clearly this wasn’t just an ornament, but an enchanted item that fired lightning magic. It might have been useful if it wasn’t too heavy to carry around during an actual fight. It was probably better suited to some sort of large demonkin.

“Maybe there’s something else…” Mil rested the ring against the side of the barrel then began rummaging inside. “Oh, I could use this.”

She’d pulled out a dagger encrusted with jewels and examined it with *Goddess Eye*.

```
Dagger: Rune Edge
Required Stats: none
Stat bonuses: 35 STR, 15 INT
Special properties: Absorbs magic attacks.
```

Apparently this dagger could absorb magic. That was bound to be useful, so Mil decided to take it.

“The armory’s amazing, just like I thought! Now all need is—”

“Hey! What’re you doing in there?!” an angry voice called from outside the armory.

Mil turned and saw a lizardman holding a long spear. He must have been on patrol. She regretted not closing the door.

“Mwuh? Aren’t you His Majesty’s prisoner?” the lizardman said.

Is that how they think of me?

“I was just looking around… Heh heh…”

The lizardman glared at Mil with suspicion. “His Majesty’s orders say you’re to be left alone, so looking around is fine. But keep yourself out of trouble.”

He’s letting me go? That’s lucky.

“Now I don’t suppose you’ve seen the princess?” the lizardman asked. “I’m sure she was headed this way.”

“Princess…?” Mil thought for a moment and then pointed at herself.

“Not you. His Majesty’s daughter, Princess Mary. Have you seen her?”

“What?! The Demon King has a daughter?!” It was the first Mil had heard.

“If you don’t know then don’t waste my time.”

“Wow. So the Demon King has a daughter. I hope I get to see her before I escape.”

“Escape?”

Oops. Should’ve kept my mouth shut.

“So that’s what you’re doing in the armory. You’re planning an escape! That’s what the dagger’s for!”

Busted!

“Put that down! Come quietly and you won’t get hurt!”

“Ahhh!” Mil tried to shield herself from the lizardman’s spear using the iron ring.

Fzzzzz!

“Huh?”

“Guh!”

The ring fired a lightning spear that passed straight through the lizardman.

“Uh-oh. I’m sorry.”

The lizardman had collapsed into twitching a heap on the floor with his eyes rolled back into his head. But he didn’t look too badly hurt.

Oh, that's right. Lizardmen are weak against lightning, aren't they? But I think I just knocked him out. He'll be okay…probably.

"Uh… What the…?"

Mil suddenly felt a sensation of lightness, as if something were filling her with newfound strength. She tried reading her own stats with *Goddess Eye*.

```
Name: Mil / Level: 15
HP: 182
MP: 77
STR: 89
DEF: 75
INT: 67
DEX: 80
SPD: 70
LUK: 25
```

"Oooh!" *I've jumped from level 2 all the way to level 15!*

Defeating a monster or demonkin was one way to level up, but simply dealing damage worked too. Since the lightning spear counted as Mil's attack, and it had dealt enough damage to knock the lizardman unconscious, it was enough to level her up.

Fighting stronger opponents was the fastest way to level up. She'd often heard adventurers in the royal capital say the stronger the monster, the faster you improve. That had to be the effect she was seeing.

Even so, she hadn't expected to advance this quickly, even from a fight in the Demon King's Castle.

"I might get stronger quicker than I thought."

All she needed for an adventure were some good items and a high level. It was looking like she'd have both in no time.

"Ugh. Uuugh." The shock-addled lizardman slowly climbed to his feet. He'd recovered from the attack surprisingly quickly. Or perhaps it wasn't so surprising given that he was a demonkin under the Demon King's command.

"M-Mr. Lizardman?"

"Ugh… Aren't you the prisoner His Majesty brought here?"

Does he not remember what just happened?

“If you don’t hurry, Princess Mary’s going to get away,” Mil told him.

“Oh, you’re right. Where is she?!”

“She was headed down that corridor.”

“Thanks for your help!” The gullible lizardman went running off in the direction Mil had pointed.

I’m lucky he didn’t remember. Now…where was I?

“I suppose I’ll hang onto this dagger.”

Next up was the treasure vault.

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“*Hello*, Mr. Treasure Vault.”

Mil slowly opened the door, releasing a gush of cold air from within. If she wanted a better weapon, this was the place to find one.

Mil was holding a torch that she’d found a few moments earlier, and taking it turned out to be a wise choice. The treasure vault was located in the basement, with no light sources to speak of.

She’d visited this vault just once in the month since her arrival at the Demon King’s Castle. It was packed from floor to ceiling with weapons, armor, and enchanted items. Exploring the room the first time had been fun, but after being satisfied by a brief look, Mil hadn’t considered coming back until now.

This was where equipment too special for the regular armory was stored, and Mil thought there might be some great finds inside.

In the light of her torch, Mil saw treasure chests and shelves filled with precious jewels, but unlike the armory, it looked like most items here had just been tossed in with abandon. Even the treasure chests were a mess with necklaces and whatnot hanging out of them.

“Is this really the treasure vault? Feels more like a storeroom.”

There was so much clutter that she couldn’t help but think so.

Mil opened a nearby treasure chest and held her torch over it. She saw some accessories inside, but *Goddess Eye* told her that they were just jewels with no magic powers to them, save for a few items with weak enchantments.

Next she checked some swords and spears that had been

thrown into a barrel. Once again, the enchantments left her unimpressed. Anyone carrying weapons like these through the royal capital would look like a successful adventurer, but Mil expected more from the Demon King's Castle.

"Is this really a treasure vault...? Something's not right here."

Nothing she found looked good enough to get her adventure started.

"Maybe this treasure chest—whoops!"

She tripped over a sword lying by her feet while making her way through the room in the darkness.

"Uh, uh, uh, oh... Ow!"

Keeping her torch tight in one hand, she couldn't recover her balance in time to avoid smacking her head into the stone wall.

Ka-clunk. Vrrrrrr.

"Um?"

Mil's head had pushed a piece of the stone wall inward, and while she was recovering a huge section of the wall shifted and slowly slid out of the way to reveal a new opening.

"A secret door! This must be the *real* treasure vault!"

As they say, every slime has a silver lining. Mil had gotten lucky. Though she realized she should have been expecting a secret room or two here and there. This was the Demon King's Castle after all.

```
Learned: detection
Requirements: Find a secret door or follow a trail
belonging to a monster.
```

A status window popped up in front of her. It seemed she'd learned a new skill by discovering the secret door. She checked her stats to confirm it, and sure enough, "detection" was newly listed under her passive skills.

If skills could be learned by fulfilling the right requirements, Mil started thinking there might be a lot of things worth trying out. But for the moment, she had other priorities.

"Don't mind me... Wow."

Unlike the storeroom she'd just come from, everything in here was beautifully organized.

The room was rather small, only big enough to accept a few people at a time. A red carpet covered the floor, and against the walls were glass cases filled with all sorts of jewelry—enchanted items, no doubt. But what got Mil's attention was an object hanging on the wall.

"A magic sword?"

It was a one-handed sword, just about the right size for a human. Mil picked it up and felt its weight—too heavy for her to swing. Then she drew the sword from its scabbard and found a black, double-edged blade. If ever a weapon was worth examining with *Goddess Eye*, it was this one.

```
One-handed Sword: Magic Sword Ragnarok
Required Stats: 850 STR
Stat Bonuses: 555 STR, 250 DEF
Special Properties: Imbued with darkness.
```

"Cool!"

But she had nowhere near enough strength to use it.

Even if I do get stronger, I'm not sure I'll ever get to 850 strength... Maybe I should find something more basic... But I wanna use this one! She was starting to understand why adventurers got so proud of powerful weapons. *When I visit a guild for real, I've gotta have a cool sword to show off in front of all the adventurers!*

She began imagining a place filled with brawny fighters and veteran mages showing each other their best weapons and trading tales of heroism. Then she imagined herself there with them. That was her dream, and she couldn't wait to make it a reality.

I'll just have to up my level!

And so her next stop was the training hall.

As Mil had already learned from the lizardman, fighting the demonkin within the castle was a quick way to level up.

She took a breath then opened the iron door. She was met with a gust of thick, warm air.

"Oh, back again, human princess?" One orc, considerably larger than the others in the hall, came walking over to Mil while wiping

his sweat with a towel.

He'd said "again" because Mil had already visited a few times during the past month as part of her exploration of the castle.

Orcs sported hoglike snouts and tusks, and were noticeably bigger than humans. Since Mil was as small as a child, this creature was like a hulking tower by comparison.

This same orc had been here during her previous visits. He was the captain of his unit and the strongest of all the castle's orcs.

"Um... Could I train with you today?" she asked.

"Ha ha ha! You, Princess? Sure, why not. But we'll have to get you a weapon."

"Actually, I've brought my own."

Mil showed him the large ring she'd brought—the same one that had fired the lightning spear at the lizardman.

"An enchanted item? You won't learn much training with that."

"I don't mind. I just want you to stand there and let me use my attack on you, Mr. Orc. Would you mind? Am I asking too much?"

He's not going to just let *me attack him, is he? No way he's going to agree to be my punching bag.*

"Ha ha ha! Sure. I can take it. Do your worst."

He was a merry orc, and luckily for Mil, his heart was as big as the rest of him.

"Here goes!" Mil channeled her mana into the ring, sending a lightning spear flying at the orc.

"Whoa. That smarts."

The orc took damage, but unlike the lizardman, he didn't pass out. He wouldn't be a captain if he wasn't tough.

Hopefully I can still level up even though I'm not knocking him down.

Mil checked her stats and saw that her level had already increased by 1. "Ooh!"

"Hm? What's wrong, Princess?" the orc asked. He had no idea Mil was looking at a status window full of her stats.

Now Mil had a proven way to gain experience. It was slow compared to knocking out a lizardman, but she could do it over and over.

"Can I do it again?!"

"Bring it on! We're on break right now, so I've got nothing but time."

How kind. If he was willing to use his break from training to help Mil, she was determined to make the most of it—it was an opportunity too good to waste!

"I'm gonna fire one after another!"

"Just try it!"

"Yah!"

Fzz!

"Ooh. I felt that one."

"Yah!"

Fzz!

"Oh-hoh, now you're getting the hang of it."

"Yah!"

Fzzz!

"Ugh. That one made my hand cramp up."

"Yah!"

Fzzz!

"Wh-Whoa there. Let's not overdo it."

"Yah! Whew. My arms are tired."

Fzzzz!

"Oof. My leg's tingling."

This went on for thirty minutes.

"W-Wait! Let me rest a little!"

"Huh?"

Mil had attacked the orc over fifty times without pause, taking her to level 30. Needless to say, that didn't even get her close to 850 strength.

"Haah, haah... It felt like you got stronger with every attack, Princess."

Her stats at level 30 were way higher than at level 15. Mil hadn't realized it until now, but it seemed enchanted items were more effective with higher stats.

The orc put his hand to his abdomen. "Yowch..."

Looking at the orc's charred stomach, Mil realized she'd gotten a little carried away. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't sweat it. A lick of spit's enough to fix this up. Bwa ha ha."

Although he was laughing it off, Mil couldn't help but feel sorry for him. "No no, please, I'll heal it properly." Mil put her hand to the orc's stomach and cast a simple healing spell. "*Heal!*"

A faint white light appeared around the injury, which

disappeared in no time at all.

"Well would ya look at that." The orc scratched at his stomach, rather impressed.

"Ooh, was that healing magic?"

"Isn't that the human princess?"

"Hey, use some on me too!"

Mil was quickly surrounded by orcs with light wounds from training. If they usually relied on ointments and natural recovery, then they were sure to appreciate a healer.

"Okay. Get in line." Mil set about healing the orcs one by one.

"Look at that! I'm good as new!"

"That's sure soothing."

"She's just like a saint."

"Yeah! Like a healing saint."

"Our saint!"

The orcs were so impressed, some began to cheer, "Saint! Saint!"

"Teh heh heh. Thank you. But I'll have to stop now. I'm all out of mana."

"Oh..."

"What a shame."

Some of them had wanted more.

Knowing some magic's nice too, Mil decided.

This felt like a good use of her skills. She was leveling up for the sake of using Ragnarok, but now she started to wonder whether she could perfect her healing magic and learn a few magic attacks while she was at it. That was when she remembered that the Demon King's Castle was full of spell books she'd never seen in the library back home. Once her intelligence was a little higher, she could start learning from them.

I guess it'll be worth paying the library another visit after I've leveled up a little more. Though I still wanna be a frontline fighter.

I wanna take on orcs and fire-breathing dragons as big as mountains with a weapon in my hand. I wanna stand at the front of my party and tell them "I got this." Not that I have a party...

"Mweh heh heh..."

"What's up, Princess?" the orc captain asked.

"Oh, nothing you need to worry about! Now could we do a little more—"

Mil was interrupted when another orc came running over. “Captain! Have you got a moment?” It looked like one of his subordinates. They had the same face as the captain, but none were quite as big.

“Yeah, all right. Give me a sec. Sorry, Princess. I’ll have to leave you here.”

“That’s fine! Thanks for everything! Can I…come back another time?”

“Sure thing. Drop by whenever.” Then he turned and asked the other orcs, “You’re all fine with that, right?”

“Yeah!”

“We want more healing from our saint!”

“Saint! Saint!”

“Ah ha ha…” Mil felt awkward with all the orcs surrounding her.

They wouldn’t stop cheering “saint.” it was a little over the top when all she’d done was heal a few bruises.

“Bwa ha ha,” the orc captain laughed as he went back to training with his subordinates.

“All right… Now I can level up even more tomorrow!”

Thus began Mil’s intense training program. She spent every free afternoon using her attacks on the orc in the training hall.

“Princess! Same again today?”

“Yep! If you don’t mind!”

Once her level was high enough, Mil didn’t have to rely on enchanted items. Instead, she used a wooden training sword, dealing less damage but getting just as much experience for each attack.

“Same again today, please!”

“Bring it on!”

At level 40, she gained *one-handed sword proficiency (low)* as a skill since that was the weapon type she’d been using. It made her wooden sword attacks do more damage. It was around that time that the orc started to wince whenever she hit him.

“Same again today, please!”

“Oh… S-Sure thing!”

By level 50, a few basic attacks wasn’t enough to level up anymore. On top of that, the orc was starting to take enough damage with each attack that he’d started wearing armor.

“Again please!”

“Just, uh, just a little.”

At level 60, it took countless blows just to gain a single level. With the orc captain at level 80, closing the gap meant the experience gains were dropping off too.

“The usual ple—”

“W-Wait. We’re taking a break today.”

After about a week, the orc didn’t want to endure Mil’s attacks anymore. Instead, he suggested facing off against some of the other orcs in mock battles.

Sometimes Mil won her mock battles, other times she lost. She’d never tried this form of training back in the royal capital, so battle tactics were completely new to her. She gained new skills from fighting this way, and it leveled her up faster than simple attacks.

```
Name: Mil / Level: 65
HP: 785
MP: 662
STR: 455
DEF: 394
INT: 502
DEX: 382
SPD: 380
LUK: 144

Passive Skills: one-handed sword proficiency (high),
light equipment proficiency (mid), tenacity,
fortitude, spellsword, fast learner, saint,
detection

Active Skills: fire magic, ice magic, lightning
magic, healing magic
```

Now that her intelligence had increased, Mil decided to try reading the forbidden magic spell books in the library.

Her intelligence stat was oddly high despite her training method, likely down to her individual nature. The higher

someone's level, the clearer it became what role they were best suited to, whether that be frontline fighter, rear support, or something else.

Though the type of training they followed could change the outcome too. For example, fighting with a weapon would raise strength more, while using magic would increase intelligence.

Given her high strength and intelligence, Mil looked cut out to be a spellsword. She'd even gained *spellsword* as a passive skill.

With intelligence over 500, learning spells looked like a good way to improve herself further. The constant battles were getting boring anyway.

"I guess I'll check out the library next."

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The next day, Mil headed for the castle's grand library.

There was a surprising amount of light inside thanks to skylights in the high ceiling. She saw rows of old books crammed into shelves that extended across the walls of the room.

Mil found the musty smell of the books all around her relaxing somehow. It reminded her that she'd always been a bookworm.

Save for Mil, there was no one here. With each step, she heard the click of her shoes on the floor echo through the room.

"All right! Time to read!"

She took several books from a nearby shelf. Each one was so thick that little Mil could only carry three at a time using both hands.

She dropped the collection onto a table in the library and took a seat. Now she'd have to read each one, a single page at a time... Or not.

"*Goddess Eye* should work..." She held her hand over the first book, causing a status window to appear.

```
Advanced Spell Book: dark mist
Required Stats: 125 INT
```

The name of the spell described by the book and the stats required to learn it were displayed in the window. The required stat was needed to actually cast the spell. Anyone with lower

intelligence wouldn't be able to use it even if they memorized the whole book.

Mil tapped the words "dark mist," causing a detailed description to appear.

```
Dark Mist: Dark forbidden magic. Deploys a black
mist to the surroundings. The amount of mist
increases with higher intelligence. With repeated
casting, the mist can be imbued with an element.
(Can be learned.)
```

Mil could decipher it using one of her powers as a goddess's priestess—*Goddess Insight*. She took a deep breath and then used her power. "*Goddess Insight—Learn Knowledge*."

A faint white light enveloped the book then began gradually breaking into small particles. Each time a particle of light broke off, it was absorbed into her body.

The contents of the book and the nature of the spell slowly took form in Mil's mind. Learning a spell with the minimum required stats could take a long time. Back when she'd tried learning fire magic in the royal capital, it had taken her two hours to learn the fireball spell.

This time, however, Mil had four times the required stat. For most people, it would still take some time, but she'd been born with the *fast learner* skill. That probably reduced the time needed even further.

After five minutes had passed, she'd absorbed all of the faint particles of white light. When she closed her eyes, she saw the spell clearly.

"All right..." She held out her hand toward an empty space. "*Dark mist!*"



Black smoke gushed from her palm, engulfing everything around her in an instant.

"Wow! I did it!"

The spell looked useful for making a smoke screen, throwing everything around her into darkness. And not just that, she could make the mist hot or cold. It was sure to come in handy.

Her first attempt at dark mist dissipated in just a few seconds, but with repeated practice, she'd be able to cast with greater power and control.

"Why's this forbidden magic?" *What does forbidden even mean in the first place?*

Although *Goddess Eye* told her this was "dark forbidden magic," nothing about it looked unusual.

Mil knew of five elements that magic could belong to: fire, ice, lightning, earth, and wind. It was possible to create various effects through specialized use of these elements or their combinations, and some mages could even create original spells that way.

This was some kind of forbidden magic that didn't belong to any of the standard elements. Though its forbidden status might have simply come from its association with demonkin. In any case, Mil wasn't too worried about any of that.

"As long as I can use it, that's all that matters! Next!"

After the mist had completely vanished, Mil set upon the next spell book. She'd already decided that whatever problems forbidden magic might cause, she'd deal with them if and when they happened.

Mil went on studying one book after another with *Goddess Insight*. Two hours later she'd learned a wide array of spells.

With *raise undead* she had necromancy under her belt. *Mind break* would cause an opponent intense psychological distress. *Poison mist* could release a vast cloud of potent poison. And that was just some of what she'd learned.

"No fire? No ice? No ordinary magic at all?" It was all magic exclusive to demonkin. "Well I guess this *is* the Demon King's Castle…"

Naturally, these weren't going to be standard adventurer spells, but magic was magic. Anything she learned was bound to be useful while adventuring regardless, and she still had time to learn more.

Focusing on nothing but leveling would get boring, so she figured mastering a few forbidden magic spells would be good preparation for her escape.

Mil pumped her fist. “I’m gonna keep learning more.”

There were many types of books here, so finding the ones that contained spells took some effort.

“Oh! This might be good! This looks fun to learn too!”

Like a patron at a buffet, Mil picked out several books that were to her liking and carried them over to the table.

Among many others, she learned:

Life drain—a spell for stealing a foe’s lifeforce.

Overload—a spell that amplified the caster’s damage output for just a short time.

Blast end—a spell for making localized explosions.

They all sounded like demonkin spells, but they’d be useful for an adventure nonetheless. *Overload*, for instance, might be good for moving boulders out of her path. Or *blast end* might be useful if she had to fight a dangerous monster.

She still hadn’t found any regular spells. At the very least, none of the adventurers she’d met in the royal capital knew them.

Among the non-spell books were some that described the land around the Demon King’s Castle and dangerous monsters known to attack demonkin. Information like that could be valuable once Mil was outside the castle. Since *Goddess Insight* couldn’t help Mil learn anything that wasn’t a skill, she’d have to slowly read through each book. But she had plenty of time, so she decided to read them all.

While looking for books with useful information, she happened across something interesting.

```
Forbidden Magic Spell Book: Extinction Gate
Required Stats: 1000 INT
```

“Ooh!”

She’d found a spell that even she couldn’t understand despite her high intelligence stat. She checked the description right away.

```
Extinction Gate: Mass elimination magic. Creates a
```

`localized gate to another world that eliminates everything within its confines. Cannot be blocked using barrier magic of any kind.`

“Sounds powerful!”

Mil had no idea what elimination magic entailed, but a spell this high-level had to be one of the best in the whole library.

“I’d try learning it, but…”

She’d never seen anything that demanded 1000 intelligence. Even at level 65, her own intelligence wasn’t close. Nor was it going to increase much by fighting orcs now that she was close to their level.

“Hmm. I want Ragnarok, but I want this too.”

The sword demanded 850 strength while the spell demanded 1000 intelligence. Mil wanted to learn everything she could, but getting her stats that high was going to take a while.

I wanna get out of this boring castle and go adventuring already. Grinding levels to learn this spell would take forever. But I wanna learn all the forbidden magic! If only I could fight stronger demonkin…

I’d try fighting the Demon King, but I haven’t seen him since my first day here, and no one knows where he is.

“Oh!” Mil suddenly remembered that the Demon King wasn’t the only powerful demonkin she’d seen.

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“My…younger brother?”

When she returned to her room that night, Mil called for her attendant, Crowell, and asked her about Graun.

“That’s right. I’d like to take on a strong demonkin.”

The first demonkin she’d examined with *Goddess Eye* had been a demon by the name of Graun Newman. He’d been almost twice Mil’s current level, so fighting him was bound to prove fruitful.

“Take on?”

“Thing is, I wanna get a little stronger to kill some time.” Mil opted not to mention her plan to escape the castle.

Mil figured Crowell would know where to find Graun since she was his sister. But unfortunately…

“Sorry, but my brother serves as His Majesty’s attendant. He

won’t return before His Majesty.”

“Oh, okay… Do you know when they’ll be back?”

“I’m afraid not. His Majesty is difficult to predict. He might not return to the castle for another month.”

“A whole month?! But I don’t know any other way to get stronger… Is there anyone else? Someone stronger than Graun maybe?”

“Well…” Crowell put her hand to her chin. “I suspect Princess Mary is Graun’s equal…”

Mil recognized the name and soon remembered that she was the Demon King’s daughter—the one the lizardman had been looking for in the armory.

“You mean the Demon King’s daughter?”

“You’ve met her?”

“No, but I heard her name from one of the castle’s lizardmen. Is she strong?”

Now Mil really wanted to see her. She wondered what kind of girl she was.

“She’s certainly stronger than the castle’s soldiers, if that’s what you’re hoping for. If you want someone even stronger, I believe the Heavenly Four—the Demon King’s henchmen—are even stronger than my brother.”

“Heavenly Four?” Mil had never heard of them.

“Yes, but once again, they return to the castle only when they desire. As for Princess Mary, I suspect you’ll find she’s too busy to spend time with you.”

“Oh, okay…”

It sounded like there weren’t many strong people in the Demon King’s Castle after all, at least not when the Demon King and his Heavenly Four weren’t around.

Reaching 850 strength would be tough, but 1000 intelligence looked near impossible. Mil sighed. *Maybe I’d better give up on that spell*.

“If you’d like, I could assist you.”

“Huh? You, Crowell?”

“Yes. I’ve learned a few things while undergoing extensive training alongside my brother. I could certainly teach you some demonic swordplay.”

“Do you mean it?!”

“If that’s what you wish.” Crowell bowed.

It was just what Mil needed. While battle practice with the orcs had been useful, there’d been no mention of schools of swordplay—everyone just used their swords in their own way. Learning proper form could be useful for the fights during her upcoming adventure.

“Are you sure it’s okay to teach demonkin techniques to a human like me?”

“My orders from His Majesty were, ‘Offer Princess Mil your assistance if she’s ever in need.’ I’m merely following that order.”

Though Crowell sounded indifferent, Mil felt warmth in her words. She certainly didn’t sound like she was compelled to help because of orders.

“They won’t think you’re a…traitor?”

Crowell laughed. It was the first time Mil had seen her smile. “If I could be deemed a traitor so easily, it would have happened long ago.”

She spoke as though there was some sort of strong relationship of trust between her and the Demon King.

“Huh? What do you—”

Before she could ask any questions, Crowell cut her off. “Shall we begin?”

“We can start right now?!”

“If you wish, Princess Mil. The training hall is conveniently empty at this late hour.”

Secret training by night… Now that sounds exciting!

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```
Name: Crowell / Level: 130
HP: 2480
MP: 750
STR: 1210
DEF: 1589
INT: 1883
DEX: 1670
SPD: 1900
LUK: 550
```

Passive Skills: demonkin, demon eye, mana replenish, one-handed sword proficiency (high), dark magic resistance (max), curse resistance (max), awaken

Active Skills: dark magic, illusion magic, shadow cut, demon slash, laceration, dark cry, dark mist

"She's strong..."

Mil might have gotten stronger, but Crowell was far beyond her.

Some of Crowell's stats were higher than Graun's, and others lower, probably due to differences in their training. Their speed stats in particular were markedly different. Their skills, however, were mostly the same.

"Um, Crowell."

"Yes?" Crowell faced her with a wooden sword in hand. Although she was still dressed as a maid, she moved like an elite fighter.

"How strong are the Heavenly Four?"

"Well, I couldn't beat any of them one-on-one. Though I might have a chance with my brother by my side. That's roughly how strong they are. That said, there are other ways of looking at it..."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing."

Mil figured they had to be a little over level 130. It also sounded like Crowell was one of the most powerful members of the Demon King's forces after the Heavenly Four.

"Let's begin," Crowell said. "Please start by holding your sword however you please."

"Okay!"

"You may make use of any magic you like as well."

"Understood!"

Thus began her late-night training with Crowell.

Mil's aim was to level up until her intelligence reached 1000, but learning sword techniques was a nice bonus.

She was glad she could use magic all the while since it would help her gain more intelligence. Using a sword was bound to improve her strength too.

However, Mil soon regretted not considering her choice of magic more carefully.

“Ugh… Poison? I hadn’t expected you to learn such magic.” Crowell was taken aback.

“Oh, uh, I’m sorry. It just looked kinda useful.”

“It’s such a vulgar form of magic for someone with a pretty face like yours, Princess Mil.”

Mil had managed to score a direct hit with her spell, leveling up as a result, because Crowell was going easy on her.

“Footwork is the most basic part of swordplay. Shift your weight to your toes so that your heel rises just slightly.”

“All right.”

Crowell taught Mil that there was more to swordplay than swinging the weapon. Unlike the contents of spell books, the fruits of combat experience came from practice and couldn’t be learned in the form of a skill.

To Crowell’s surprise, Mil had proven a talented student. “You’re improving awfully quickly for a beginner,” she remarked after giving Mil a little training.

These late night training sessions went on for a week, until finally Crowell and Mil met for one final lesson.

“None of the orcs in this castle could cross swords with you now. That’s how much you’ve grown.”

“Thank you.”

In just one week, Mil had learned all the basics from Crowell, including footwork and the importance of managing one’s distance from an opponent. Mil felt much stronger than when she’d simply been swinging her weapon around with no care for technique.

“I’d expect no less. His Majesty did say that humans learn with incredible speed.”

“Teh heh heh.”

“But why do you want to be so strong? You’re too passionate to be merely killing time.”

“Well… Um…”

So I can handle pursuers when I escape the castle and then fight monsters on my adventure. But Mil couldn’t say that or she’d probably be placed in chains.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sure it’s dull being a

prisoner. I wasn't criticizing you."

"Um..."

It feels like she's looking right through me. Does she know I'm training for my escape?

"In any case, why not finish by learning a demonkin sword skill?" Crowell suggested.

It would be a new active skill. Mil had learned a lot of fundamentals, but no new skills so far.

I can't stop now! "Yes, please!"

"Allow me to demonstrate with a true sword."

Crowell picked up a weapon hanging on the wall of the training hall—a real sword stored in a scabbard. Without drawing the blade, she assumed her stance.

"A draw slash...?" Mil wondered aloud. She'd seen people in the royal capital with skills that allowed them to draw the sword and strike a foe in one fluid movement.

"*Demon slash*."

Crowell drew the sword so quickly that Mil's eyes couldn't follow it. As the blade swept through the air, it created a black shock wave that flew out into the empty space ahead.

The shock wave continued through the air until it struck a straw training dummy, slicing it clean in two. It was as if the sword slash itself had leaped out of the blade. That was the best way Mil could describe it.

"The blade will strike over a wider range as you grow stronger. The trick is to channel your mana into the sword. I expect a talented student like yourself only needs to be shown it once." Crowell passed the sword to Mil.

Mil took it and held the sword within its scabbard by her waist, just as she'd seen Crowell do. "Channel my mana into the sword...then draw?"

"That's right. Please give it a try."

Mil took a breath then visualized her mana flowing into the sword. Then she drew. "*Demon slash*." The sword flew out as she spoke the words, and from the blade came a black shock wave. "I did it!"

But Mil's shock wave, unlike Crowell's, dissipated quickly once it left her blade.

"Aw... I failed."

“You need merely to hone it. Practice every day and I’m sure you’ll be able to hit distant targets within a week.”

“Thank you! But why are you being so good to me? I’m just a prisoner.”

The lizardman had said so. That was how the castle’s residents saw her. She wanted to know why Crowell would go to such lengths to help her.

“I must confess, I too dreamed of adventure before I began my service in this castle.”

“You did?!” *I’d never have guessed!*

“I’d like to help you achieve the same dream. That’s why I’ve taught you the basics.”

“I had no idea.” Mil felt a little embarrassed by the idea of them sharing a dream.

“I was joking,” Crowell added.

“You were?!”

Crowell’s face was so hard to read that Mil couldn’t tell what the truth was. Only one thing was for sure—Crowell had been a big help. She probably had her reasons for doing what she did, and Mil sensed it was better not to pry. But there was one thing that bothered her.

Didn’t Crowell just say that I was dreaming of being an adventurer? Did I imagine that? Oh well.

Not long after it began, Mil’s training with Crowell was over. And now her stats were high enough.

```
Name: Mil / Level: 110
HP: 1235
MP: 977
STR: 1010
DEF: 709
INT: 1042
DEX: 733
SPD: 843
LUK: 205
```

Winning a handful of the practice bouts she’d had with Crowell had really helped Mil level up and reach her goal. Crowell had

been holding back of course, but it still counted as defeating a powerful demonkin.

Some of the stats she wasn't focused on had improved too. Her growth beyond level 65 had been rapid overall. That seemed to be something unique to Mil.

I guess I'm just a late bloomer.

✧✧✧

"And...I've learned it!"

The next day, Mil was back in the library.

The spell took almost two hours to learn, probably because she'd only just barely reached the required stat. There was daylight when she started, but it had faded while she'd been busy. The evening sky visible through the library's skylights was growing dark.

Mil had large-scale elimination magic at her disposal in the form of *Extinction Gate*, and she was eager to give it a whirl.

"What can I use...? What can I use...? Oh, I know."

She remembered the straw training dummies. They'd be ideal for testing the spell's power.

Mil quickly returned the book to the shelf and hurried toward the training hall.

She opened the training hall's door to find the orcs resting, having just finished for the day.

The large orc captain noticed her. "Oh, Princess. You're back again?"

After seeing the orcs almost every day, Mil was beginning to recognize the slight differences in their faces.

"Yes! I wanna try something out."

The orc trembled. "Uh... Th-Thing is, we're already done training for today. Sorry." After taking so many beatings from Mil, he automatically assumed she was about to try some new attack on *him*.

Mil felt a little bad. "No, I wanna use a training dummy."

"A dummy? All right, but what for?"

"I'm gonna practice a spell I've just learned."

The orc looked relieved. "Oh, then go for it. The dummies are all yours."

“Yay! Thanks!”

She went and stood facing a dummy near the edge of the training hall.

The other resting orcs began to notice her.

“Oh, it’s our saint.”

“Hey, heal me up after.”

“What’re you doing, saint?”

Soon there was a gathering around Mil and the training dummy, with her as the center of attention. The orcs had gotten quite fond of her after she’d healed their wounds so many times.

“Now I’m getting nervous…” Mil cleared her throat as she tried to relax, and then she held out her hands. She held an image in her head of a black hole opening up before her. “*Extinction Gate*!”

A small bead appeared at the center of the dummy’s chest. It was blacker than pitch, as if not even light could escape it. A strange sound followed, like a steel blade twisting and snapping, as the dark bead grew to completely subsume the dummy and then some.

“Whoa! What is that?!”

“Is that magic?!”

Some of the orcs sounded scared.

A moment later, the bead shrank to about the size of a fingertip and then vanished completely. Where the dummy had once stood there was nothing left but a circular crater. It was as if the whole region of space had been deleted.

This was the power of *Extinction Gate*. Even Mil herself didn’t know where the dummy had gone.

“Eek…”

“Uh… Wuh…”

Every orc was too stunned to speak. Terror was clear on the faces of everyone in the training hall. This was some strange form of magic that struck fear into the heart of anyone who witnessed it.

“Th-That was…” Mil’s hands were shaking.

She’d stumbled upon magic that could erase anyone and anything, with no regard for their magic resistances. If she used it on a living thing…the consequences didn’t bear thinking about.

The orc captain saw Mil’s reaction and grew concerned. He placed his hand on her shoulder. “I see you’ve learned some

fearsome magic, Princess. But it'll be your choices that decide whether it's a power for good or for evil. You needn't fret. Take it slow, and with practice—"

"This is *awesome*! It's perfect for getting rid of big pieces of trash! Garbage is a solved problem!"

"Uh…?"

There wasn't a hint of fear or caution in Mil's mind. Her dominating thought was, *This is super useful!*

"Aren't you scared, Princess?"

"Huh? Well, I'm sure concerned about how much mana it uses up, but that aside, I can do all kinds of stuff with this! Teh heh heh. I've learned the most useful spell *ever*." An angelic smile graced Mil's face.

"Sh-She's smiling."

The smiles of the orcs around her, however, were more like grimaces.

"I'm starting to think she's the devil."

"If she's okay with it, then everything's fine…I guess?"

Mil turned to the captain. "Thanks, Mr. Orc! I'll be back if I want to test anything else!" Then she waved goodbye and dashed out of the training hall.

Speaking in unison, all the orcs solemnly agreed, "We've raised our saint into a monster…"

Mil had grown far stronger than any of them.

✧✧✧

"I'm back, Mr. Treasure Vault."

She'd returned to the same room she'd visited many times before. She slowly opened the old wooden door and stepped inside. Next, she opened the door to the secret room and headed farther in.

"Yep, yep. All still here."

The magic sword, Ragnarok, was still on the wall where she'd left it.

Mil picked it up and drew it from its scabbard.

It wasn't heavy anymore. What had once felt like a lead weight was now light as a feather. Even an ordinary longsword would have had more heft.

“I wonder if there’s anything else in here I should take—I mean, borrow.”

She’d been so fixated on this sword that she hadn’t examined the other enchanted items in the room. She decided to take a quick look around for anything that might prove useful.

“Hm? What’s this thing?”

There was a bag on the wall designed to be worn over one shoulder. It looked like a perfectly ordinary cloth bag, but if it was hanging up in this treasure vault, it had to be special somehow.

She examined it with *Goddess Eye*.

```
Accessory: Dimensional Bag
Required Stats: none
Description: Contains a subspace within that
drastically increases capacity.
```

Although it looked like a small shoulder bag, Mil could see plenty of empty space inside.

“I had no idea there were items like this.”

With this bag, she’d be able to pick up all the enchanted items she wanted.

“Maybe I can take everything in here.”

The glass case beside her was filled with bracelets, anklets, and broaches, but her bag was big enough to hold them all

“Hm? How does this case open?”

There was a keyhole, but she couldn’t see any keys. She tried searching for it among the swords on the wall and behind a suit of armor, and then…

“Oops!”

Crash!

She’d accidentally knocked over the armor, smashing open the glass case.

“Well, if it’s broken, I might as well empty it.”

Anyone watching her stuff all the items into the bag might have mistaken her for a thief.

“And then for armor…this should do it.”

Besides the fallen suit of armor, there was also a black set of light armor. It was lightweight and would let her move freely.

This was the best choice for someone with a long journey ahead. She certainly didn't want to travel in anything heavy. She'd get tired.

She put the armor in the bag with the rest. A set of armor wouldn't normally have fit, but the bag held it no problem, with plenty of room to spare.

Once she was done collecting enchanted items and equipment she sighed. "Whew. I think that does it."

She'd raised her level, gained a weapon, and learned forbidden magic. She was all set for her adventure.

✧✧✧

The next morning, Mil was supposed to head for the throne room and help demonkin by examining them with *Goddess Eye* and awakening their skills with *Blessings of the Goddess*. But she had other plans.

She'd chosen clothes that made for easy movement along with a short skirt. She was carrying Ragnarok at her waist, slung the bag over her shoulder, and wearing the light armor she'd taken from the treasure vault. She was ready to head out.

Mil closed the door to her room, turned to face it, and put her hands together in prayer. "Thank you for looking after me, but it's time for me to leave the castle."

She hadn't told anyone that she was planning to leave. She knew they'd object.

"All right…" Mil turned around and noticed a cloth bag lying in the middle of the corridor. "Huh?"

What's that doing there? When she picked it up, a letter fell to the floor.

She picked it up and read it.

Dear Princess Mil,
If you happen to go out adventuring, you'll need these things in the outside world.
If you don't know where to go, rely on the compass to guide you east. On the way, you'll find several villages and a town full of humans. It's a long way

to go, but travel far enough east and you'll reach the royal capital. Our time together was brief, but I'm glad to have met you. Good luck out there.
P.S. I'm not used to using human writing. I hope this letter was readable.
Yours,
Crowell

Mil looked in the bag and found a compass, three days worth of food, a lantern, and a map of the region. Only now did she realize that she'd been overly focused on combat when planning her trip. Adventurers had to consider their own well-being too.

"Food could be—oh."

There was also a plant encyclopedia. It explained which wild plants and mushrooms were edible. She was glad to have it. She'd probably need it while traveling through the forests near the castle.

"Thank you. I'll make good use of it all."

So Crowell really did know my secret.

Perhaps Crowell had heard her whispering "I wanna go adventuring" to herself when she'd been alone in her room. She must have guessed that Mil would try to leave eventually. Mil was grateful that Crowell had given her this final bit of help despite being part of the Demon King's forces.

She put all of the supplies into her dimensional bag and headed for the castle gate.

But where am I gonna go?

She hadn't thought about what to do once she was outside the castle. Crowell's mention of a town to the east was the closest thing she had to a plan.

"Father and everyone back home must be worried…"

A search party must have been dispatched in the month since she'd left home. *Knowing father, he's probably worried sick.*

"But I can still enjoy my adventure, right?"

I feel bad for father, but I wanna enjoy myself out there. I'll still make the royal capital my goal, rather than wandering aimlessly. I'll just have some fun along the way!

Her destination was set. With no idea what sort of journey

awaited her, she couldn't help but feel anxious, but the thought of adventure stirred her heart.

She trembled with excitement as she walked toward the castle's gate. A red carpet led the way ahead through a corridor flanked by demonic statues. It wasn't totally unlike the throne room. Far ahead was a towering pair of double doors that served as the main gate. Once she got beyond it, she'd be on the open plains that surrounded the castle.

As she neared the gate, full of hope, she realized there was a problem. "I didn't think about the guards…"

Two giants were standing at either side of the gate. Each was wearing a full set of golden plate armor and holding a massive halberd. They were even bigger than orcs. They looked big enough to effortlessly crush a small human like Mil in one hand.

But how strong are they? she wondered.

Mil hid behind a demonic statue and extended a palm toward one of the giants.

```
Name: Gregoria / Level: 75
HP: 2800
MP: 155
STR: 390
DEF: 422
INT: 126
DEX: 189
SPD: 59
LUK: 23
```

"Oh?"

He had a lot of HP, but he was only level 75.

Mil checked the second giant and found he was no stronger than the first.

Other than their strength and defense, each giant had surprisingly low stats for level 75. They had a few skills, but neither could use magic, limiting them to physical attacks.

"Could I actually beat them?"

It looked like she could force her way through, but just to be sure, she used a spell she'd learned in the library—*overload*—to

temporarily increase her damage output. Now she felt strong enough to break through the wall with a single punch.

She gulped and then slowly stepped out in front of the two giants.

“Stop right there! Who are you?”

“Are you the human princess? Why have you come to our gate?”

The two giants crossed their halberds, blocking Mil’s path.

“Um… I was thinking it’s about time I went home.”

“We were ordered to let no one through.”

“You can’t pass, whatever your reason.”

Well, that’s pretty much what I’d expect a guard to say. It would have been nice if they’d let me walk by, but oh well.

“Then I’ll have to force my way through… Is that all right?”

The guards both laughed aloud under their metal visors.

“A small thing like you?”

“Defeat us? I’d like to see it. You don’t—”

Before they could finish mocking her, the sound of scraping stone stopped them.

“Huh?!” they both cried.

“Ngh… Hup.” Mil lifted the demonic statue beside her into the air. From the giant’s perspective, she was a weak young girl lifting a solid stone statue twice her height.

“I’m gonna throw it. Please move aside so you don’t get hurt. Yah!” She sent the statue flying at the gate.

“Whoa!” cried the giants as they moved out of the way.

The statue smashed into one of the doors, and cracks ran through the wood.

“Hup.” Mil picked up the next demonic statue and threw it with another “Yah!”

Once again, the giants cried “Whoa!” and dodged out of the way.

This time the statue hit the stone wall, creating a large hole.

“This princess… She’s no weakling!”

“We’ll have to stop her with all our strength.”

Before Mil could throw another statue, a giant swung his halberd at Mil with all his might.

Clap!

“Huh?”

Mil effortlessly caught a halberd blade between her hands and

threw it aside with a “hup!” along with the giant holding it.

“Whoaaa?!”

The giant crashed into another demonic statue, rolled across the floor, and was left lying on his back. He wasn’t dead, but he wasn’t moving.

Mil’s attention then turned to the other giant.

He was trembling but he yelled, “You won’t get away with this!” before bravely swinging his halberd at Mil.

The result was the same as before. Mil caught his halberd and this time sent him to the ground with an overhead throw.

“Guh!” Much like the first giant, the second was laid out on the ground, completely still, but he wasn’t totally out of HP.

“Huh? Those giants were lighter than I expected.”

Both giants had been knocked to the ground by the same small girl, leaving no doubt as to who was stronger.

“A-Are all humans…this strong…?”

“Our gate hasn’t been breached in over a hundred years…”

Mil felt a little guilty, but her desire for adventure was irresistible. She bowed her head as an apology, then headed for the castle gate.

“All right! Now a new adventure can—”

“I can’t let this human make fools of us like this!”

Mil was interrupted by a girl’s voice from behind, and immediately she sensed danger. She reacted quickly by leaping to the side.

An instant later, a sharp blade cut through the ground where she’d been standing, leaving a long fissure running along the red carpet, all the way to the castle gate.

“You gave me a real fright!” Mil said as she turned around.

A slender girl was standing between Mil and the two fallen giants. But she wasn’t human. There were two small, black wings on her back, and horns on her head that curled backward. She was a demon, just like the Demon King and Crowell.

Her face was beautiful and her skin fair, but her eyes were cold.

What stood out above all else was the huge scythe she carried —it was bigger than she was. It looked ill-omened, like the tool wielded by the death gods of legend.



The demon girl didn't look friendly. Her eyes remained fixed on Mil, like she was sizing up her target.

Mil quickly raised her hand to use *Goddess Eye*.

```
Name: Mary / Level: 108
HP: 1750
MP: 1093
STR: 880
DEF: 755
INT: 889
DEX: 1203
SPD: 982
LUK: 259

Passive Skills: demonkin, demon eye, mana replenish, night vision, dark magic resistance (max), fire magic resistance (high), ice magic resistance (high), lightning magic resistance (high), one-handed sword proficiency (mid), great scythe proficiency (high)

Active Skills: dark magic, death scythe, cross wave, scythe hurricane, rock eibra, dark hit
```

"Mary?"

The name was familiar. Perhaps, Mil wondered, this girl was the Demon King's daughter.

Whoever she was, she was a strong opponent with an impressive list of passive skills. *Night vision* in particular sounded really handy for fighting at night. Her stats were also far above almost everyone else in the Demon King's forces. She was comparable to Graun of the royal guard.

"Mil Arphilia, is it? Father mentioned you."

"Father?"

"You've met him, I'm sure. He's the one who brought you here."

"Ahh."

That confirmed it. This was the princess the lizardman had

mentioned when she'd visited the armory.

The pair of horns on her head and demonic wings on her back weren't as big as those of the Demon King, but she certainly shared the same features. But what really mattered was how cute she was.

The demon girl was beautiful, albeit still slightly babyfaced. She had the body of a fully grown woman, with breasts far bigger than Mil's and a lean build that was obvious even through her clothes.

"Father would be so sad if you disappeared. I can't let you go." Mary brandished her scythe.

Mil looked at the weapon with great interest. She'd never seen anything like it. But as the scythe started spinning Mil had to stop staring, and drew the magic sword at her waist.

"All I know is that I wanna go adventuring. I can't stand being here anymore."

"Then you'll have to go through me!" the demonkin princess shouted as she began running at Mil.

She's fast!

Mary had closed the distance in a mere few steps, barely giving Mil enough time to raise her sword. The sound of clashing metal rang in the air as their blades met and ground against each other.

But it didn't end with that one attack. Mil had to deal with a shower of blows. She managed to block each swing as Mary tried a multitude of different attacks, but only just.

If she was the Demon King's daughter, then it stood to reason that she'd be stronger than any orc or giant. Mil was confirming that firsthand.

"Yah!" Seizing an opening, Mil knocked the scythe aside and backed off a good distance. Then she sheathed her sword and adopted a peculiar stance.

"Huh...?" The Demon King's daughter froze for a moment.

Now's my chance!

"*Demon slash!*" Mil drew the sword from its scabbard, sending a black shock wave flying ahead.

"Hngh!" The Demon King's daughter met the attack with her scythe, parrying it without much effort. Once redirected, the airborne slash cut a nearby demonic statue in two.

"Wow! Wow!" Mil began jumping up and down on the spot. "I did a perfect *demon slash* that time, but you still parried it no

problem!”

“How…? Where’d you learn it? It’s a demonkin technique.”

“Hm? Crowell taught me. And a lot more swordplay besides.”

“Crowell?!” Mary’s eyes went wide with shock.

What’s so surprising about that?

The Demon King’s daughter lowered her gaze and thought for a while. “Don’t tell me Crowell already knows you’re planning to leave?”

“She knows. She even gave me supplies for my adventure.” She hadn’t handed them over to Mil personally, but it amounted to tacit approval.

The Demon King’s daughter fell to even deeper contemplation. Then she lowered the scythe. “So you really wanna go home?” she asked. Her willingness to fight had vanished.

Mil shook her head. “Truth is, I’ve seen a lot of adventurers back in the royal capital. I always wanted to do some adventuring of my own.”

The Demon King’s daughter listened quietly as Mil continued.

“But I’m a princess… I couldn’t just do whatever I wanted. Being brought to the Demon King’s Castle is like an opportunity for me.”

“An opportunity?”

“Yep! An opportunity for adventure! I will head back to the royal capital since I know my father’s worried, but I’m planning to enjoy the journey first!”

To Mil, the promise of adventure was everything. She’d held back her curiosity all this time, and she could resist it no longer.

“So it’s the same for humans.” The Demon King’s daughter laughed softly.

Mil didn’t understand it, but she sensed something self-deprecating in her laugh.

“All right,” Mary continued. “I get it. Maybe it’s Crowell’s way of showing me that there’s more than one way to live.”

“What do you—?”

Before Mil could ask her to explain, the Demon King’s daughter said, “I’m Mary Garland. The Demon King’s daughter. I doubt we’ll meet again, but take care on the road.”

“Oh. Um, I’m Mil Arphilia, princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom,” she replied politely. She’d heard Mary’s name enough times that it didn’t feel like their first meeting.

“I know,” Mary laughed. The coldness in her eyes was completely gone now.

What if… Mil wondered. A concern she’d long held came back to her—the thought that adventuring alone might be lonely.

“Um! Would you like to come with me…?” Mil asked.

“Me?” For a moment Mary was stunned, but she soon shook her head. “I can’t. I’m the Demon King’s daughter. Father would never let me go traveling. Especially not with a human.”

“Oh…”

That much should have been obvious. They’d only just met. Of course Mary wasn’t going to agree to join Mil on a long journey.

“You should go,” Mary said. “Before I change my mind.”

“Aww. Well, I’ll be seeing you! Thanks for letting me go!” Mil hurried toward the castle gate.

Mil stopped for a moment to gather her courage. Her preparations were complete. She’d gained the strength to face what lay outside, and she’d learned a bunch of forbidden spells too!

“Here goes…” *My adventure…starts here!*

Mil reached out for the towering doors.

“Heh heh heh.” Behind her she heard bitter laughter from Mary.

“What is it?”

“Heh heh heh… Sorry. I never thought the first human to lay a hand on these doors would reach it from *inside* the castle. It’s funny—you’re inside and breaking out.”

“Is it?” Mil didn’t get why that was funny, but she was no expert on demonkin humor.

“Be proud. You may be the first human in all of history to make it back alive from the Demon King’s Castle.”

“Thanks. See you.”

Mil put her hand on the heavy door and gave it a firm push. The door began to open loudly.

“Wow…”

With the door fully open, she could see that the castle was atop a hill. A drawbridge lay ahead, and farther down the hill were the ramparts that surrounded the castle. She still had some way to walk before she was truly outside the castle grounds, but she was outside nonetheless.

She took in the view from the hilltop. Ahead of her were plains,

stretching out as far as she could see.

Her expectations had reached a new high.

“Here I go! I’m gonna find those dragons and all kinds of new monsters!”

Mil rushed toward the castle gates.

Chapter 2: Mil’s First Friend!

“Ohh! It’s a wolf!”

After departing the Demon King’s Castle, Mil had set off east, and it wasn’t long before she reached a lush forest beneath a blue sky. According to Crowell’s map, this forest was infamous among demonkin for the ferocious monsters lurking within.

The forest quickly lived up to its reputation when she was surrounded by creatures lurking in the undergrowth. She recognized them as monsters called greatwolves. To them, it must have looked like a tasty treat had wandered into their backyard.

“Grarr!” One of the greatwolves lunged at Mil.

Since she had no time to prepare herself, the girl was knocked to the ground. The creature showed no mercy, going straight for her throat with its sharp fangs.

“*Nether hand*.”

Mil cast the spell as she fell, summoning translucent black hands from the ground around her to ensnare the greatwolf that just her pinned down. However, the grip of the dark hands wasn’t enough to stop the wolf’s fangs from reaching Mil’s neck.

“Ah ha ha!” Mil laughed. “That tickles.”

But the fangs couldn’t so much as pierce her skin.

Nether hand was a spell that created ghostly hands around the caster. Rather than simply immobilizing a target, they sapped the strength of any creature they touched.

“Grrhh!”

Several more greatwolves lunged at Mil. Now there were wolves biting her arms, abdomen, and legs, each one gripped by a dark hand.

“I count five of you! Maybe I’ll take one of you with me. But who should I pick…?”

Mil stroked one of the greatwolves under its chin. The stiff bristles of its fur coiled around her finger tips. The greatwolf was a cute creature in spite of its angry-looking face, but its breath didn’t smell too good.

“*Slave chain!*”

This was a forbidden dark magic spell for capturing a target. Several black orbs appeared in the sky around Mil, and from these sprang several thick chains.

“Grroh?!”

The chains wrapped around each of the wolves, binding them tightly.

“Got you.” Mil climbed to her feet, finally free. “Yay. I’m gonna have so many friends!”

“Grawwhn…” Mil’s smile must have been a terrifying sight for the greatwolves. Faced with an overwhelming foe in command of forbidden magic, they trembled like mere puppies.

“Let’s start by naming you all. You can be Doggy, and you—ahh!”

Just as she’d started naming the wolves, Mil was struck by a gust of wind.

Mil crouched low to the ground in an attempt to stay on her feet as she heard tree branches breaking all around her. It felt like she was enduring an explosive blast.

Mil’s spell weakened while she was distracted, giving the greatwolves a chance to slip free of the magic chains and run off yelping.

“Aww, they’re gone. I didn’t even get to teach them to sit.”

But what was that gust of wind? Mil looked at the sky through the gaps in the trees.

“Grrrooooooh!” A great howl seemed to shake the air around her. The source was a massive red dragon flying overhead.

“A fire-breathing dragon as big as a mountain?!”

Mil completely forgot about the greatwolves.

“No! Luludra! Wait up!”

Having already decided on its name, Mil kept her eyes on the dragon in the sky as she ran after it.

“Oh?”

Something seemed to grab the dragon’s attention, and then it descended from its place high in the air.

Could this be my chance?! Mil ran after it, full of excitement.

“Eeek! A d-d-dragon?!” She heard someone cry.

Mil didn’t know whether the voice belonged to a human or a demonkin, but either way, the dragon had scared someone.

“Oh no! I’ll have to train it!”

Mil wasn't going to let her dragon attack people. She was determined to teach it how to behave before it came home with her.

She quickly made her way through the trees and then stepped out onto a road wide enough for a horse and carriage. In the center of the road, a cowering human was staring up at the sky. He was a burly merchant with heavy luggage on his back.

"Are you all right?!" Mil asked.

"L-Look! Up there! A d-dragon!" he cried with a trembling voice.

Mil stood in front of the merchant with her sword drawn. "It's all right! Hide someplace nearby."

The merchant followed Mil's advice and hid himself in the undergrowth by the roadside.

The dragon was slowly descending, unleashing a powerful gust of wind at Mil each time it beat its massive wings. Its scales were red, there were sharp claws on each of its feet, and a pair of large horns extended from its head. Its keen eyes were soon fixed on Mil.

"It's huge. I didn't think its stomach would be so big and round."

"Graaah!" With a roar, it swooped down at Mil from the air.

Mil was ready for it. "*Dark plasma!*"

A lightning bolt shot from her outstretched hand. This forbidden torture spell created plasma bolts that would wrap around a target and cause it continuous pain.

"Grrroooh!" Caught in Mil's electric net, the dragon howled in agony.

"It's just a little lesson for you. *Poison mist!*"

Mil's plan was to restrict the dragon's movement by covering the area around it in poison. The dragon crashed to the ground with a great thud, landing in the middle of the mist and sending up a cloud of dirt and gravel.

"Now to bind it with *slave chain*. I'd better give it a collar too."

Mil was delighted by the idea of having a dragon for a pet.

"Graaoh!"

"Ahh!"

With a great howl, the dragon broke free of the net of lightning. The plasma spell wasn't powerful enough to keep the dragon contained. The poison mist helped a little, but that hadn't sapped the dragon of its strength either.

Mil was left with just one option. She returned her sword to its scabbard and assumed her stance. “Yah!”

Her sword whooshed through the air, unleashing a demon slash. Though Mil made sure not to attack with all of her power.

“Graah!”

“Yah!”

“Grr!”

“Yahh!”

“Grraaaoooh!”

She struck the dragon repeatedly with black shock waves, while taking care to hurt it as little as possible.

This ought to weaken it.

“Graaaoh!” With another great howl, the dragon took to the air.

“Aah! No, wait!”

The effect of the poison mist hadn’t been enough. It had been a mistake to hold back against a dragon.

The dragon turned its back to Mil and quickly disappeared into the distant sky.

“Aww. It’s gone. I can’t believe how tough it was. Wish I could’ve rode on its back.”

If only she could fly with magic, she’d have chased after it, but sadly, there’d been no such spells in the castle library. Mil made a mental note to learn a flying spell the moment she found one.

“Y-Young lady…?” The merchant emerged from his hiding place in the undergrowth.

“Oh, is everything all right? You’re not hurt?”

The merchant looked surprised to see Mil approaching. So surprised that he backed off a few steps. “N-Not at all! I’m fine!”

“Hm?”

The merchant looked afraid for some reason. *Oh, but of course. Luludra must have scared him.* Mil accepted that as an explanation. She had no idea how the sight of her tormenting the dragon with a smile on her face had looked from his point of view.

“Y-You’re strong, young lady… Are you an adventurer?”

“An…adventurer…? Uh heh heh, heh heh heh.”

She must have looked the part, with a bag over her shoulder, light armor, and a sword, just like any other adventurer.

“Well…”

Mil’s bashful smile was making the merchant even more

nervous. Mil wasn't sure why.

"Teh heh heh... Yep, I'm an adventurer! What about you, mister?"

Mil was assuming he was a merchant, but there was still a chance he was an adventurer too.

"I'm a merchant. I'm planning to sell my goods at a small village that's supposedly somewhere up ahead. I never expected there'd be a dragon flying around... I should've done a little more research before heading out."

"A village?! Could you guide me to it?"

"Oh, no problem. It's a relief to meet a strong adventurer like you along the road. I should be the one asking for help."

"Yay!" *Now I feel like a real adventurer!*

Mil had heard from the adventurers in the royal capital that they often met travelers on the road, and sometimes accepted requests to aid them. Experiencing it for herself gave her butterflies in her stomach.

"Y-Young lady? Are you all right?" the merchant asked as Mil was savoring the sensation.

"Let's get moving. Is this the right way?"

"Yes, that's— Please don't run!"

I wanna see this village! was the thought driving Mil onward as she quickened her pace.

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"I wish I could've petted Grizzy."

The large bear briefly named Grizzy, the wolves she'd yet to name, and all of the other creatures she'd encountered along the way had escaped her. Mil was going to have to practice a little more if she wanted to use her magic to discipline wild monsters.

"Haah, haah..." the merchant panted. "Young lady, you sure are full of energy... Though I suppose that's what got us here safely."

Deep within the forest, far from the main roads, laid a village. It was a small settlement with a population of around forty or fifty.

The path into the village led to a well in the square at its center where several elderly women had gathered to talk.

Once they'd entered the square, the merchant bowed to Mil. "Well, young lady, now that we're here, I've got trading to do.

Thanks for escorting me. I couldn't have made it without you."

"It was nothing! I hope we'll meet again sometime!" Mil waved goodbye as the merchant walked away.

Her next task was to find an inn. Assuming there was one. Not many adventurers would pass through a small village like this. But she wouldn't pass up the chance to look around.

"Dragon!"

Clang clang clang! A ringing sound echoed through the square as a young man sounded the alarm.

"A dragon? It must be the same one!"

If the red dragon that had escaped her before was in the village, it meant she'd have another chance to ride it. Except, she had to worry about the safety of the village first. A dragon could reduce this place to ruins in no time. *I've got to save them.*

Mil ran toward the young man sounding the alarm. "Where is it?" she asked him.

"Right there! Look! You can see it through the trees!"

Mil looked where he was pointing and saw the dragon looking down on the village from above. It really was the same one as before, and it was already making its descent.

As much as Mil wanted to discipline the dragon like a pet, she had to make sure she didn't cause any damage.

She reached for her sword. "Looks like I'll have to go easy on it again."

"Stand back, young lady."

Villagers carrying hoes and sickles were gathering in the square from all directions. It was as if they were planning to fight, but a few farmers wearing straw hats and gloves tattered from farmwork had no chance. They clearly weren't equipped for combat.

"Graaah!" the dragon roared as it plunged toward the village square.

The villagers reacted by holding up their hoes and sickles. Then their tools began shining brightly.

"Huh?"

With each swing of their tools, lightning, ice, or flames shot out at the dragon.

"Grrohhh?!"

The dragon recoiled from the unexpected barrage of ranged

attacks. The villagers' tools turned out to have powerful enchantments, and each one was unleashing spells at the dragon.

But the dragon wasn't driven off so easily, growling through gritted teeth. It came close once more, ignoring the spells striking it.

"Whoa!"

"Uuugh."

A beat of its enormous wings was enough to knock several people off their feet, and then a lash of its claws knocked down several more who couldn't block the swipe with their hoes.

The villagers might have been experienced fighters, but Mil feared they wouldn't survive the battle.

Mil crouched down and placed both hands against the ground. "*Hell's end ball!*" At her command, several black orbs rose from the ground, then flew for the dragon.

"Grrohh! Grraaaahh!"

Hell's end ball was a forbidden spell that created orbs of powerful acid. Any human would have dissolved without a trace upon touching one of them, but the dragon merely felt a burning sensation thanks to its high magic resistance. Fortunately, it was still too much for the dragon to bear. It howled and then rose back into the air before flying off once more.

"Hey! Is everyone all right?!"

More villagers carrying hoes, sickles, and pitchforks came running out from the depths of the village. There'd been reinforcements waiting all along.

"Ouch... Yup, the young lady here drove it off."

"That was really something, young lady... Urgh."

Although none of the farmers hit by the dragon were fatally wounded, some looked like they'd need a few days to recover.

"Are you all right?" Mil asked. "*Heal*."

It was just elementary healing magic, but it was enough to fix a minor wound.

"Oh, wow. I'm better already," said a farmer with renewed energy. His wounds were closing up rapidly where Mil touched them.

"That's some power you've got, young lady. Mind patching me up next?"

"And me too, if you don't mind."

“Sure, I’ll be right with you.”

Mil went to each of the people on the ground. Since she had so much more MP than she used to, she got them all back on their feet without breaking a sweat.

“Thanks a bunch. You’re a real saint.”

“Never thought I’d see a saint with black magic.”

“Many thanks. Many thanks.”

Some of them acted like she was worthy of worship, but at least they were lively.

“Ah… You must be the adventurer who drove away the dragon.” An aged man emerged from the village, using a staff to walk. He looked like the village elder.

“That’s right… I’m Mil Arphilia.”

Oops, she thought no sooner than she’d introduced herself. The name Arphilia was a name used by royalty. In the Holy Arphil Kingdom, it was instantly recognizable.

“I hope you won’t mind me calling you Mil. I’m the village elder, Graham. You’d be welcome in my home if it’s good enough for you. I can’t offer much in the way of hospitality, but I’d like to thank you somehow.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. If you haven’t chosen an inn already, let me give you a room for the night.”

This is better luck than I could’ve hoped for! I’d better take up his offer… But if he didn’t react to the name Arphilia, I must be real far from the royal capital…

“Thank you!” Mil followed after the village elder, overjoyed.

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“Pardon the intrusion…”

“Come now. It’s not much, but please make yourself at home.” The village elder urged Mil to enter the house.

The unique scent of wood filled her nose. Mil had never been able to experience it anywhere inside a stone castle. It made her want to inhale deeply, over and over.

The entrance led straight into a dining room, where there was a wooden table and chairs in the middle of the floor, and a pot on a stove in the corner.

“I didn’t tell you about my daughter, did I…? I’ll introduce you to her.” The village elder turned to face a door at the end of a corridor and called out, “Yulia!”

A voice behind the door replied, “C-Coming!”

Mil heard slippers against the floor, and then the door opened.

“D-Dad, welcome ho—ahh!” No sooner than she’d emerged from the room, the girl tripped over her own feet and landed spectacularly on her face.

Mil hurried over to her. “Are you all right?”

“Uh, ah… I’m f-fine… Thank you.” The girl sat up but remained on the floor.

She was small. Smaller than Mil even. She looked about ten years old. She was wearing casual clothes and a hood over her head. Mil couldn’t see her face clearly, but she did see a little silver hair that curled slightly near the tips.

When the girl—Yulia—noticed Mil, she gripped her hood tight and pulled it down to cover her eyes. “Are you a g-guest?” Yulia was trembling and clearly wary.

She’s…so cute. Yulia was so much like a small animal that Mil just wanted to hug her tight. *If I had a little sister, I’d want one just like her*.

“Ha ha,” the village elder laughed. “You can relax, Yulia. This is Mil, an adventurer. She drove a dragon away from the village just now.”

“A d-dragon…?” Yulia looked back and forth between Mil and the village elder.

“I thought she might stay the night. Say hello, Yulia.”

“O-Oh…” Yulia climbed to her feet with her legs still trembling then quickly bowed. “N-Nice to meet you… I’m Y-Yulia Neumann.”

She looked even cuter now that Mil could see her round, childish face and big blue eyes inside the hood.

Unable to resist any longer, grabbed Yulia’s hand and squeezed it tight. “Nice to meet you! I’m Mil Arphilia! A novice—”

“Aaahhh!”

Yulia screamed and shook her hand free before running down the corridor and back into her room. A moment later the door opened very slightly and Yulia peeked out. She was clearly terrified, but Mil likened her to a kitten, and wasn’t bothered by being rejected in the slightest.

She's so cute I wanna eat her up!

"I'm sorry, Mil. Whenever my daughter meets someone new, she gets—"

"Don't be sorry! I think it's really cute!"

Mil was already enamored with Yulia and could barely contain herself. She looked down the corridor again and saw that the door had since closed, as if Yulia feared Mil might enter the room.

"I just wish I could talk to her more."

"I'll introduce you to her again when we have dinner. Now, please, take a seat over here."

Mil sat on a chair made of oak that creaked under her weight.

Now that she thought about it, Mil realized that the village elder, Graham, and his daughter, Yulia, were a little far apart in terms of age. Mil would much sooner believe Yulia was his granddaughter.

"You're still thinking about my daughter?"

Mil hadn't realized that she was sneaking glances down the corridor often enough for the village elder to notice.

"No... I mean, yes." Mil had just barely stopped herself from asking about Yulia's age.

The village elder seemed to guess what was on Mil's mind. He placed two cups of tea down on the table then sat facing Mil. "The truth is, she's not my real daughter."

"What?"

"It all happened a little over ten years ago. A baby was abandoned by the entrance to the village. No one knew where she'd come from, and she was wrapped in a type of cloth we never see around here. Everyone agreed that an adventurer must have abandoned her."

"Does Yulia know...?"

The village elder slowly shook his head. "I've never told her, though she might have figured some of it out for herself. We couldn't just abandon her, and my wife passed before we could have children of our own, so I decided to raise her myself."

Mil felt a little down knowing there were adventurers who'd do such a thing.

"And you saw the villagers fighting earlier, didn't you?" the village elder asked.

"Yes! They put up a good fight against that dragon!"

“Do you remember what sort of weapons they used?”

“Hoes and sickles… Oh, they had lightning and fire enchantments on them.”

Enchantments strong enough to hurt a dragon through its scales, no less. A few of the villagers might have been hurt, but they’d probably have been able to drive away the dragon even if Mil hadn’t been there.

“Yulia enchanted those tools.”

“What?! That’s amazing.”

“It turned out she had a talent for magic. She’d buy spell books from the occasional visiting merchant and master each spell within a day. That’s how she learned to create enchantments.”

“She learned it all by herself?! Wow!”

“Indeed. We see lots of dangerous monsters around here. It must be because the Demon King’s Castle is so close. We all band together to defend the village each time, and Yulia’s help makes it a lot easier.”

A few rare adventurers with a skill known as *magic talent* could learn spells ten times more quickly than any ordinary person, and with half the usual intelligence requirement. Yulia was probably one such person.

If she can make powerful enchantments like those, her level must be pretty high. Mil couldn’t help but think, *What if…?*

“Could you give me a moment?” Mil extended a hand toward the village elder and used *Goddess Eye*.

“What is it?” he asked.

The window that appeared before Mil declared the elder’s level to be 56, and his stats were a match for any first-rate adventurer.

“I knew it…”

Weak villagers wouldn’t be able to face dragons or defend the village from dangerous monsters. Mil assumed they were all about as strong as the village elder.

“It’s been a whole year since we last saw a dragon. There are fewer youngsters here by the day, and those who’ve stuck around often can’t fight. Driving off dragons is still hard work.”

They might have struggled to fight back, but the village elder was talking about repelling dragons like it was another regular chore. Even first-rate adventurers couldn’t deal with dragons that easily. It was as though villagers got stronger the closer their

village was to the Demon King's Castle.

But the number of villagers was dwindling as the years went on, with Yulia's enchantments becoming necessary to pick up the slack.

There was a knock at the door to the house.

"Who's there?" the village elder called out.

"Sorry to interrupt," said the young man who entered. "I've brought some farming tools with worn out enchantments, sir."

"Ah. More tools for Yulia? Thank you."

"I hope she's not overworking herself. I'll leave them with you." The young man left the tools near the entrance then bowed before leaving.

"Worn out enchantments?" Mil didn't know what that meant.

"That's right," the village elder said. "Yulia's powers aren't infinite. The enchantments wear off after a few uses. But she's always kind enough to reapply them."

Helpful as Yulia's enchantments were, she had her work cut out for her maintaining the village's defenses.

"Oh, I'd better get back to making dinner," the village elder said. "Mil, I'll show you to your room and you can rest there until it's ready."

"All right. Thank you."

I hope I'll get to talk to Yulia again.

The village elder had said she'd reintroduce them during dinner.

I'll make sure not to scare her next time!

While she waited, Mil spent the time running through mental simulations of her next conversation with Yulia.

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When dinner was ready, the village elder called Mil into the dining room. The pot had been moved from stove to table, filled with cream stew. Mil heard her own stomach rumble the moment she caught the sweet scent of it.

"Please take a seat," the village elder urged.

Only now did Mil realize that she'd been so distracted by wolves and dragons in the forest that she'd forgotten to eat at all.

"I'll call for Yulia," the village elder said. But then he realized there was no need. "Oh, Yulia, you're here already."

Mil turned and saw Yulia looking her way. Yulia was pressed against the wall of the corridor as if trying to hide herself, and her hood was so low that her expression wasn't visible.

"Um..." It sounded like Yulia was trying hard to speak up. "S-sorry...about earlier..."

Earlier? It took Mil a moment to realize what Yulia meant. *Oh, she's talking about when she ran to her room. She's even cute when apologizing!*

"Don't be! It's fine. I just wanna hear more about you."

"O-Okay..."

Just when Yulia was finally about to reach the table, she cried and tripped again. She'd once more shown how clumsy she could be.

"Ha ha ha. Are you all right?" the village elder asked from where he sat.

Yulia quickly got back up and took a seat beside him. When she lowered her hood, she revealed slightly curled silver hair so beautiful that Mil couldn't help but fall for her.

Mil's gaze made Yulia grow wary. "Wh-What is it?"

"Oh, sorry. Do you like magic, Yulia?"

"Yes. I always enjoy learning things that I didn't know. I tend to forget the time while reading spell books."

Mil was a little surprised to hear Yulia suddenly expressing herself clearly. It seemed she was the type who opens up when it's about their favorite topics.

"Wh-Why did you come to our village, Mil? You don't look like a merchant."

"Me? I've just started adventuring. A merchant I met on the road told me about this village."

"That's what I thought. I've never met an adventurer. Where are you from? If you just started, you must be from a nearby town."

Mil wasn't sure how to answer Yulia's questions, but she certainly didn't want to lie to her. More times than she could count, her father had told her that a princess should always be honest. Since she had nothing to hide, she answered truthfully.

"Actually, I'm not from around here at all. I escaped from the Demon King's Castle."

Yulia's eyes went wide with surprise. "What? Does that mean you're a...demonkin?"

The village elder froze just as he was about to put his spoon in his mouth.

“No, no. I’m a human the Demon King abducted. I decided to sneak out and go adventuring after being kept in his castle for a month.”

“He abducted you…? I had no idea the Demon King abducted people.”

“It was because I’m a princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom. He wanted to use my power as a goddess’s priestess.”

“W-Wait… P-Princess? You’re a princess?” Yulia’s jaw dropped and her eyes blinked in confusion.

The spoon in the village elder’s hand had begun to tremble.

“Uh… Yeah. That about sums it up. Oh, but don’t treat me special just because I’m a royalty. Right now, I’m just an adventurer.”

Yulia collected herself and asked, “So… What’s a goddess’s priestess?”

“It means I can see an adventurer’s stats and help them awaken new skills. Most goddess’s priests and priestesses can only see stats up to a certain level, but I’ve got no such limits. That’s why the Demon King wanted me. I could take a look at your stats right now, Yulia.”

“I-Is it really that easy?”

“Sure is. Just keep still.”

Yulia recoiled slightly as Mil held out her hand.

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Name: Yulia / Level: 105
HP: 870
MP: 1550
STR: 453
DEF: 455
INT: 2040
DEX: 433
SPD: 650
LUK: 459

Passive Skills: sage, magic talent, elemental master
```

Active Skills: ultimate fire elemental magic, ultimate ice elemental magic, ultimate lightning elemental magic, ultimate earth elemental magic, composite magic, advanced light magic, imbue advanced elemental magic, etc...

Mil tapped *sage*, *magic talent*, and *elemental master* in the passive skills list.

Sage: A rare ability among mages. Allows fine-tuning of all kinds of elemental magic and the simultaneous use of two types of magic.

Magic Talent: Intelligence requirements are reduced by 500 when learning new spells.

Elemental Master: Grants a large boost in power and a reduction in MP cost when using elemental magic.

All three were powerful skills. Her high level was the result of the experience she gained whenever someone used her enchanted weapons.

Magic talent was the crowning jewel of her skills. Most of her stats were a little low compared to Mil's considering how close their levels were. But Yulia's intelligence stat blew hers out of the water, even after all her training trying to improve that stat in the Demon King's Castle. It was further confirmation that stats developed differently for different people.

"Ooh! You're really strong, Yulia!"

Yulia jumped with fright at Mil's sudden loudness. "Uhh... Th-Thank you..."

"Oh, sorry. But you really are amazing. There aren't many people this strong, even in the Demon King's Castle."

"Oh, um... Really...?" Yulia looked pleased. She muttered, "Then maybe I could..." before hesitating for a few moments. "Do you think I've got what it takes to be an...adventurer?" she asked, finally.

"I'll bet you do! I'm sure of it!"

“Then maybe I…” For a moment Yulia’s eyes were full of hope. But then her confidence faltered and she lowered her head. “S-Sorry. N-No, I couldn’t…” She pulled her hood down to her eyes, stood up, then hurried away to her room.

“Did I say something wrong…?” *If I said something to upset her, I’d better apologize.*

“I’m sorry, Mil,” The village elder said. “That was rude of Yulia.”

“No, I don’t mind… Um… The stew’s really great.”

She would have liked to talk to Yulia some more. After so much time spent as a princess without a friend in the royal capital, she still hoped Yulia might be her first.

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“Ugh. I think I’ve overeaten.”

Mil regretted giving in to the village elder’s offer of two extra helpings of stew. But it was delicious, and the Goddess Arphil’s teachings said food shouldn’t be wasted.

The room that the village elder had given her was neat and tidy with not a speck of dust on the floor. It looked like it was cleaned daily, even when not in use.

Mil lay down on the bed and looked out the window as beams of moonlight shone in.

When she listened closely, she could hear all kinds of insect sounds that she’d never heard in the royal capital or the Demon King’s Castle. They felt even closer when she closed her eyes. She felt herself relax as if it were a lullaby she was hearing.

Just when she thought, *I want to fall asleep just like this*, she heard a knock at the door and quickly sat up.

“May I…come in?” The voice outside belonged to Yulia.

“Of course!” Mil replied.

The door opened with a creak, then Yulia, nervous and trembling, slowly entered.

Before Yulia could pull out the chair from the desk, Mil patted the bed beside her. “Come sit here,” she urged.

“If you d-don’t mind.” Yulia was still stiff as she sat down next to Mil.

For Mil, it was starting to feel like a sleepover. The thought made her happy. She’d never gotten to do anything like that in the

royal capital.

"So... What is it, Yulia?"

Yulia took a breath. "Well, I'm...curious about the royal capital."

"You are?"

"I'm sorry for running away earlier. It was hard to talk about it in front of dad..."

Huh? Mil felt confused. *What was so hard to talk about?*

"I...often buy spell books from merchants. I sell them after reading so that it doesn't get too expensive. Though I always buy new ones as soon as I can..."

Mil had been hoping to read some of Yulia's old books, but it sounded like she wouldn't get the chance.

"And, well, I heard that the royal capital's library is full of amazing books..."

It was true that the royal capital's library was full of spell books. Mil's level had been too low for her to fully appreciate them, but they were probably far better than the books that merchants brought to the village.

"Is there something you especially want to read?"

Yulia nodded. "A series called the Seraph Scripture."

"Oh, we've got those back home!"

The Seraph Scripture was a series of sixteen spell books that embodied the Goddess Arphil's power. It was said to have been written by the first goddess's priestess in history a thousand years earlier. Although the royal capital's magic research department could decode the Seraph Scripture's text, even the palace sorcerers couldn't use the magic it described.

But if other mages were only failing due to their lack of necessary stats, there was a chance Yulia might have more success.

"Wow! So it's true?!" Yulia lurched closer as her excitement grew. She really wanted to read that book.

"Yeah, I remember the palace sorcerers talking about it. We've also got the Six Chime Scripture, and other books about the goddess that—"

"The Six Chime Scripture?! The one about the holy bell?! The ultimate enchanted item that gave rise to the Goddess Arphil herself?!" Yulia shuffled even closer and unconsciously took hold of Mil's hands in her own—Yulia's were warm.



“Yep. Wanna read them all?”

“I’d love to! It’s…my dream… Oh, I’m sorry.” She quickly released Mil’s hand after calming down a little. But even as Yulia went back to being her usual wary self, her eyes were still sparkling.

“Do you wanna visit the royal capital, Yulia?” It would explain why Yulia had asked about becoming an adventurer.

“Huh? Oh… Um…” She began fidgeting and rubbing her fingers together.

Looks like I’m right. Is this my chance?

“Okay! Then how about I take you there? I was thinking I’d take my time and have adventures on my way to the royal capital anyway. And I can definitely get you permission to enter the library.”

Only palace sorcerers with permission from the king could enter the library, but Mil could convince her father to make an exception for Yulia. In fact, she was sure he’d welcome a first-rate mage like Yulia with open arms.

“M-Me? Go with you…?”

“Yep! I was worried I’d be lonely by myself. When I saw adventurers in the royal capital, I always enjoyed watching them form parties.”

Mil had enjoyed her adventure since leaving the Demon King’s Castle, but she couldn’t deny feeling like it was lacking without any companions. She was sure the adventure would be even more fun if Yulia agreed to join her.

But Yulia shook her head. “I’d like to go…but I can’t leave the village. I’m sorry. Without me, the villagers won’t have the power to defend against monster attacks. I’m the only one who can enchant the tools.”

The village elder had said that they’d come to rely on enchantments because of the lack of young people in the village. If Yulia was gone, then her enchantments couldn’t be replaced after being used up, and the village’s defenses would gradually weaken. That fear kept Yulia from leaving.

“Oh…”

It was clear she wanted to go, but Mil couldn’t force her. Besides, Yulia would have a strong attachment to her hometown no matter the situation.

“I’m sorry,” Yulia said, “but maybe you can talk to me about the

royal capital until you leave…?”

“No problem! Ask me anything! I’ll tell you all our kingdom’s secrets!”

“You…don’t have to go that far.”

They’d only have until the next day, but that was enough. As long as Mil could enjoy a conversation with her first ever friend.

As the village elder moved away from the door to Mil’s room, he could still hear the two girls talking happily.

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Mil had fallen asleep in her bed at some point. She knew she’d been up late into the night talking to Yulia, but she didn’t remember how the conversation ended. She woke up alone, so Yulia must have returned to her own room.

Her concerns didn’t last long however, as Mil caught the sweet aroma of freshly baked bread and guessed that the village elder was making breakfast.

She slowly got out of bed, put on her gear, and affixed her sword to her waist.

Though she wished she could stay longer, she decided she’d set out that same morning to avoid being a burden.

When she left the room and headed to the dining room, she saw that it was actually Yulia, not the elder, who’d been making breakfast.

“G-Good morning.” Yulia fidgeted a little and looked down at her feet as she greeted Mil.

“Good morning, Yulia.” Mil felt all the more lonely knowing this was her last chance to see Yulia’s cuteness.

“Breakfast’s ready… Please have some…”

Since breakfast for three had already been served on the table, Mil figured it would be a waste not to eat it before setting out.

“Is the village elder still sleeping?” she asked.

“No, he went to fetch water from the well. I think he’ll be back any moment.”

Making breakfast must have been one of Yulia’s daily chores.

Just as Mil was about to sit down, she noticed the farming tools left by the entrance.

“Have you been enchanting those?”

“Th-That’s right.”

Mil picked up a hoe that was leaning against the wall. Just by touching it, she could tell it was imbued with purified mana. She used *Goddess Eye* to examine it further.

```
Two-handed Weapon: Hoe
Required Stats: none
Description: Advanced fire enchantment. 15 uses.
```

It really did have a usage limit. Once the enchantment ran out, it would go back to being an ordinary hoe.

“Where are you going to put them?” Mil asked.

“They’re kept in a storehouse near the village square.”

“How about I take them there?”

“I can’t let you do that… It wouldn’t be right.”

“You’ve taken care of me and given me good food. I want to do something in return.”

“No! You don’t have to do anything.”

Mil knew she wouldn’t get anywhere by arguing over it with Yulia, so she simply gathered them up in her hands without getting approval.

“Hup. The storehouse by the square, right?”

“Uh… Sorry. It’s the one made from brick. It’s easy to spot.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

Mil hurried away from the house, passing people here and there on her way to the square. Some were farmers with hoes in hand, probably headed to their fields, and others were women headed to the well to draw water.

“Oh? Is that you, Mil?” The village elder noticed Mil looking around for the storehouse. He was on his way back from the well with a bucket full of water in each hand.

“Oh, good morning.”

“Good morning. Those are the new enchanted tools, aren’t they? Sorry, I was going to carry them myself once I was done fetching water.”

“I don’t mind.”

It was a small price to pay for the food and lodging. If anything, Mil felt she should have done more.

“You’re a good girl. I’m sure Yulia’s going to—ah.” The village elder started saying something but then stopped.

“Going to what?”

“Sorry… I overheard you talking to her last night, and it confirmed my suspicions. Yulia wants to go to the royal capital, doesn’t she?”

She did, but she was too concerned about the village to actually go anywhere.

The village elder sighed and then continued. “The truth is, Mil, I’d like Yulia to go out and learn more. Her talents are wasted in a little place like this. She talks about wanting to be here for us, but we’re just holding her back.”

A few farmers approached as the village elder was talking.

“Are you talking about Yulia?”

“It’s not right how we’re always relying on her. And you know how Yulia is. She has big ambitions but puts herself second.”

“Exactly.”

“We have to do something.”

More farmers and some women too were starting to gather. Everyone sounded worried about Yulia.

She sure is loved, Mil thought. *Everyone in the village loves her. They want to let her follow her dreams, but they can’t. If only I could help somehow.*

The village elder looked down at his feet, deep in thought, then looked at Mil and said, “Oh, I’m sorry, Mil. I didn’t mean to hold you up. Let’s head back to the house and have breakfast.”

“I have to store these tools first.”

“No, you should let me handle that,” a farmer said before taking the tools Mil was carrying.

That’s right… They need these tools…

Yulia couldn’t leave the village because the enchantments on these tools were always running out. If only the tools were permanently enchanted, the problem would be solved.

“Could I have one of those?” Mil asked.

“Sure, but what for?”

“I want to try some magic on it…”

Mil took a hoe and examined it using *Goddess Eye*. Her hope was that she could reinforce the enchantment using her power as a goddess’s priestess, or using some spell she’d learned in the

Demon King’s Castle.

```
Two-handed Weapon: Hoe
Required Stats: none
Description: High-grade fire enchantment. 15 uses.
```

She tried tapping the weapon name and the use count, but both just gave her more information, with no options for reinforcement.

Maybe… She decided to try another spell that she’d learned.

One of the forbidden spells she’d learned in the Demon King’s Castle was dark magic known as *chaotic enchantment.* With it applied, the hoe would be able to attack with black mana, and as long as the wielder kept channeling in more mana when they used it, the enchantment would never run out.

“*Chaotic enchantment!*” Black miasma poured from Mil’s outstretched hand.

The sight caused some alarm among the farmers, but the miasma coming from Mil’s palm was soon absorbed by the tool.

“I did it! Huh?”

Just when she thought it had worked, the hoe began to shake violently. Then it began spewing black orbs that scattered in all directions. There were a number of violent *ka-dunk* noises as the black orbs gouged holes out of the ground.

“Whoa! What’ve you done, Miss Adventurer?!”

“Watch out!”

There was panic all around.

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” Mil cried as she threw the hoe to the ground, smashing its handle into two. The black orbs stopped appearing the moment the hoe broke, restoring calm once more.

“Uhh… This magic’s too powerful.”

The hoe was made of wood and iron, but it seemed forbidden magic wasn’t compatible with anything but holy swords or magic swords forged using mana crystals.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to break the hoe. I hope no one was hurt.”

“We’re fine. We’re fine.”

“I got hit, but it wasn’t any hotter than my furnace in the

workshop."

"It just gave me a fright, that's all."

The villagers were laughing it off. People who lived near the Demon King's Castle really were far tougher than most.

As forgiving as the farmers were, Mil didn't want to waste more of their tools, so she couldn't attempt any more enchantments.

"What am I going to do…?" *Chaotic enchantment* was the only spell Mil had for permanently enchanting things.

"Wh-What's going on? Why's everyone gathered?"

Mil heard the voice and turned to see Yulia. She must have come to look for Mil after she was slow to return.

The village elder walked over to her. "I'm sorry, Yulia. We were just talking. Now let's go home." He began heading back to the house.

Then, with the worst possible timing, they all heard a roar.

"Grrrooohhh!"

"It's the dragon!"

The red dragon was descending on the village from above.

"It's the same one as yesterday! It's back!"

"Dragons are smart creatures. It won't attack once it knows it can't win."

"So it doesn't think it lost last time? We'll just have to drive it off again then."

"Grrrroooohhh!" The dragon's chest shone with red light as it inhaled deeply, and then flames erupted from the depths of its maw.

"Fire?! It really was a fire-breathing dragon!"

A torrent of flames scorched the square and its surroundings, sending the villagers standing outside fleeing in all directions.

"Uh-oh! That dragon's mad! It'll destroy our whole village!"

Villagers had to scramble to put out fires as the dragon's flames hit wooden buildings.

"I-I can stop the f-fire! *Aqua rain!*"

When Yulia held her hands up to the sky, large drops of rain came falling from above. The rain gradually grew to cover more area, quickly extinguishing the buildings that had just started to burn.

"You saved us, Yulia!"

The fire was under control, but the fire-breathing dragon was

still a problem.

I have to take it down myself! Mil decided. “I’ll do something about that dragon!”

Mil reached for her sword, but the village elder held up his hand to stop her.

“Please let us handle this, Mil.”

“That’s right. We can’t always count on adventurers.”

“We’ll sort this out ourselves!”

The farmers each picked up one of the enchanted tools and got ready for a fight.

“Huh? But…”

“We see dragons like this about once a year. It’s not our first time fending one off. You can leave us to defend our own village.”

“Grrraaaooohhh!” With a ferocious roar, the dragon descended, accompanied by an intense gust of wind that made Mil shield her face with her arms.

The farmers raised a battle cry and rushed at the descending dragon, swinging their enchanted weapons to release a barrage of fire, lightning, and ice attacks.

The farmers were certainly tough, but the dragon’s intense assault left them no opportunity for an effective counterattack.

Once Yulia was done extinguishing the fires, she headed toward the dragon. “I’ll h-help too.”

But before she could get near, the village elder caught her and held her back. “No, Yulia.”

“Um… Dad?”

It was the farmers who explained everything to her.

“That’s right, Yulia. You just watch.”

“We’ll prove we can defend the village without you.”

“We’ve been counting on you for too much.”

“B-But… Your enchantments have run out…”

The enchantments were already gone from the tools they were holding. Each farmer might have been as tough as a first-rate adventurer, but they couldn’t fight a dragon with nothing but ordinary hoes and sickles.

“Yulia, you want to go to the royal capital, don’t you?” The village elder said as they watched the farmers fight.

“I…”

“We know you’re worried about us. Well, we’ll show you that you

needn't be. We know how to drive off monsters. Even dragons."

"But… But…" Yulia's eyes were red, like she might start crying any second.

What can I do…? Mil wondered.

The farmers couldn't stand to be holding Yulia back and preventing her from going on a journey. They didn't say it outright, but their plan was to defeat the dragon without her help so she could leave the village with peace of mind. It was a plan that could easily backfire if they died trying.

If they just had better weapons…

Mil's bag was full of daggers and enchanted items taken from the Demon King's Castle, but all required high stats to use them. The villagers probably weren't high level enough.

If I could just enchant something… Oh, I've got it!

The tools couldn't withstand Mil's forbidden magic. It had to be Yulia's enchantments. But her enchantments would soon lose their effect. There was only one way to change that—using the powers of the goddess to make her potential skills blossom.

If it works…

Mil tried using *Goddess Eye* to see Yulia's stats.

Oh… It's possible!

Yulia's enchantment magic was ready to awaken.

"Yulia! Let me give you something!"

"Wh-What? What are you doing?"

"I'm using my powers to awaken your skills! Just leave it to me!" Mil took a breath then began casting. "*Blessings of the Goddess—Goddess Bloom!*"

The faint light emitted from Mil's palms was taking the form of an angel embracing Yulia.

"Uh, wha—?! Mil, what is this?"

"Stay calm and trust me."

When the light finished gathering in the angel, that meant Yulia's skill was fully awakened.

Imbue ultimate elemental magic appeared in the status window; it worked. Yulia's previous enchantments all had limited uses, but maybe now…

"Yulia, try enchanting something."

"O-Okay…"

"But Mil, that would mean…" The village elder was about to stop

her.

“Everything’s going to work out,” Mil reassured him. “Yulia’s more powerful than before.”

Yulia ignored the village elder and reached for a tool to reapply its worn-out enchantment. “*Flame enchant*.” Intense flames gathered around Yulia, then flowed into the tool.

Mil took the enchanted tool from Yulia and examined it with *Goddess Eye*.

```
Two-handed Weapon: Hoe
Required Stats: None
Description: Ultimate fire enchantment. Unlimited
uses.
```

The magic was more refined, and the tool’s uses were no longer limited. Now it would be a powerful weapon, no matter how long it was used.

“Everyone! Use these tools! Yulia’s gonna enchant them all!”

Yulia began enchanting one tool after another. Then she approached the farmers who’d backed away from the dragon with worn-out weapons.

“But, adventurer, we can’t—”

“It’s fine! Use them all you like!” Mil reassured them.

The farmers stopped trying to argue with Mil, and instead they turned the tools against the dragon. They’d been on the defensive the whole time, but their powerful new enchantments were enough to push the dragon back.

“Ooh, the enchantment’s not running out!”

They swung their tools with renewed vigor, keeping the pressure on the dragon with elemental magic attacks of all kinds. They’d always held back in the past because they feared wasting the limited uses of each enchantment. With no limits to worry about, they could swing the tools without restraint.

“Grrrooohhh…” Unable to bear the onslaught, the dragon howled and then fled into the skies.

“It’s finally leaving… It gave us its all and still lost. It won’t be back after that. But Mil, why aren’t Yulia’s enchantments running out?”

“I used my powers to give her a new skill. I bet she could get even stronger, but it’ll be hard for her to learn more here.”

Although Yulia was talented, her magic had been limited to *advanced* tier spells. With nothing but a few spell books that merchants brought to the village, she couldn’t develop her magic as much as she wanted to.

“It took a little help from me, but now Yulia can make enchantments that never run out.” Once enchanted, the tools would stay enchanted. With this power, the villagers could band together to drive off foes as powerful as dragons without needing the magic constantly reapplied.

“Wow… I can hardly believe it. Enchantments that never run out…” The village elder glanced at Yulia. “Now we can get by without constantly relying on Yulia.”

“Huh…?”

“Yulia.” The village elder approached her. “What do you really want to do?”

“Dad…”

“If you’d like to stay with us in the village your whole life, then that’s fine. But if you’d like to study magic in the royal capital, we want to support you.”

Yulia hung her head. She was conflicted. She loved the village she’d grown up in, but wanted to learn more about magic. Both were important to her. “I…” Just as she seemed ready to burst into tears, she hugged the village elder and hid her face.

“Y-Yulia.”

“Dad… I…”

Mil heard Yulia sobbing into her father’s chest. The village was everything to her, and the village elder was her only family.

She had to choose between remaining in the village or seizing an opportunity to travel. Even Mil, an outsider, could sense how torn Yulia was.

I should’ve been more considerate…

She regretted casually inviting Yulia to travel with her the night before. This was a major turning point in Yulia’s life, and yet Mil had tried to talk her into it with no thought.

The village elder placed his hand on Yulia’s shoulder. “We’re not saying goodbye forever, you know? You can come back if you get lonely. We’ll always be right here.”

Yulia raised her small voice. “I…”

“Yes?” The village elder asked softly.

Yulia raised her head. “I’d like to go to the royal capital.” She looked straight at the village elder with eyes full of determination. “I’d like to learn more magic.”

The village elder smiled warmly and nodded. “Then go, my child,” he said while putting his arms around her shoulders.

Yulia continued to sob with her face buried in the village elder’s chest.

The village elder turned to look at Mil. “My daughter, Yulia…can I leave her in your hands?”

“Y-Yes. Leave her to me. But are you sure about this, Yulia?”

“Yes. It’s just like my dad says. I’m not saying goodbye forever.”

A cheer suddenly erupted from the villagers.

“Yulia! Do your best out there!”

“You can come back anytime!”

“We’re proud of you, Yulia!”

Yulia wiped away her tears as she listened to their cheers. She smiled and nodded firmly.

“Now come have something to eat, you two,” the village elder said. “It’s not too late to have breakfast before setting out.”

“Okay. Oh, um, Yulia!” Mil turned to face her and extended her hand. “I’m glad to have you with me.”

“Y-Yes… Me too.”

The pair shook hands.

Chapter 3: Animal Ears Are Fluffy!

In the throne room of the Demon King's Castle, the seat was occupied by a weary Demon King. He'd returned after a long expedition that had left him worn out. He placed an elbow on the throne's armrest and sighed. "Haah..."

"Welcome back, Your Majesty."

"Oh... It's you, Crowell."

He had even noticed her until she'd gotten close.

"How did it go this past month?" he asked. "I haven't seen her in some time. Is she well?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come now. Obviously, I'm talking about the princess I ordered you to look after. Don't tell me you've forgotten."

A month prior he'd put Mil in Crowell's hands before leaving the castle. Someone else had been temporarily assigned to the Demon King's daughter, Mary, while Crowell's turned her attention to taking care of Mil. And having been gone the entire time with his own attention focused elsewhere, the Demon King himself was clueless as to the happenings within his castle.

"If you mean Princess Mil..." Crowell spoke clearly, undaunted by the Demon King's overwhelming power. "She's no longer in this castle. She set out a few days ago."

"Ah, I see. Then make sure— What?! She's gone?!"

"That's correct," Crowell said calmly. "She spoke of adventuring, so I doubt she'll return."

"I gave you an order! I told you to look after Princess Mil. How could you let this happen?"

"My orders were 'Attend to Princess Mil's needs while she's here in the castle.' Now that she's not in the castle, I'm not under orders to attend to her."

"Then you should've stopped her from leaving! Why didn't you?"

"I was under no orders to do so."

With a sigh, the Demon King put his hand to his brow and shook his head. "You're always like this. You never change."

"Thank you, Sire."

Crowell had long served the Demon King, even back when the previous Demon King was on the throne. He'd been used to her eccentric nature for just as long.

"I doubt she'll last long out there," the Demon King said. "The monsters must have gotten her already. We'll probably find the princess lying dead by a roadside somewhere."

"You needn't fear for Princess Mil. I taught her swordplay, and she learned numerous spells from our library."

The Demon King was so shocked he rose from his throne. "You did *what*?!"

Crowell hadn't just allowed Mil's escape, she'd abetted it.

"I also provided her with a compass, some food, and other things she'll need for her adventure. She certainly won't die along the road."

"I can't believe this... You always had a soft spot for adventurers..."

"Thank you, Sire."

"It's not a compliment!"

The Demon King sighed once more and sat back down on his throne.

"Wait, did you say spells from the library...?" The Demon King turned pale. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead. "Oh, but I'm sure she can't have learned *that* spell."

Crowell knew exactly which spell the Demon King was talking about. "I assume you're referring to a particular form of elimination magic?"

Specifically, they were referring to *Extinction Gate*. Merely speaking its name was a taboo among demonkin.

"You know just how... Oh, but a human wouldn't be able to use that spell for its true purpose. Enough about that. Where's Mil now?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you. If she's aiming for the royal capital, then I assume she headed eastward."

"East... Well, Mil can't possibly run from *him*. Summon him at once, and send him after her."

"As you command, Sire. Oh, and..."

"There's more?"

"I must inform you that Princess Mary has met Princess Mil. She took your favorite scythe and used it to fight her."

“What…? I hope Mary wasn’t hurt.”

“She’s quite all right. Her clothing got slightly dirty, but she was completely unharmed.”

“I should hope so. She’s the future Demon Queen. If anything happens to her, all’s lost. Remind her that she should stay out of trouble and focus on her studies.”

“As you command…Sire.”

The Demon King couldn’t help but notice when Crowell furrowed her brow for just a moment. “You have something to say?”

“No… Not at all, Sire.”

Crowell could never question the Demon King’s orders. She bowed and slowly left the throne room.

When he was left by himself, the Demon King heaved a heavy sigh.

“It’s one thing after another. Lately, Mary’s been difficult too. Though I suppose Mil is the more pressing concern. It’s a good thing humans move slow. I’ve no doubt *he* can bring her back.”

Above all, he feared for Princess Mil’s well-being. She was small and feeble. He just hoped she wouldn’t be eaten by a monster.

“There’s no end to my troubles,” he said, punctuated by another deep sigh.

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“Yulia! Look! Look at all these tentacles!”

“Ah wah wah… M-Mil, please, let’s run away.”

After leaving the village and heading eastward, Mil and Yulia hadn’t gotten far before being attacked by a monster.

The creature, known as a roper, had a body soft as mud and tentacles adapted for preying on people. At that moment, it was holding all four of Mil’s limbs in its tentacles and was gearing up to chow down.

“Whoa. Their tentacles are way lumpier than I thought. I figured they’d be slippery smooth, but they’re kind of rough.”

“This is no time to think about that!”

Though the roper had nothing even resembling a face, a section of its body had parted in two to reveal a wide opening—presumably its mouth—and the creature was preparing to throw

Mil into it.

"I knew it! Its breath *stinks*!"

Mil was too busy playing with the tentacles to notice how worried Yulia was.

"I've g-got to do something." Yulia reached both hands up to the sky and began casting a spell. "*Death trail tempest!*"

A rolling mass of thunderclouds appeared above Yulia's head, and the trees around her began to creak in the winds of the growing storm.

"That's your magic, Yulia?!"

It was an ultimate elemental spell that drastically changed the weather. Torrential rain battered everything in sight, and winds raged so hard that trees were threatening to tear from the ground.

Bright flashes followed as numerous thunderbolts tore the roper's tentacles.

When the tentacles holding her were severed, Mil crashed to the ground, landing hard on her behind. "Ouch."

Mil watched as lightning bolts continued to skewer the roper, and it cried a sort of low-pitched screech before giving up and slithering away into the forest.

"Aww. It got away." Mil stayed on the ground as she brushed the dirt off her skirt.

"A-Are you all right?"

"Yep! Your magic's amazing, Yulia!"

Yulia must have undone the spell, because the thunderclouds were shrinking rapidly, restoring the sky to the same clear blue as before.

"I'm just glad I didn't hit you, Mil."

Yulia's power was way beyond any ordinary adventurer. She had full control over some of the most powerful magic Mil knew of.

"Thanks, Yulia. Let's look for a giant slime next."

Mil wanted to find out what it was like to be inside its squishy body.

"We can't. We've wasted too much time already…"

They'd left Yulia's village half a day ago. The western sky was already starting to turn crimson. At this rate, they might have to camp somewhere deep within the forest.

"That place you mentioned was in this direction, right?" Mil

asked.

According to Yulia, there was a beastkin village to the east of her village. The two villages were in regular contact and only half a day's walk apart, so they'd made it their next destination.

"That's right. Hopefully they'll know it's me when I show them my staff."

Yulia took the short wooden staff affixed to her waist and held it up for Mil to see. It had originally been a gift from the beastkin settlement.

"So they won't chase us away just because we're humans?"

"I d-don't think so... Beastkin don't side with humans or demonkin. But they're friendly enough to trade with my village."

Mil only knew a few things about beastkin. They had ears and tails like animals, they understood human languages, and they were always wary. That was the extent of her knowledge. Beastkin sometimes made contact with humans, but most of their settlements were secluded deep in the mountains.

"I hope we get there soon," Mil said. "Shouldn't we be there already? You said it would take half a day."

"We would be, but...we haven't made good progress because you keep getting sidetracked."

"Oh, sorry."

Mil had a bad habit of wandering off to look at whatever rare plant or monster happened to catch her eye.

"But it shouldn't be long until—oh, there it is." Yulia pointed straight ahead.

Through the trees they saw fields and several thatched roofs. It looked like the beastkin village Yulia had described.

"Ooh! So that's where the beastkin with the fluffy ears live?"

"Yes, I think so. Though it's my first time seeing it."

"Really?"

"My dad often told me about the beastkin, but I've never actually seen them myself."

Mil could barely contain her excitement as she tried to imagine what sort of people beastkin were. She pictured animal ears and tails, and squishy pads on their hands and feet. *I wanna touch them!*

"I'm going ahead!" Mil declared.

"N-No, Mil, wait."

Mil didn’t even hear Yulia as she charged off through the trees, and she didn’t stop until she was in front of the village gate. It was a splendid wooden structure attached to a high fence to keep out any would-be invaders.

A figure standing in front of the gate soon noticed Mil approaching and reached for the sword at their waist.

“Who’s there? Halt!”

It was a beastkin woman with long, shimmering blonde hair. Her outfit resembled a casual kimono with an obi tied around her waist. Aside from the odd outfit, she herself was beautiful. Her long legs and narrow waist were striking, and she also had much bigger breasts than Mil or Yulia. Her clear, pale skin, narrow eyebrows, lips with a touch of crimson, and sharp eyes all gave her face a mature look.

The gatekeeper’s other noteworthy feature was on top of her head. A pair of animal ears, like those of a fox or a cat, stood up tall, coming to sharp points at the tip. She also had a sleek, golden tail extending from her back. Other than the lack of squishy pads on her hands, she was exactly like Mil had imagined.

“Ooh! Animal ears! A tail! You’re so cute!”

“Animal…? Tail…? Cute?”

The beastkin girl was caught off guard. At first, she simply stared as Mil inched closer, but she quickly came to her senses and drew the sword at her waist.

“Our v-village lies beyond this gate. You cannot enter without permission.”

The sword was better described as a katana. It was slightly curved and had a dull shine.



Mil flapped her arms in alarm. “Wait! Hear me out!”

All Mil wanted to do was touch her, but she wasn’t going to get a chance if she remained this wary. *How can I make her let her guard down?* Mil wondered.

The beastkin’s nose suddenly twitched a few times, and she said, “There’s a smell of meat coming from your bag.”

Meat? She means this? Mil took out some dried meat from her bag. “You want meat? Here, come get it.”

The sound of the beastkin’s sniffing was soon accompanied by a rumbling sound from her stomach.

Hey, this might actually work!

“You can have it… Why not come closer?”

The beastkin edged closer and then accepted the meat. It was too much for Mil to take.

Now’s my chance! I can’t resist anymore! Mil pounced at her prey.

“Got y—huh?”

“Hm?”

“Let me pet you!”

Unfortunately for Mil, beastkin reactions were exceptional. Even as her nose continued its twitching, the beastkin leaped a great distance back, evading Mil’s attempt at a hug with no problem.

“Ah ha… Just as I thought! You’re naught but an apparition in human form! I’ll cut you down!”

“Uh-oh! Now I’ve done it!” *If I’d just kept my cool a little longer!*

The beastkin charged at Mil without giving her another chance to speak. With her body low to the ground, she closed the distance between them like a bolt launched from a crossbow.

“She’s fast!” Mil quickly drew her own sword and then parried a slash from the beastkin.

“Not bad, apparition!”

“That’s not what I am!” Mil continued to parry attacks from the beastkin while trying to explain herself.

“Ngh…”

“Haah haah… You’re quick…”

After being tired out by the long walk, this was a grueling fight for Mil. The beastkin was a powerful opponent. At the very least, she was a cut above all the orcs that served in the Demon King’s forces.

Just how strong is she? Mil cautiously held out her hand at the

beastkin.

```
Name: Kuro / Level: 105
HP: 1135
MP: 755
STR: 1004
DEF: 638
INT: 756
DEX: 1242
SPD: 1276
LUK: 200

Passive Skills: beastkin, quick footed, detect
presence, sense danger, katana proficiency (high),
light equipment proficiency (mid), fire resistance
(low), ice resistance (low), lightning resistance
(low)

Active Skills: bewitching dance, cross slash, draw
slash, spirit breath
```

She really is strong…

After finding it so easy to tempt the beastkin with dried meat, Mil had mistakenly assumed she'd be easily won over.

As Mil was still trying to get over the high stat line, the beastkin adopted a new stance, facing Mil straight on with her katana held at chest height and pointed toward Mil's face.

"You will never set foot in our village." *Grrr*. "Sorry, but I'm not going to hold back."

"Huh…? Did that growling sound come from your stomach?"

The beastkin's expression remained serious as ever, but she was turning bright red. "You heard nothing!" *Grrr*.

There it is again!

The beastkin vanished. Or so it seemed. She was suddenly inches away from Mil, who quickly backed off while blocking an upward katana swing with her sword.

She's so strong… She might be even faster than me.

It wasn't just the beastkin's speed that posed a problem, but also her swordplay. She was so skilled that Mil began to think she had no chance of winning the fight without resorting to spells. Forbidden magic would surely give her the edge here, but her opponent was just a girl trying to defend her village. Mil didn't want to risk hurting her.

But it'll hurt real bad if that katana hits me. Maybe just a little magic.

Just as Mil was about to cast a spell, she was interrupted.

"M-Mil! Are you all right?!" Yulia came running from the trees, panting for breath.

"Another apparition!"

"Wha?!" Overwhelmed, Yulia began to tremble beneath the hood that hid her face.

Mil spoke up in Yulia's place. "I'm sorry! I got carried away... We're not monsters or anything."

"Then what brings you here? You're too well-trained to be a pair of humans who just happened to wander up to our village." *Grrr*. When her stomach rumbled once again, her eyes remained serious and fixed on Mil, but her cheeks were again turning red.

Yulia replied in a trembling voice. "I-I... Um... I'm Yulia from a nearby village. Y-You always treated my dad well... Here!" She was trembling like a frightened kitten, but she held out the wooden staff for the beastkin to see.

The beastkin suspicions remained strong as ever as she stared at the staff.

Yulia grew all the more afraid. "Ah wah wah. Th-The staff isn't enough...? Dad said I'd be fine if I showed it to them."

The beastkin girl gulped. She must have finished chewing the dried meat. "Well... It certainly is the staff of sacred wood that our village chief gifted to a human... Did you say your name was Yulia?"

"Y-Yes."

Yulia was trembling so hard it seemed she might foam at the mouth and pass out. The beastkin didn't trust her any more than she'd trusted Mil.

"You said you're from the neighboring village?"

"Th-That's right... We'd like to stay here tonight... If we may."

"But what if you're an apparition with a fake sacred staff?! I

cannot let you pass!”

“Whaaaa?!”

“What’s all the noise?” A woman had appeared from within the village. She was another beastkin with animal ears, wearing flowing robes colored white and red.

Mil had read about this style of robes. It was an outfit worn by shrine maidens when performing religious rites.

“Chief! It’s an apparition! It’s disguised as a human!”

Rather than reply to the first beastkin, the shrine maiden looked over at Yulia and smiled. “Oh my. How you’ve grown, Yulia.”

“H-Huh? You…know me?”

“Graham once brought you to visit when you were very small.”

“Oh… I don’t remember that.”

“You wouldn’t. You were very young. But let’s not stand out here. Please follow me into the village. You too, Kuro.”

“Oh. Okay. But what about the other one?” Kuro glanced suspiciously at Mil.

“I’m Mil! Yulia’s friend. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Ah. I am Kuro. I apologize for my rudeness.”

She bowed her head low and then the two shook hands.

Mil was relieved to know that Kuro wasn’t a bad person. She was just serious about her work.

“And forgive me for asking, but…” Kuro hesitated for a moment. “Do you have any more of that dried meat?”

It was cute how Kuro couldn’t help but show her appetite.

✧✧✧

The room the village chief led them to was different from anything Mil had seen in the royal capital or the Demon King’s Castle. Instead of carpets, the floor was covered by mats made of woven rushes, known as tatami. The doors too were unfamiliar structures lined with paper and cloth that slid sideways to open. There were no chairs—only a low table in the center surrounded by cushions.

“Is it your first time seeing this style of room?” the chief asked.

“Yes,” Mil replied as she sniffed at the air. “It smells really good in here.”

“That’s the smell of rushes. If it’s to your liking, I’m honored.

Now please, take a seat."

Sitting on the fluffy cushions on the floor was relaxing in a totally different way from anything in the royal capital.

"And Yulia," the chief said, "I'm sorry for the rudeness from one of my people."

"Oh, no, it's nothing." Yulia folded her legs beneath her as she sat down, her gaze facing nervously downward.

"That was my fault," Mil said apologetically. It had been her rash actions that created the misunderstanding. "It was my first time meeting anyone with animal ears."

"Animal ears?" The chief's ears twitched. "Do you mean people with ears on their heads?"

"I got overly excited by my first sight of a beastkin and acted terribly rude." Mil looked across the table at Kuro, who was sitting opposite.

Kuro still looked a little wary.

"So that's what happened. Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Irie, and I serve as the chief of this village. Kuro here is my niece."

"I'm Kuro. Sorry once again for my rudeness." Kuro bowed her head low.

"I'm Mil Arphilia. Was the dried meat good?"

Kuro responded with a gulp.

Well, that's what really matters.

"Arphilia?!" the village chief replied with alarm. "Um… Forgive me for asking, but might you be Princess Mil Arphilia of the Holy Arphil Kingdom?"

"Yes. It's a long story, but I was imprisoned in the Demon King's Castle for a while. I escaped just recently."

I didn't think she'd know my name. Am I that famous?

"This place might be remote, but the rumors reached here long ago. It's an honor to meet a holy princess who's loved by the goddess."

Mil bashfully scratched the back of her head.

Kuro lurched forward and yelled, "A holy princess from the royal capital?!"

"Kuro, please," the chief scolded.

Kuro was undeterred. In fact, she was growing increasingly excited. "Then you must have tried the royal capital's food? Do they

really have chocolate cake and cheesecake?”

“Kuro!”

“They do,” Mil replied. “There are mille crepe and strawberry cakes too. Do you like cakes?”

“To be honest, I love all food!”

I figured that much.

“Especially sweets, however. I heard that cakes are even sweeter than manju or ohagi. I *must* try them!” Kuro was leaning across the table as she spoke, her eyes wide with excitement.

“Manju? Ohagi? Have you ever eaten those, Yulia?” Mil asked.

Yulia shook her head gently in response.

Mil hadn’t even heard of them. Apparently it wasn’t just the rooms that were different here, but the food as well.

“If that just piqued your interest, then I could serve some for you,” the chief suggested.

“You wouldn’t mind?” Mil replied. “I’d love to try them!”

“Please give me a moment.”

Once the chief left through a sliding door Kuro began, “Um… Princess Mil.”

“You can call me Mil.”

“Then you may call me Kuro too. I was just wondering what other foods they eat at the royal capital. Please tell me!”

“Let me think… There’s so many delicious things. Besides the cakes we just mentioned, there are cream puffs, creme caramel—”

“Cream cuffs? Creme caramel? What sorts of food are they?”

“Cream puffs are soft cream packed into a crispy dough. They break apart and release all the sweetness the moment they’re in your mouth.”

Mil heard a clear gulp from Kuro. Behind Kuro’s back, her golden tail was swishing to and fro.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’ve brought the manju and ohagi.” The village chief entered and placed a bowl on the table with two types of food. One was small, white, and round while the other was coated in little black lumps.

“Please help yourselves,” the chief urged. Mil picked up one of the white objects while Yulia chose a black one, and both were equally delighted by the taste.

“It’s so good!” Mil said. “I thought it looked tough, but it’s really soft! How’s yours Yulia?”

“Mmh, mmh… Mh? Oh, it’s…sweet.” She’d been so focused on chewing, she almost hadn’t heard Mil.

The village chief smiled. “That’s a manju you’re eating, Princess Mil. And yours is an ohagi, Yulia. I have plenty, so please eat as much as you’d like.”

“Thank you!” Mil replied. “I’ve never tasted anything so delicious!”

Mil had already eaten two of them and was starting to wish she had a drink to wash them down.

Thankfully, the village chief was already pouring tea into cups. “This is green tea. It’s hot, so please take care.”

Mil took a sip and found that the slight bitterness complemented the manju perfectly.

“It’s getting late, Chief,” Kuro said. “How about we begin making dinner?”

“You’re right. I’ll put in some extra effort tonight and we’ll all have something special.”

“We’d really appreciate it!” Mil bowed her head.

“Y-Yes please.” Yulia bowed too.

“Please wait here for a little while.” Irie rose to her feet.

“Chief, let me help,” Kuro said, moving to stand as well.

“I’m sure the three of you have a lot to talk about. I can handle it by myself, so stay here and talk with our two guests.” Before leaving the room the chief turned to Mil and Yulia and said, “Please enjoy yourselves in the meantime.”

When they were left alone, Kuro cleared her throat. “So, Mil… Is adventuring fun?”

“It sure is! Are you curious about it?”

Mil had only been traveling for a few days, but the outside world had been a never-ending source of excitement—full of new experiences.

“It’s just not the royal capital… I’d like to try good food from all kinds of places.”

It was as though there was something more Kuro was struggling to say.

“Like cakes?” Mil asked.

“Especially the sweet stuff! I’m sure there are countless dishes that we don’t have in this village!”

The village had good food like manju and miso soup, but if she

wanted to try a wider variety of things, she'd have to travel.

"Sounds like you want to go adventuring," Mil said.

This could be a good opportunity. Mil decided she'd ask Kuro to join them.

"If you wanna try it, then why not come adventuring with us?!"

"You're inviting me to join you?"

"Yep! Yulia's okay with it, aren't you?"

Yulia gave a few firm nods.

"Oh. Thank you, but...I couldn't."

"What?! Why not?" *She clearly wants to!*

"The village code says that villagers must never leave," Kuro explained.

"Code?"

"The code has existed since long before I was born. We have more contact with outsiders in recent times, but over a hundred years ago, people with ears and tails like mine were treated like curiosities. It's said that humans would often kidnap our kind."

So they decided to keep out of trouble by not going outside? Come to think of it, people might have mentioned beastkin in the royal capital, but I never once saw one. Disappointing as it was, Mil figured she'd just have to give up.

Kuro noticed Mil's reaction. "Please don't feel down. I'm happy that you invited me. Oh, I know. Why don't we visit the hot spring together instead? It's the pride of my village."

"There's a hot spring?!"

She'd heard about them from adventurers in the royal capital, but she'd never visited one. Bathing in a hot spring supposedly felt amazing, and it had long been high on Mil's bucket list.

"I'm sure you'll love it. Come with me, and we'll pass the time relaxing there. It's my way of apologizing for not joining you on your adventure."

Mil and Yulia were in high spirits as Kuro led the way.

✧✧✧

"Something so delicious truly exists?!" Kuro's voice echoed off the fences that surrounded the open air bath beside the village chief's home.

A refreshing breeze was blowing across the water, and they

could hear the chirps of insects from every direction. Experiences like this couldn't be had in the royal capital.

"Yep, and there's another really good one called a mille-feuille. It's a combination of pastry and custard cream."

Mil described the various desserts available in the royal capital as she scrubbed Kuro's back with a towel. It was her first time washing someone's back like this. Kuro's skin was smooth, and her long, thin tail was joined to her lower back. It was the real thing, after all.

Ugh... It's hard to resist when it's right there. I wanna touch it! I want to grab it right now, but...

"Um... Kuro."

"Hm?"

"I can't resist your ears or tail anymore!"

I can't stop myself. Without waiting for a response, Mil began ruffling the fur on Kuro's ears and tail. *These ears are so soft! And her tail's so fluffy.* Even when wet, Kuro's fur remained sleek and her ears squishy.

"C-Could I try it too?" Yulia finished washing herself and grabbed Kuro's tail. "Wooow! It's so fluffy!"

"Her ears are just as soft."

They both lost themselves in ruffling, scratching and feeling up Kuro's fur.

"Gah ha ha ha!"

After the groping had gone on for about five minutes, the three finally enjoyed a soak in the spring's water.

"Ooh. This feels so good," Mil sighed. "They don't have hot springs in the royal capital, so this is all new to me."

"Really?" Kuro, sitting beside Mil, was surprised.

A short distance away, Yulia was floating on her back with her arms spread wide.

"We've got a bath back home, but it's just a big tub. There's no hot spring."

It was also Mil's first time in an open-air bath. She'd never known how good it felt to soak in hot water while exposed to a cool breeze.

"Tell me more about the royal capital! Can you eat all you want whenever you feel like it?" Kuro was excited again. She got all fired up whenever the conversation turned to food.

“Ah ha ha. No, I can’t just eat whatever I want. That said, though I’ve never been there, I’ve heard there are restaurants near the castle where they’ll bring out huge portions if you have enough money to pay for it.”

“Ooh! Do they serve meat like that?”

She’s interested in meat now?

“And there are buffets where you can pile up as much on your plate as you can eat.”

“Do those exist for cakes too?”

“I think I’ve heard of cake buffets, so probably…”

A trail of drool was forming at the side of Kuro’s mouth. Her favorite foods were obvious to anyone—meat and sweet treats.

“The ice cream’s good too,” Mil added.

“What’s ice cream?”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that!” Yulia flipped onto her feet and splashed water all over. “A merchant told me about it! It’s a way of eating frozen milk, isn’t it?”

“You can freeze milk?! Doesn’t it turn into ice?” Kuro stared at Mil in a demand for answers.

Yulia was interested too; it was rare to see her this excited.

“I don’t know how it’s made, but some types are really soft and sweet. And some are used in parfaits together with fruit.”

The name alone was enough to excite Kuro. “Parfait?! Just from the name I already know it’s delicious!”

“I have to admit, I’d like to try these things too,” Yulia said.

Yulia had never set foot outside her village, so she couldn’t have tried any of the royal capital’s food either. Although she’d never said so until now, there was a good chance she’d been looking forward to trying new food the whole time.

“The outside world sounds incredible. It’s more than I imagined.” Kuro sent waves across the surface of the water as she fell onto her back and looked at the sky with a contented sigh.

I know that feeling. Mil was reminded of herself and the way she used to indulge in fantasies of the outside world.

“I’m glad I had the chance to make friends with both of you,” Kuro said.

“Friends…?” Mil replied. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m happy too.”

“This village doesn’t have much contact with outsiders. It’s the first time I’ve really talked to anyone about the outside world like

this.”

“Now you’re embarrassing me.” It pleased Mil to hear Kuro call her a friend. She’d never never known anyone like her.

Likewise, Yulia laughed bashfully.

“If you’d remember me and my village once in a while, I’d be quite happy,” Kuro said. “And if you’re ever passing near, drop by and we’ll give you a grand welcome.”

“Sure! Thanks, Kuro.”

Mil was glad to have met her. Even if she might never see her again after that day.

✧✧✧

In a bedroom so large that it took ten tatami mats to cover the floor, the flickering flame of a single wax candle was all that held off the darkness of the night. Long after everyone else was sleeping, the village chief, Irie, was still reading the book that lay on her bookrest.

She reached out to turn the page but stopped when something caught her attention: the chirping bugs outside had all fallen silent at once.

Irie sensed she wasn’t alone. Beyond the sliding door, someone was approaching, keeping their footsteps silent as they moved through the pitch black corridor.

It wasn’t Kuro. Nor was it either of the guests. Irie could sense wickedness. She felt a thick, black presence characteristic of an intruder intending harm—intent to kill. The intruder was making no attempt to conceal it.

“Who’s there?”

“Chief Irie, might I have a moment of your time?”

The door slid open, slow and silent, to reveal a demonkin, fully covered by a black robe. Their skin was red and a single horn protruded from their forehead. Judging by their rugged, angular features, the intruder was a man, and an ogre.

“Are you from the Demon King’s forces? But why? What business could you have here at this hour?”

“Rather than waste your precious time, I’ll get right to the point. I would like you to hand over Mil Arphilia. If I’m not mistaken, she’s in your care at present.”

“Princess Mil?”

Mil had said something about escaping from the Demon King’s Castle. This ogre must have been sent to take her back.

“It would displease me greatly were it necessary to resort to violence. I do hope we can reach an amicable resolution. Might I assume that you’ll cooperate for the sake of your village’s safety?”

“You’re threatening me? Let me guess. The Demon King wants to make use of Princess Mil’s powers as a goddess’s priestess?”

“It seems you understand the situation already. Then you must know you have no reason to shield her from us.”

This ogre was no mere underling. He was someone high-ranking—probably one of the Heavenly Four. Someone so important wouldn’t have come to handle this personally unless Mil’s powers were considered crucial.

Irie braced herself. “Princess Mil is a guest in our village…and a friend of Kuro. Handing one of our friends over to a barbaric fiend such as yourself is out of the question.”

“I see… You’ve got courage. What a shame. I had hoped to avoid kidnapping anyone.”

Irie glared at the ogre. “Do you think I’ll just stand back and watch while you take her?”

The ogre laughed aloud. “There seems to have been a misunderstanding. That princess was strong enough to defeat the gatekeepers of the Demon King’s Castle, and I cannot afford the risk of a direct conflict with the beastkin of this village. But I’m quite capable of handling you alone.”

“What are you saying?”

“I hear all the beastkin of this village are able to sense bloodlust.”

“Chief! Who’s with you?!” Another door to the room flung open and Kuro burst in, brandishing a sword the village had entrusted to her when she was young.

The ogre reacted quickly—quicker than the beastkin could follow. In a single motion he slipped behind Irie and gripped her tight in his broad arms.

“Ngh…” With the ogre’s arm around her neck, Irie couldn’t speak.

“Chief!”

“Don’t move. You wouldn’t want me to break her neck, would

you?”

“You brute.”

“If you’d like me to return her, bring Mil to the lake south of the village in the morning. Mention me to no one. Fail to obey me and… Well, I’m sure you can guess.”

While taking a hostage was cheap, it was all but guaranteed to work against someone as trusting as Mil.

What an underhanded trick, Irie thought. *He’s trying to leave us little choice.*

The ogre had found a way to avoid fighting the beastkin of the village. Both sides could suffer great losses, and Mil might escape, leading to the worst possible outcome. Taking a hostage was a much safer and more reliable approach.

I see now. When he spoke of kidnapping, he meant me.

“Do you understand me? Kuro, is it? Lure Mil to me, and make it convincing.” With that the ogre slowly slid open the door then silently disappeared into the darkness outside.

When Kuro was left alone in the room, she collapsed to her knees.

Why would anyone attack the chief? It sounded like he’s a demonkin here to take Mil away. He must be serving the Demon King. But why would he want Mil? Because she’s a princess?

Kuro remembered the chief saying something about the princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom having special powers. It might have explained why the Demon King’s forces had come for Mil. The chief had been kidnapped for the sake of obtaining those powers.

Chief…

Saving the chief meant betraying Mil. She’d probably never see Mil again, but it was the only way. The ogre couldn’t kill the chief without making an enemy of the entire village, so the Demon King’s forces were sure to release her once they had Mil.

We just became friends… How could I…

Kuro’s mother had died in childbirth, and the chief had quickly stepped in to fill the role. Her father, meanwhile, had joined the Demon King’s army in her youth, and he’d lost his life in a campaign somewhere. With both parents gone, she’d been raised almost solely by the village chief.

The chief had long been a diligent and patient teacher to Kuro,

despite Kuro often being slow on the uptake. Irie had taught Kuro to use a sword so that she could defend the village. When Kuro had gotten lost in the forest, it was the chief who'd searched for her until her own clothes were torn and ragged.

What choice do I have…?

✧✧✧

"Hey, Kuro. How big's the lake we're visiting?"

Early the next morning, before breakfast time, Mil and Yulia were following Kuro as she led them away from the village.

The paths they took were little more than animal trails through the depths of the forest. They had to push their way through the undergrowth as they walked.

Kuro had suggested they trek to a nearby lake, explaining that they had to get there early to see it at its most magnificent.

They'd brought their swords since there was always a risk of danger outside the village, but that was just a precaution.

"About average, I suppose. It's not huge."

In spite of the beautiful sight awaiting them, Kuro sounded down. Either she was feeling unwell or she just wasn't in the mood for an outing.

"Is something wrong?" Mil asked her.

"No, it's nothing. We're nearly there."

Through a gap in the trees they caught sight of the surface of the lake sparkling as it reflected the morning sun.

Mil started running ahead the moment she spotted it.

"Wow, it's so pretty! Is this the lake you wanted to show us, Kuro?" Mil looked back.

"I'm…sorry," Kuro muttered before clenching her teeth in frustration.

An ogre dressed in black emerged between Mil and her companions. Then more demons and orcs appeared, surrounding Mil.

"Just as we planned," the ogre said. "You've served me well, Kuro."

"Huh? What's going on?"

"Mil, Yulia… I'm sorry."

Another demonkin appeared beside Kuro and grabbed Yulia.

“Ahhhh. No, l-let me go.”

“Yulia!” Mil cried.

The ogre in black stepped forward. He had to be the leader of the group. “If you wish what’s best for your friends, I suggest you accompany me back to the Demon King’s Castle.”

“Who’s this guy with the horn?”

The ogre had a massive sword on his back. It would take two hands to wield, but even then, no ordinary human could have used it.

“Pardon my rudeness. I am Red Arms Grood of the Demon King’s Heavenly Four. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“The Heavenly Four?!”

Crowell had mentioned them. They were the four most powerful demonkin among the Demon King’s forces, second only to the Demon King himself.

Mil extended her hand a little toward him, ever so slightly to not raise suspicion.

```
Name: Grood / Level: 145
HP: 3550
MP: 1400
STR: 1905
DEF: 2051
INT: 1504
DEX: 1695
SPD: 1302
LUK: 1090

Passive Skills: demon general, two-handed sword
proficiency (high), Magic Sword Gram proficiency
(high), ultra-regeneration, fire resistance (high)

Active Skills: demon light slash, howl of fury,
advanced black magic, thundershock
```

He’s strong…

It seemed the Heavenly Four weren’t mere figureheads. This was the strongest demonkin she’d encountered so far. She had no

chance of beating him in a fair fight.

"I am here under direct orders from His Majesty. Lady Mil, we will return to the Demon King's Castle together. Your unscheduled outing has been cause for concern."

Mil had been expecting pursuers, but not so soon. She couldn't stand to go back now that she'd finally started adventuring and made some friends—if she returned to the Demon King's Castle, she'd probably never see Yulia or Kuro again.

Mil drew her sword. "I'm not going! I wanna adventure more!"

Mil looked at the orcs around her. Some were surely the same orcs she'd known in the Demon King's Castle, but they looked far less friendly now. They had to be under strict orders.

I hope I can avoid injuring anyone. Even Grood. He's just doing his job.

"Must you be so stubborn?" Grood said. "Surely you understand your situation?"

"Ugh…"

Behind Grood, Yulia grimaced as an orc gripped her tight.

"I heard that you escaped by defeating the gatekeepers of the Demon King's Castle. You're strong, I'll give you that, but it won't help you when I have hostages."

His knowledge of Mil's strength must have been why he resorted to this elaborate plan instead of attacking as she slept.

"Let Yulia go!" Mil demanded.

"Do as I say and she'll be released in due time. But if you refuse…" Grood called to the orc, "Do it."

The orc nodded his head in response, then clenched his hand around Yulia's throat.

"Leave Yulia out of this! Let her go! Orcs, please say something!"

The orcs simply scowled at Mil without speaking or moving. She'd seen how soldiers in the royal capital behaved while carrying out the king's orders, so she knew there was nothing she could say to convince them.

"Come quietly and no one has to get hurt. My orders were simply to bring back Lady Mil. I'll accomplish that, even if it requires sacrifices."

"Sacrifices…?"

Does he mean Yulia…? Would he really go that far?

Mil's thoughts were growing so muddled she couldn't speak.

She felt like her limbs were made of lead, rooting her to the spot.

Grood finally lost patience. With a click of his tongue he said, “Kuro, put these manacles on the princess.”

Kuro was cowering near Mil’s side when Grood threw a pair of silver manacles down at her feet.

“There are mana-blocking crystals embedded in them. Whatever spells she might know, they won’t work once she’s wearing these. This too.” He threw down another object. This one looked like a collar.

“What’s this?”

“The ring of evil. It’s a cursed item that, once worn, cannot be removed by anyone except its owner. Should the wearer refuse to obey the owners orders, it causes them pain so severe they’ll long to die. In short, it’ll make her my pet.”

“Y-You don’t have to go that far! This wasn’t part of the deal…”

“What are you saying?” Grood moved closer to Kuro then grabbed her by her clothing.

“Gughh…”

“*You have no other choice.* Have you still yet to understand your situation?”

“No… I c-can’t…let my…friend… Ahhh.”

Before Kuro could finish, Grood slammed her to the ground. Then he kicked her repeatedly, sending her rolling. “You don’t get it, do you? Don’t you care what happens to your chief?! Fool!”

“Guhh… Ahh!” Kuro didn’t try to fight back. She didn’t even try to defend herself.

Now Mil understood why Kuro had felt down the whole time. She’d been threatened by this ogre. Mil surmised that the chief had been kidnapped and that Kuro was coerced into bringing her to the lake. Meanwhile, Mil herself pranced and played without a care, completely unaware of the danger they were in.

“Perhaps you’ll understand better once I’ve beaten some sense into you! Like this!”

“Ugh, guh!”

Mil clenched her fists. “Stop…”

“Well?!” Grood yelled. “Not so defiant now are—”

“Stop it!” Mil’s rage-filled cry shook the air around them.

Grood finally stopped kicking Kuro and turned to look at Mil, his eyes wide with shock.

“Lady Mil...?”

It wasn’t just Grood who was shocked. All of the orcs were looking at her nervously too.

“You’re not getting away with this,” Mil told Grood. “I’m not so mad at everyone else, but I won’t let anyone hurt Kuro and Yulia!”

It turned out demonkin were just like humans. Many of them were good people. Others, not so much. As she came to terms with this realization, for the first time in her life, Mil became genuinely angry, and that anger was quickly boiling over.

I’m gonna...! She was determined to punish the demonkin before her.

“*Gravity gate!*”

“Ugaahhh! Wh-What is this?!”

The foot Grood had used to kick Kuro sank into the ground. *Gravity gate* was forbidden magic that massively increased the gravity in an area. Grood’s leg continued to sink deeper into the ground, threatening to pop right off his body.

“Enough with your tricks! Is that all your magic can do?! *Anti-domination!*” Grood used a spell Mil had never heard of, and her magic lost its effect the moment Grood finished casting, allowing him to pull his leg free. It had to be some sort of spell for interfering with other spells.

“*Dark mist!*” Mil didn’t give Grood the chance to fight back, covering everything around her in a thick black mist. She prayed that her friends would find some way to escape under the cover of darkness. “Yulia! Kuro!”

“Whoa!”

“Guah!”

Mil’s fears were soon alleviated when she heard the pained groans of orcs in the darkness.

“*Aqua shift!*”

Next Mil heard Yulia casting a spell, followed by more anguished cries from the orcs.

“Take this! *Whirlwind!*”

When the strong wind swept away the mist, leaving Mil’s view clear, she saw Kuro and Yulia standing right in front of her.

“Yulia! Kuro!”

“M-Mil... Th-That was so scary!” Yulia was trembling and still close to tears.

“Mil… I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.” Tormented by guilt, Kuro couldn’t even lift her head.

Mil shook her head. “No, you did nothing wrong, Kuro. It was all that demonkin’s fault. I know he forced you into everything by capturing Irie.”

“But…I lied about—”

“It doesn’t count. I’m gonna punish him!” Mil turned to face Grood.

“You can use demonkin magic…?” Grood said. “You must have read the spell books in the library. But it’s nothing more than a human’s pale imitation! Your mana can’t compare to that of a demonkin!” Grood created a ball of air in his hands then threw it at Mil. “*Wind bomb!*”

Yulia held out both her hands. “*Wall wind!*”

The barrier stopped Grood’s wind bomb from reaching them before it exploded—however, it couldn’t stop the aftershocks, and Yulia cried as she was pushed back.

Even Yulia struggled to block an attack from one the Demon King’s most powerful soldiers. Another one of those and she might not stay on her feet.

I need a way to block magic… Oh, I know!

“What did I tell you? You mana can’t compare! *Wind bomb!*”

As Grood was casting the spell a second time, Mil quickly drew a dagger from her bag.

“Nh! What?!”

The dagger she grabbed was the Rune Edge she’d picked up in the treasure vault—the dagger with the power to absorb an opponent’s magic.

It was also able to fire whatever magic it absorbed. With a “Yah!”, Mil swung the dagger and fired the ball of air back at Grood’s feet.

“You must have found that dagger in the vault! Grr… Who would have thought that a princess would be a thief…?” Now enraged, Grood yelled at the orcs, “Don’t just stand there! Rush them! Capture the princess!”

The orcs all raised their swords and axes then charged at Mil.

“Ah wah wah—” Yulia panicked. “Mil, wh-what now?!”

“I’ve decided. I’ll never let you down again, Mil!” Kuro drew her katana and prepared to hold back the orcs by herself.

But there was no need for that.

“Leave it to me. *Gravity gate!*” This time Mil cast the spell over a wider area.

The orcs headed for Mil all cried out in surprise.

“Whoa!”

“Wh-What is this?!”

“I feel so heavy…”

In no time at all, they were all lying flat on the ground.

Mil then drew her sword and approached one of the orcs. *Gravity gate* had no effect on the caster. Once an opponent entered its range, they were trapped by a net of gravity, and it was game over.

“Ah! S-S-Sorry! Lord Grood ordered me to do it! I never meant to hurt you, Mil!”

It was hard to tell one orc from another, but Mil definitely knew this one from the training hall. Without a word, Mil swung her sword down at the orc.

“Eek!” the orc cried as the blade stopped an inch from his face.

“Where’s Irie? You kidnapped her, didn’t you?”

“Sh-She’s over there!”

Mil followed the orc’s gaze and saw another orc outside the range of the gravity gate, with the village chief gagged beside him.

“Let her go. And don’t get in my way again. Your bodies might be weighed down, but my sword isn’t.”

Once Mil had released the spell, the orcs all scattered into the forest yelling, “We’re sorry!”

As the orcs were running away from Mil, the chief came running toward her. Though her mouth was gagged, her legs weren’t bound.

“Chief! Are you all right?!” Kuro untied the gag.

“Kuro, Princess Mil… I’m terribly sorry. I let myself be captured and did nothing to help.”

“I was no better,” Kuro said. “We’re really sorry, Mil. I deceived you.”

“No, it’s fine. You were just making sure Irie was safe.” Mil was relieved that the chief wasn’t injured.

“H-Hey! Where do you think you’re all going?!” Grood turned to face Mil.

Mil pointed her sword at Grood. “Apologize to Kuro, Yulia, and

Irie."

"Grrrr. Who do you think you are, little human?"

Grood drew a massive sword from behind his back. Not even Mil felt she could stop a swing from a weapon like that.

But a target that big was easy to hit. Mil held her hand in front of her and cast the most powerful forbidden magic spell she'd used so far. "*Extinction Gate!*"

A black bead appeared at the tip of Grood's sword, quickly growing into a lightless void.

"Wh-What did you—?!"

As the void engulfed Grood's sword, he threw it down in fear. The black mass swallowed the blade completely before vanishing, taking a large chunk of the ground along with it. It was all gone in an instant.

Not a single trace was left of the black mass, nor of anything caught within. The sword was reduced to just its hilt and a small piece of the blade.

"Magic Sword Gram... Wh-Why..."

"This spell doesn't just erase swords. I could cast it inside your body just as easily. Now apologize to Kuro and everyone else!"

Mil knew Grood's stats. A one-on-one battle would be tough, but now it was three against one. Together, they had the advantage.

"Ngh... Pah. You'll regret the day you defied me. *Warp gate!*"

"W-Wait!"

Grood's spell tore a black distortion into the nearby space, which he stepped into without hesitation. Once it closed behind him, he was gone completely.

"Teleportation magic...?" Mil wondered to herself. "I didn't know that existed."

He'd probably gone back to the Demon King's Castle. Kidnapping Mil should have been easy with the aid of teleportation magic, unless he could only use it on himself.

Angry as Mil was, there was no way for her to follow him.

"I can't forgive that guy! Look how badly hurt everyone is!"

As Mil was stomping her foot in rage, Kuro placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm really sorry, Mil. I've done something so awful that no amount of apologizing is going to be enough."

“No, you haven’t! It was all that demonkin’s fault! He can’t get away with hurting Kuro and Irie like this!”

“We brought it on ourselves by betraying you,” Kuro said.

“But that wasn’t—”

Kuro cut Mil off. “Please, let me apologize. I take responsibility for everything. But I’m not asking you to forgive me.”

“Forget all that! You did nothing wrong. Right, Yulia?”

Yulia nodded her head.

“Thank you, Mil.” Kuro bowed her head low.

Talking to Kuro was helping Mil to calm down a little. “Those demonkin only came here because of me. I’m sorry too.”

“No, you did nothing wrong. It was our fault. There were other ways we could have handled this, and yet I brought you right to him.”

“It was me who got you mixed up in all this.”

“No it wasn’t! You did nothing wrong!”

“No. If I’d never come here—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” the village chief said with a clap of her hands. “If you both keep apologizing, it’ll go on forever. How about you settle it by shaking hands?”

It was just as the chief said. Neither wanted to back down because both felt uneasy about what had happened. They’d already forgiven each other, but until they both forgave themselves, they couldn’t move on.

“She’s right… Mil.”

“Okay.”

Mil and Kuro shook hands. Not for the sake of forgiving each other, but themselves.

“Thanks, Kuro. But I’m leaving today, before I cause any more trouble for the village. Besides, I wanna adventure more, and I’ve gotta get back to the royal capital.”

“Okay…”

Kuro’s ears drooped flat on her head. It was obvious she wanted to go adventuring too. But she’d said that their code wouldn’t permit her to go outside. She was going to have to part with the new friends she’d only just met.

“Oh? Why don’t you go with them, Kuro?” the chief suggested.

“What…? But Chief, I thought leaving was against the village code?”

“That was a lie.”

“A lie?!”

Irie grinned. “There *was* a rule like that, but only until about a decade ago. The practice is meaningless in this day and age, so it was abolished.”

“But why…?”

The chief smiled at Mil. “Rules made long ago aren’t always relevant to us, are they?”

“Then I can go with Mil…?”

“I’ll be sad to see you leave, but I’d like you to spend some time among humans. What do *you* want to do?”

“I…” Kuro let out a big sigh. “I’d like to go. I want to visit the outside world and eat all kinds of tasty food and lots of it!”

“Then go. You might miss home at first, but all the new experiences will make it worth it.”

“Chief…” Kuro was still reluctant to leave her home. Although she said she wanted to go, her ears were still drooping a little.

“Princess Mil, please take good care of Kuro for a while,” the chief said while bowing her head.

“Of course! It’s great to have you with us, Kuro! Let’s eat lots of good food together!”

“Oh…! Thank you, both of you.” Kuro’s ears pricked up and a look of determination appeared on her face.

“I’m g-glad to have you with us…”

When Yulia nervously held out her hand, Kuro gripped it firmly.

“I’m so glad—huh?” Mil looked down and saw scales, like those of a lizardman, spreading across her left arm. When she rubbed her eyes and took another look, they were gone.

Am I…seeing things?

Her body looked fine, and nothing felt unusual. She had to conclude that she was imagining things after getting so heated a moment ago.

“Now,” the village chief said, “let’s all return to the village and have breakfast.”

“You’re right chief.” *Grrr.* “I’ll bet these two are hungry.” *Grrr.* Kuro’s stomach was growling loudly. She did her best to act calm, but her face was turning bright red. “D-Don’t look at me like that!”

“It sounds like Kuro’s hungry too,” Mil said. “Heh heh.”

Oh well. I was probably imagining things. All that matters is that I

get to eat their amazing food again. And there's something else to be even happier about…

"Wh-What is it, Mil?" Kuro asked.

"Teh heh heh. It's a secret."

I'll have another friend with me on my adventure!

Chapter 4: This Is a Bit of a Pinch!

The Demon King's heavy sigh echoed through the throne room.

"My apologies, Sire! I gave the matter my all, but Princess Mil has learned forbidden magic from the spell books in the library, and Magic Sword Gram was…"

Not long after fleeing, Grood was kneeling before the Demon King with sweat streaming down his face like a waterfall. Having seen what became of others who'd failed so utterly, the thought of meeting a similar fate had filled him with terror.

The Demon King merely sat on the throne with his eyes closed as he listened to Grood's report. Then, with a deep sigh, he finally responded, "Did she use a form of forbidden magic that erases regions of space?"

"Ah! Yes! I've never seen such magic. The mere sight of it filled me with fear."

"*Extinction Gate*. Over a thousand years ago, we demonkin used that same magic to erase the nation of a hostile adversary known as the dragonkin."

"Yes, I've read written accounts of that incident. They say a long war between demonkin and dragonkin ended with a single spell…" Grood then roared in surprise, "*That's* the spell she's using?!"

The dragonkin had been a prosperous people over a thousand years ago, but now, so few traces remained that they were considered extinct. And all because of a single *Extinction Gate* spell cast by a demon warlock. Written accounts said that all of the dragonkin were erased, but the precise details had been lost to time.

"If Mil only erased one sword, then she probably hasn't discovered the true extent of its power," the Demon King said. "But it sounds as though the records are true—the very sight of the spell is enough to instill terror."

"Then the fear I felt was a side effect of her magic?"

"It's said that the warlock who used the spell to destroy the dragonkin lost his mind in the process. It consumes not just regions of space, but also people's minds. Or at least, that's how I

interpret it."

"And now it's in the hands of a young girl..."

"Well, no matter what magic she might have learned, a single human's mana is limited. It's hard to imagine her ever developing the power to destroy an entire nation with a single spell. Unless..."

Mil was a goddess's priestess. It could be a mistake to assume she was subject to the same limitations as ordinary humans. *We can't be sure yet*, the Demon King concluded.

"Sire, I beg for your mercy."

Grood kept his head low. He couldn't have been prepared to face such magic, but he'd failed to capture Mil all the same. He waited, ready to accept whatever punishment was given to him.

"You've determined the extent of Mil's forbidden magic. That's enough."

The Demon King knew he'd given Grood a difficult task, but he'd fully expected him to capture Mil. It seemed she was proving to be more trouble than anyone had realized.

And she's using techniques learned from Swordmaster Crowell... She'll easily dispatch any ordinary pursuer...

Grood had never been much of a fighter. Powerful as he was, he tended to be overly cautious and entrusted tasks to subordinates whenever possible. The rest of the Heavenly Four were different. It was the very reason they weren't welcome within the castle.

"Are the other members of the Heavenly Four still engaged elsewhere?" the Demon King asked.

"Yes, Sire. They're leading expeditions to the north and west. If they were recalled now, the front lines would—"

"Yes, I know. I can give this task to someone else," The Demon King looked at the large throne room doors and called, "Enter."

There was a low rumbling as the doors opened.

It was Graun of the royal guard who entered first. "You called for me, Sire?"

By his side, now wearing light armor instead of her former maid outfit, was Crowell. "I am at your command, Sire."

"Graun, Crowell, I'd like you both to track down Princess Mil."

"Please leave it to us, Sire."

"As you command."

They each knelt and placed a hand to their chest.

"And Crowell, make sure you actually *apprehend* her. Don't tell

me later that my orders were merely to track and not capture her."

"As you wish, Sire. I will track down Princess Mil and apprehend her as you command."

"It's what you should have done in the first place. Don't fail me this time. Graun, I'm counting on you too."

"Yes, Sire. My sister and I will work without rest."

Whew... The Demon King slumped in his throne. "That unruly princess has been nothing but—"

The Demon King was interrupted by the door to the throne room slowly opening.

Another demonkin entered and stepped in front of Graun and Crowell. "Father, I'd like to talk about yesterday."

The Demon King didn't have to look at her directly to know it was his daughter, Mary.

Mary was fearful as she chanced a glance at her father's face. It was a sorry attitude for someone next in line to the throne.

Already in a bad mood because of his subordinates' failure, the Demon King replied loudly, "I thought we settled this yesterday. You're a future queen. You're not going adventuring over some vague notions about wanting to see the outside world."

"But..."

The Demon King was unmoved by her pleading eyes. "Enough! I'll send you outside when the time is right. And not alone. You'll have guards. I won't have you going off by yourself and pretending to be an adventurer!"

"But father..."

"What do you think you can accomplish anyway? You're ignorant of the outside world and lacking in combat experience. Now stop troubling me. Return to your lessons."

Her father's dismissal left Mary so deflated that she left the throne room without another word.

"Graun, Crowell, head out at once. I won't tolerate failure."

"Yes, Sire," they both replied before leaving.

No matter what forbidden magic she might've learned, she doesn't have the experience she'd need to escape the brother and sister both.

"I just hope Crowell won't go so easy on her this time." Despite their skills, the Demon King couldn't help but worry nonetheless.

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“So that’s what Father really thinks…”

After leaving the throne room, Mary slumped against a wall with her head hung low.

She’d had a sheltered upbringing in the most literal sense. No matter how much she pleaded, she was always denied the right to even step outside, just because she was the Demon King’s daughter.

As she was sighing to herself, a pair of lizardmen talking at the end of the corridor caught her attention.

“It was a garuda? Aren’t they the birds that lay those tasty eggs?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Anyway, it came down from the mountains and took out a few of our soldiers a short while back.”

“I’m guessing they’ll put a hunting squad together.”

“I’m not so sure. The nest’s in a ravine. It’s no easy trek. *We’d* never reach it; we can’t fly.”

“Even if we could, we’d be no match for it. From what I heard, it beat one of our demons.”

“No way.”

A garuda?

Mary had read about them in the library. A garuda was a ferocious demonic bird, and if the lizardmen were to be believed there was one giving the Demon King’s forces a lot of trouble.

Combat experience… Her father’s words replayed in her head. *If he thinks I’m ignorant and lacking in combat experience then I’ll just have to change that. I can bring back an egg to prove I’ve done it. That’ll change how he looks at me.*

Mary clenched her fists. Even if the punishment for sneaking out went far beyond a mere scolding, she was determined to prove she had what it took to handle herself in the outside world.

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In the fortress town of Algram, Mil collapsed with a thud on the main road just inside the town’s gate. “Finally… We made it!”

“M-Mil, you’re blocking the road,” Yulia said.

“So this is the fortress town! I hope the food’s good! Oh, they’re selling meat!” Kuro began to wander away.

“Kuro, wait, you’ll get lost!” Yulia cried. “Mil, please get up.”

The party had left Kuro's village about a week ago. After leaving the forest and crossing some hills, they sighted a town just as impressive as the royal capital.

Within the huge wall that encircled the fortress town of Algram was a population of over fifty thousand. The close proximity to the Demon King's Castle and dangerous monsters that inhabited the region meant that the town could never have grown so large without strong defenses.

The town was bustling with not just humans, but also beastkin similar to Kuro and a few types of friendly demonkin. Horse-drawn carts were constantly coming and going along the main roads, as were groups dressed like adventurers, and merchants carrying huge bags of wares. Some gave Mil curious glances as she lay in the dirt.

Yulia dragged her along the ground by her clothing. "Mil, at least get out of the road."

"Sure is dusty around here," Mil observed.

"All these people are making me feel a little nervous." Yulia was like a fish out of water. Her eyes kept darting from one sight to the next. The small village where she'd grown up could never have held this many people at once.

"Look at all the demonkin and beastkin," Mil said. "You don't see so many different races in the royal capital."

"Are the streets of the royal capital just like this?"

"Yep! But not so dusty since the roads are paved with stones. All the dirt gets into the air here."

"You're right... But Mil, we need to move quickly before Kuro disappears somewhere."

Kuro had wandered over to the opposite side of the road, drawn in by the restaurants and taverns there.

"Oh, good. She's finding us a place to eat lunch." Mil jumped to her feet. "Hey, Kuro, wait up."

"Ahh. Mil, wait for me."

Kuro was standing in front of a building with her tail swishing to and fro as Yulia and Mil ran to catch up.

"Oh, Mil. This place has some good looking meat dishes!"

It was a wooden building by the roadside with a stylish exterior. The sign in front of it said "Adventurer's Guild." Indeed, when Mil looked in through the window, she saw lots of adventurers sitting

inside—fighters in light armor, priests in robes, and a few mages too. Also outside was a display case full of replicas of the dishes sold there.

“It’s an adventurer’s guild,” Mil said. “And it looks like they serve food too.”

She’d heard that most guilds doubled as places for the adventurers to eat, and this one was no exception.

“What’s an adventurer’s guild?” Kuro asked.

“It’s a place to sign up for quests or form a party. Every adventurer goes there at least once. There’s no better place to gather information…or so I’ve heard.”

Since Mil and her friends were adventurers, she figured there was no reason not to go in.

“Well, now we can grab something to eat and maybe find a nice quest while we’re at it.”

“Meat! Meat!”

“I’ve n-never been anywhere like this.”

Their hearts raced as Mil opened the entrance door.

The moment they stepped inside, their ears were assaulted by the clamor of rowdy adventurers. The main street was bustling, but inside the guild was a whole new level of loud, and Mil nearly staggered back. A party of adventurers at a nearby table were clanking their glasses together and laughing loudly. Deeper inside, two adventurers had grabbed each other by the lapels in some sort of dispute over the quests on the noticeboard. A few fearsome warriors had gathered around the fighting men to cheer them on and place bets.

“Ooh! I smell the meat!”

“I’ve never actually been in a guild before…but I guess we just go to the counter and— Yulia?” Mil realized that Yulia was clinging tightly to her sleeve with tears in her eyes.

“I’m a little s-scared…”

“There’s a free table!” Kuro declared. “Come on, let’s hurry. You too, Yulia.”

Kuro couldn’t bear to wait around, but Yulia was a nervous wreck. The atmosphere of the guild was proving far too much for her.

“Come on, let’s go sit at that empty table,” Mil said to her.

“O-Okay…”

The trio walked to a table by the window where they all sat down.

A woman in an apron soon came over to their table with a notepad in her hand. “Welcome to the Adventurer’s Guild. What’ll it be?”

“Give me your best meat!” Kuro’s impatience was visible in her eyes.

“Ah ha ha,” Mil laughed. “Meat could be nice, but I think I want something lighter. What other dishes do you recommend?”

The server hesitated for a moment then said, “Well, my recommendation would be an egg-based dish, but…”

Kuro’s ears twitched with excitement. “We’ll have that! The dish with eggs!”

“But first you’d have to bring a garuda egg to the guild,” the server explained. “I don’t suppose you brought any eggs with you?”

“Nope,” Mil replied. “Don’t tell me adventurers have to bring their own ingredients before they can eat anything?”

“That’s not quite the case,” the server replied with a smile. “We only ask that adventurers supply rare ingredients when they’re in short supply. If you bring in more than required, we can also pay out rewards for the surplus.”

In essence, adventurers didn’t usually visit the guild to buy things. They came to get rewarded in some way for the quests they’d completed.

“Kuro, we’ll have to go fetch the eggs later.”

“Indeed! I heard about garudas back in my village. They’re ferocious birds that eat people, aren’t they?”

The server immediately tried to talk them out of it. “I’m sorry if I raised your hopes with talk of rewards, but that’s a high-difficulty assignment. Even veteran adventurers rarely manage to obtain a garuda egg.”

But it was too late now. The talk of eggs and difficult challenges had captured their imaginations. So far they’d completed a difficult journey to the town, but hadn’t encountered any of the tough foes or hurdles that featured in stories about heroes.

“This is what adventuring’s all about!” Mil said. “You don’t mind, do you, Yulia?”

“Sounds scary… But if you’re going, Mil…” Yulia agreed, albeit

nervously.

“Okay, can we sign up to collect eggs later?” Mil asked.

“That’s no problem,” the server replied, “but you certainly made that decision quickly.”

“It sounds really fun.” It would be Mil’s first guild quest, and she couldn’t wait.

“All the other adventurers are too scared to do it… Well, let’s consider that settled. Would you like something else in the meantime? Of the dishes we have readily available, I’d recommend the tansel fish meunière.”

They’d gotten distracted talking about garuda eggs, but they’d have to order something else in the meantime.

Yulia began to fidget, then mumbled, “I’d like the fish dish…if that’s all right.”

After eating nothing but wild plants in the forest, Mil liked the sound of it too.

Kuro, likewise, was drooling from the corner of her mouth.

“Okay, could we have three of those?” Mil asked.

“Of course. It’ll be right with you.” The server returned to the area behind the counter.

“I can hardly wait to try this fish,” Kuro said. “It’s been a week since we ate anything other than mushrooms.”

Yulia nodded in agreement.

“Yeah,” Mil said. “I can’t wai—huh?”

Around them, other adventurers were discussing various rumors, and a particular conversation had caught Mil’s attention.

On the table behind Mil, one man said to another, “So, according to the information I bought from a demonkin, the princess trapped in the Demon King’s Castle escaped.”

“I heard about that. They say she punched the castle gate down then defeated a hundred orcs with her bare fists on the way out.”

“Not just that. I heard from a merchant that she stopped a dragon from attacking a village then laughed while tormenting it half to death.”

“What kind of princess does a thing like that?”

“Then when she was done, she made it into her pet.”

“Are you serious? She can’t be human.”

That has to be me they’re talking about…

“They’re exaggerating, aren’t they?” Yulia said. She must have

been listening too.

Mil started to regret telling anyone she was a princess.

The conversation between the men continued. “Didn’t you learn anything more?”

“Yeah, listen to this. They said the Demon King’s daughter disappeared from the Demon King’s Castle around the same time. I’m not sure I believe it though. Maybe someone got her mixed up with the human princess.”

“Does the Demon King even have a daughter? I don’t know much about his castle. The monsters around there are so bad that only platinum-ranked adventurers can even get close.”

“True. Especially since there’s no caverns or ruins. It’s all risk, no reward. No hunting quests around there either.”

“Yep.”

The Demon King’s daughter…? Mil had met her briefly—a great scythe wielding demon by the name of Mary Garland. *What makes anyone think she’d leave the castle? I wish I could ask them about it, though it doesn’t sound like they know much.*

The server reappeared with plates balanced on both hands. “Sorry to keep you waiting! Tansel fish meunière for three!”

As the dishes were placed on the table, the fragrance rose from the plates and stole the girls’ attention.

“Ooh! Time to try it!” With no hesitation, Kuro grabbed her chopsticks and carried a piece to her mouth. “This is delicious! I’ve never tasted anything like it!”

While Kuro enjoyed her meal, the server said, “By the way, our guild is also offering rewards for the ingredients of this dish. It’s a relatively easy job for anyone good at fishing, making it a reliable source of income for local adventurers.”

“Wow.” Mil put another piece of white fish in her mouth as she listened to the server.

“The minimum rank is just… Oh, I forgot to ask, what rank are you all?”

“Huh? What rank?”

“Oh? You haven’t heard of that? Forgive me for asking, but how long have you all been adventurers?”

The men behind them had mentioned something about a platinum rank too.

Adventurers are supposed to have ranks…? Mil began to grow

worried.

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“Dang,” Mil groaned. “I can’t believe we have to get ranked before we take on the garuda egg quest.”

“It’s a good thing there’s a rank assessment happening today,” Yulia replied.

They’d found the assessment hall just a short distance from the main street. It was a large space within a square stone building that reminded Mil of a training hall for soldiers. The high ceiling and tough walls both looked like they’d been fortified to keep spells contained. The floor was hardened dirt, and wooden training dummies were placed at regular intervals.

“I really hope we pass.” Mil took a look at the other examinees. There were a little over a dozen of them, and each looked like a seasoned fighter, a practiced mage, or some other form of veteran adventurer. “I’m not so confident…”

According to the staff at the Adventurer’s Guild, an adventurer’s strength was indicated by their rank, and there was a minimum rank needed for many quests.

Of the seven different ranks, platinum was the highest. The details didn’t really matter to Mil’s party as long as they could take on the garuda egg quest, so they hadn’t asked any questions. All they knew was that they needed to pass this exam to do the quest.

“I wonder what we’ll have to do… I’m worried I might fail…” Yulia was keeping close to Mil and trembling.

Kuro, on the other hand, was full of enthusiasm. “We just need one member of our party to pass, don’t we? Okay! I’ll make sure I pass!”

A woman dressed in the guild’s official uniform addressed the examinees. “The exam is about to start. There’ll be a measurement of your abilities, and then we’ll ask you to demonstrate your best skills or magic on this training dummy. The dummy is enchanted so as to absorb whatever technique you might use, and we’ll decide whether you’ve passed or failed based on the quantity of energy absorbed.”

Beside the woman was an elderly priest with a white beard. He stepped forward and said, “I am one of the goddess’s chosen

priests. I'd like each of you to step before me in turn so that I might examine you before you attempt the practical assessment."

This set off the examinees chattering to one another.

"A goddess's priest? Only a chosen few get that title."

"Isn't this the priest that made an adventurer retire a while back when he branded him talentless?"

"Well, when a goddess's priest gives an adventurer advice, there's no ignoring it... I sure hope he doesn't call me talentless."

They were all in awe of the elderly priest.

Yulia whispered in Mil's ear, "He said goddess's priest."

Mil whispered back, "Yeah, he's got the same power as me."

If the priest could likely see the stats of another, just like Mil, then this was sure to be a fair assessment.

"Ooh. Well, that should make it easy," Kuro said. "I was ready to admit defeat if it was a written exam."

"I'm still a little worried," Yulia said. "Everyone else looks so strong..."

Mil doubted that either of her friends would fail, but at the same time, she wasn't expecting this to be easy.

"All right, I'm first up." The man who boldly stepped forward with an axe in hand looked like a fighter.

"Indeed... Let's begin." The priest held out his hand to examine the man.

Ngh. I wish I could see...

Mil wanted to examine the fighter herself, but then the priest might see her status window and realize she was a goddess's priestess. Things could quickly get out of hand if he then guessed she was the missing princess.

I just want a quick peek... Mil was finding it hard to resist.

"Urraaahhh!" With a great roar, the fighter brought his axe down on the shoulder of the training dummy. He hit so hard that any ordinary dummy would have been reduced to splinters, but his axe bounced off with a metallic clang. Some sort of enchantment was reinforcing the dummy.

"That looks like a defense enchantment," Yulia whispered to Mil. As enchantments were Yulia's specialty, the young mage had better insight into them.

"Hmm..." The priest said. "You've shown promise, but your practical performance falls short."

“Gah… Your dummy’s too hard, old man.”

“I suggest you return after more training. Next.”

It sounded like he’d failed because of the way his weapon bounced off. It might have been a different story if he’d at least scratched the dummy.

“I’m up next.” The next adventurer held a greatsword. But much like the axe, his weapon bounced off the dummy, resulting in his failure. The test was proving tough for everyone.

This went on with the next few examinees failing in the same manner.

“Next is…examinee number eighteen,” the woman from the guild called out.

“Ah! Th-Th-Th-Th-That’s me…” Yulia had been trembling the whole time, but now the color in her face was totally gone.

“Go for it, Yulia.”

“You can do it, Yulia.”

Mil and Kuro were cheering her on as she stiffly stepped forward.

“Uh-oh.” Before she reached the priest, she tripped after her own feet.

Yulia’s clumsiness set off a round of laughter and jeering from the other examinees.

“Ha ha ha. Are you all right, miss?”

“Maybe you ought to back out now.”

“She looks like a mage, but can she even cast a spell?”

Mil commented to Kuro, “I hope Yulia’s gonna be okay.”

“Let’s hope she can cast spells with trembling hands,” Kuro replied.

They sounded like concerned parents watching over their child.

“Let’s see… Your stats are… Oh?!” The priest broke into a cold sweat as he looked back and forth between his status window and Yulia’s face.

“Um… May I…use magic?”

“Her stats are h-hidden from me… How can her level be that high…?” the priest muttered to himself. Apparently, he couldn’t see any information in his status window.

“Um…” Yulia said.

“O-Oh… Let’s move on to the practical assessment.” The priest sounded like he was still in a daze.

All the other adventurers, who couldn't see status windows, were still smirking at Yulia.

"H-Here goes…" Yulia took a breath then held out both hands.

A small fireball emerged from Yulia's palms, but It was so tiny that all the examinees watching burst out laughing.

"Bwah ha ha! That little thing! It's no bigger than a bean!"

"It's about time you went home, miss."

"You couldn't even defeat a baby with a piddly little spell like that!"

As the adventurers were making fun of her, Yulia continued channeling mana into the spell.

Then one of the adventurers noticed a change. "Wait… Is it getting bigger?"

Yulia's fireball was growing steadily, reaching the size of her palm then continuing on to get much bigger.

"Wh-What… How's it so big?"

"How's she still going?!"

"Stop!"

The adventurers were growing nervous. The fireball in front of Yulia had grown big enough to tower over a grown man.

"*Flare impact!*" Yulia cried as the fireball shot forward.

The fireball's searing heat melted the ground beneath it as it flew straight at the dummy, then an earsplitting roar and a wave of unbearable heat shook the exam hall, knocking several of the adventurers off their feet.

Black smoke rose from the spot where the dummy had been. It was so thick that no one could tell what had become of the dummy at first. Then, when the smoke finally cleared, there was nothing left but a small crater. Not even ash remained.

The adventurers, the priest, and the woman from the guild were all left speechless with their mouths agape.

Yulia was the one to finally break the silence. "Um… Sorry for breaking it… Was that enough…? I was worried I might destroy the room if I made my spell any bigger…"

"Oh… Ah… Yes, you passed."

"Thank you." Yulia bounced up and down on the spot. "Mil! I did it!"

The woman from the guild put a replacement dummy in the middle of the crater then called on the next adventurer. "N-Next…"

“Oh, that’s me.”

Adventurer number nineteen was Mil. Naturally, Mil’s party members were going to be called one after the other since they’d all rushed in to register at the same time.

As Mil passed Yulia, she was pleased to hear her whisper, “Do your best.”

Mil bowed deeply to the priest. “I’m ready, sir.”

The priest cleared his throat then said, “Let’s begin by measuring your stats… Uhh?!” The priest stared at the status window with wide eyes. “J-Just what are you…?”

“Can I start now?”

“Y-Yes… But make sure you hold back a little.”

This time the adventurers paid attention to the priest’s reaction and started muttering to each other.

Let’s do this. I can’t let myself fail after Yulia passed. I know plenty of spells, but if it’s just about making the dummy absorb lots of energy, then it has to be…

She held out both hands. “*Gravity gate!*”

The gravity around the training dummy instantly intensified, its enchantment quickly giving up against Mil’s power. In no time it began to crack and snap loudly, then soon after it fell apart and the pieces slammed into the floor.

“I’ve never seen magic like that!”

“Is the absorption enchantment even working?”

“Look, it’s even crushing the ground…”

Cracks appeared in the floor around the dummy, then a section of the room’s stone walls collapsed.

“Whoa! Look at that!”

“You’re telling me she was unranked until now?!”

The priest cried, “Th-That’s enough! Stop! You’ve passed! You’ve passed!”

When Mil finished her spell, the dummy had been crushed flat and the floor nearly shattered with it.

“I passed?! Yay! Yulia! Kuro! I did it!”

Yulia and Kuro were jumping up and down with excitement just like Mil had.

“Did you hear?” said one examinee to another. “They say the princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom escaped from the Demon King’s Castle not long ago.”

“The one who broke the castle walls down on the way out?”

“No… She can’t be…”

The adventurers were all looking at Mil.

I might be drawing a little too much attention to myself.

“N-Next,” the woman from the guild called.

“Oh! That’s me. Let’s finish this.”

“Do your best, Kuro!”

“Y-You can do it, Kuro!”

The priest froze for a moment when he realized Kuro was with Mil and Yulia. “W-Wait! You’re in the same party as those two?!”

“That’s right. I fight with a sword. If I slice one of those things into little pieces, will that be enough?”

“Eek…”

Kuro passed as easily as her two friends, making all the three of them ranked adventurers.

Once outside the exam hall, the trio huddled up together. Mil took command as the party prepared to set out on their first guild quest. “All right, everyone! Let’s go get those garuda eggs! Yay!”

“Yeah!” her party members cried in response.

✧✧✧

Mil’s party learned that the garuda they sought was a monstrous bird that roosted in the valley north of town—a valley hidden deep among towering mountains.

The road there was every bit as treacherous as the guild staff had warned. Or more accurately, there were no roads at all. They clambered from one rocky mass to another, shuffled along narrow ledges, and squeezed through narrow openings. It seemed that every single step had to be made with care lest someone be sent tumbling down the mountainside.

“Haah, haah,” Mil panted. “This is tougher than I expected… Haah, haah…”

“At least we didn’t meet any man-eating rocks…” Yulia replied. “Haah, haah…”

They were on a dirt path, strewn with boulders, where no trees grew. The path followed a cliff edge that afforded a view of the sprawling forests below. A single misstep would prove fatal.

“Maybe they were exaggerating about that. Ugh, I’m hungry.

Mil, isn't time for—oh?" Kuro had accidentally kicked a round object and sent it rolling across the dry ground. It was a human skull.

"Eep... Looks like someone ran into trouble here," Yulia said.

Mil gasped. "Watch out, you two! Something's coming!"

A section of a rocky wall dislodged itself, and then massive eyes and a mouth appeared in it.

"A face in a rock? It must be one of those man-eating rocks."

It was a massive face in a round rock, along with protrusions that functioned as arms and legs. Mil recognized it from the pictures she'd seen in an encyclopedia in the Demon King's Castle library. This rock golem had been disguising itself as part of the mountain.

Mil had expected golems to look more like humans, but all four of its limbs grew directly out of the spherical rock with the face on it.

"It's all round and cutesy. I wanna carve it into something a little more stylish."

"Careful, Mil!" Kuro warned. "That monster must have eaten countless humans. Don't get careless."

"Oh. Sorry, sorry."

She certainly couldn't afford to take risks. Their footing was unstable and it was a long way down.

Mil and Kuro both drew their swords, but fighting looked near impossible.

"We'd better watch our feet," Mil said. "We can hardly move or we'll fall over the edge."

Since they were perched on a narrow ledge on the side of a cliff, trying to dodge any attack from the golem could prove disastrous.

The golem swung its arm down at the ground, carving away the rock surface it grazed. They'd have to deal with it quickly or it was going to make the ledge collapse completely.

"Mil! What can we do?!" Kuro asked. "The ground we're standing on won't hold out!"

Mil tried to think of a useful spell. *Extinction Gate* was too risky because it could erase more of the ledge, poison wasn't likely to work on a rock monster, and explosions were out of the question. *Maybe Yulia knows something more useful...*

"Yulia! Can your magic move the ground?!"

“Um… I think so, but how would that help?”

“Can you push the golem off the cliff using the rocks behind it?”

“Oh! Yes, I can do that!”

Yulia stood directly facing the rock golem with the cliff to her back. Meanwhile, Mil and Kuro backed away against a wall.

“This spell should work wherever there’s a large stone surface. *Create rock!*”

“Oorrrh!” The golem groaned.

The rocks behind the golem suddenly jutted outward as Yulia used her magic to control the stone itself, shoving it toward the cliff’s edge.

“Ah wah wah.” Yulia hurried back to Mil and Kuro.

“Ooorrrhhh…” The rock golem stumbled toward the cliff then went tumbling over the edge.

“You did it! That was amazing, Yulia!”

“I r-really did it… Haah…” Yulia heaved a sigh of relief.

“Impressive! So this is what magic can do!” Kuro in particular was awestruck because she couldn’t use magic herself.

“Hey, why don’t you use that same magic to make some steps for us,” Mil suggested. “We’ll reach the top in no time.”

“Ooh, nice thinking!” Kuro said.

“I’ll g-give it a try!”

Yulia had previously explained that water magic worked best where there was a lot of water and wind magic worked best in windy places. It stood to reason that earth magic was stronger in places with an abundance of dirt and rocks.

Since almost everything in sight was a rock, the conditions were perfect for earth magic. Though that didn’t make Yulia’s magic any less impressive.

Aided by Yulia’s stone staircase, they found the remainder of the mountain much easier, and soon they reached an open space. In the center of the space was some flat ground peppered with large boulders. It was the perfect place to rest.

Yulia sat down with her back resting against one of the boulders. “Phew. Haah… I’m…exhausted…”

“Nice work, Yulia,” Mil said. “Now let’s all take a break.”

Kuro leaped up onto a boulder. “The shade behind this rock should be—whoa! Come over here! Someone’s hurt!” After peering at the ground behind the boulder, Kuro jumped down.

“Huh? A person? Kuro, wait.” Mil went behind the boulder to take a look for herself. It had to be an adventurer, which meant it was up to her party to save them.

Behind the boulder was a person lying face-down in its shadow. Kuro was already by their side trying to wake them up.

When Mil got closer, she found it was no human adventurer, but a demonkin. The two horns growing from their head and the two black wings on their back were those of a demon. She was a slender, fair-skinned demon girl clad in light armor, with an unusually pretty face.

“It’s a demonkin… Wait, she’s…”

Though the demon girl’s face was thinned with exhaustion, Mil recognized it, and the huge scythe lying by her side eliminated any doubt in her mind. It was the Demon King’s daughter, Mary Garland.

Judging from the dirt on Mary’s armor and all the cuts and grazes on her limbs, she’d been walking for a long time before she finally collapsed. Mary let out the occasional groan, suggesting she was still conscious and in some pain.

“Uwaah… Mil… Kuro…” Yulia approached from behind then collapsed in a heap on the floor as her stamina finally gave out. She was as exhausted as Mary.

“Mil, what should we do?” Kuro asked.

“For starters, I’ll try my magic on her.”

When Mil cast her healing spell, the injuries on Mary’s body rapidly faded, and the color returned to her face.

Kuro opened her waterskin and held it to Mary’s mouth. “It’s water. Drink it.”

Mary gulped it down willingly. “Ugh… Uuugh.” Her gaze was vacant but her eyes were open now.

“Mary, are you all right?”

“Uh… Huh? How did I…?” She still looked absent minded as she slowly came to her senses.

“You must have passed out. Don’t you remember?”

“Passed out…? Umm… Oh, you’re…” Mary was suddenly wide awake when she saw Mil’s face. She jumped to her feet and put some distance between the two of them with surprising quickness. “What are *you* doing here?!”

“I was about to ask you the same thing. You can’t have walked

all the way here from the Demon King's Castle."

"I... Um..." Mary looked at Kuro and Yulia. "Don't tell me you just saved me...?"

"Well, you were hurt really bad, and you looked thirsty. Oh, we can give you some food too, but it'll be dry rations unless you can wait a while."

Kuro placed a hand on Mil's shoulder. "Is this a friend of yours, Mil?"

"Well... She's the Demon King's daughter. I had a bit of a run-in with her while I was in her castle."

"The Demon King's daughter?!" Kuro stared at Mary with wide eyes.

"You're from the beastkin village, aren't you? Then you'd best listen up." Mary swept her hair back then puffed out her chest proudly. "I'm Mary Garland, daughter of the mighty Alvin Garland."

Ugh... Her boobs really are much bigger than mine.

Kuro sat down on the ground. "I hope I wasn't rude. They call me Kuro. Nice to meet you."

"Oh and, I'm Mil Arphilia, Holy Princess of the—"

Mary cut her off before she could finish. "I know who *you* are."

"Ah, yeah." Mil laughed awkwardly and scratched the back of her head. "I couldn't remember whether I ever introduced myself."

"Um... Thanks," Mary said.

"Huh? For what?"

"For the water! You've given me something, and demonkin always repay their debts. So I have to make it up to you now, don't I?"

Mil found it cute how Mary avoided her gaze as she spoke.

"Ugh... Mil... Water..."

"Whoops. Are you all right, Yulia?!" Kuro hurried to her.

They'd completely forgotten about Yulia.

"I see you've...found some companions," Mary said.

"Yep! The girl on the ground is Yulia. Her magic's something special!"

Kuro was dragging Yulia into the boulder's shadow.

"B-Be more gentle..." Yulia groaned.

"Something special...?" Mary said. "That's awfully vague. Anyway...I take it your journey's going well?"

"It sure is. But wait, what are you doing here, Mary?"

“Don’t call me by my first name. I was just running an errand. Now why don’t you explain what you’re all doing here?”

“We came to fetch garuda eggs for a guild quest. They’re gonna make them into food for us.”

“Garuda eggs?! You’re here for the garuda’s eggs too?!”

“What? That’s why you’re here, Mary?”

“I said stop calling me that.”

Mil took firm hold of Mary’s hand. “Let’s look for it together!”

“Why would we do that?”

“Well, if we’re both egg hunting, we might as well help each other look. Oh, and we were just about to have lunch. Why not join us?”

Mary frowned in response, but her stomach brooked no argument.

A short distance away, Kuro had taken a pot out of their dimensional bag and was already preparing food.

“F-Fine. It’ll be my way of thanking you for saving me.”

“You’d think it was you who’d saved us,” Kuro said.

“You be quiet,” Mary shot back, scowling.

“Great!” Mil said. “Let’s all eat together. We’ve got enough ingredients to make soup for everyone.”

Mil noticed Mary gulp in response to the word “soup.”

Once they’d all rested and had some food, they went back to climbing the mountain, and eventually they came to a precipice with a stream visible far below.

“This isn’t just a valley… It’s a canyon!” Kuro’s voice trembled as she looked over the edge.

“I heard the egg’s around here somewhere,” Mary said. Then she pointed at something. “Oh, over there.”

Half way down the cliff, the garuda nest was positioned precariously on a ledge. It was so much bigger than any ordinary bird’s nest that they couldn’t even imagine how large the garuda itself had to be.

“You never told us why you wanted the egg, Mary,” Mil said.

“I don’t have to tell you.” Mary abruptly turned her head away. Her argumentative nature was cute in its own way.

“We gave you some good soup just now, didn’t we?”

“Ugh…”

“There’s still some left.”

“Forget that,” Mary said. “How were you planning to get down there? Did you think you could climb down the cliff?”

She had a point. The garuda nest was some way down on a narrow ledge. They’d have to do some rock climbing to get near it. And not only that; whoever went down would have to climb back up with the eggs in their arms. All while powerful gusts blew through the canyon. They could feel the wind on their faces each time they looked over the edge.

“What’ll we do…?” Kuro asked.

“We’ll just have to climb down,” Mil said.

“B-But I can’t do that…” Yulia objected.

Mil gazed down at the nest. “Hmm…”

Mary gloated over them. “Heh, heh. I’ll take care of this while you three are wringing your hands,” she said before jumping off the cliff.

“What?! Mary! Huh…?”

Powerless against the force of gravity, Mary plummeted toward the bottom of the canyon. Or so Mil assumed, only to be proven wrong when she saw Mary floating in front of her. Naturally, there was nothing beneath her feet.

Mary beat her wings and said, “This is a piece of cake for someone like me.”

Oh, that’s right. I forgot demons have wings.

The canyon’s powerful winds didn’t so much as slow Mary down as she glided smoothly toward the nest. With no effort whatsoever, she reached her target, picked up an egg, and carried it back to the top of the cliff.

“Phew.” With the egg held in one arm, Mary swept back her hair with the other hand and said, “Don’t worry, there’s still more.”

“That was amazing!” Mil said. “Grab some for us too, please!”

“Okay, but this makes us even.”

Mary’s help was going to make everything easy. If it was safe for Mary to make several trips, then Mil wanted to avoid trying the risky climb down the cliff herself.

“How many do you want?” Mary asked.

“Three!”

“All right. Just wait right there.”

“Thanks! Let’s all eat the eggs together later!”

“Fine, I’ll eat with you if you insist.”

Mary glided back down. It seemed they'd all have an egg within just a few minutes.

"I can't believe how easy this is," Mary said to herself. "Those soldiers made it sound like a difficult mission."

The response came as a shrill, deafening screech that filled the air above. "Kukeeeeeh!"

Fearing the worst, Mary looked for the source and saw a huge, monstrous bird flying straight at her from the depths of the canyon. It looked big enough to be the garuda. It was so big, in fact, that it could have swallowed a human in a single gulp.

"That must be the mother!" Kuro cried. "Mary, get out of there!"

"Mary, run!" Mil yelled.

"Huh...? Ah!"

The garuda hit Mary full force with its wing, sending her flying into the cliff face.

"Now what?!" Kuro said.

"L-Leave it to me! *Aero garden!*" Yulia held out both hands and created a powerful gust of wind that blew through the canyon.

"Kukeh!" Caught up in the wind, the garuda lost control and crashed into the cliffside.

Mary seized the opportunity to fly back, with an egg still held under each arm.

"Mary! Are you all right?!" Mil asked her.

"Thanks. I'm just fine."

The garuda continued to screech as it rose from below the cliff and flew at Mil's party.

"Kukeh!" a lightning bolt fired from the bird's open mouth, tearing up the rocky ground at their feet.

"*M-Magic barrier!*" Yulia hastily cast a spell that created a translucent dome around herself, Mil, and Kuro.

Magic barrier could create a wall that blocked magic attacks. The higher the caster's intelligence stat, the stronger the wall it created.

Realizing that the lightning attack was ineffective, the garuda began beating both wings powerfully. It was creating a powerful storm that threatened to blow the party away.

"Watch out!" Kuro suddenly leaped at Yulia to shield her.

"Um... Ah!"

Not a second later, a huge fissure appeared in the ground

where Yulia had been standing. It seemed the garuda had some sort of skill for making invisible shock waves with its wings.

“Th-Thank you, Kuro.”

“Let me handle the shock waves,” Kuro said. “I can sense them coming.”

Mil couldn’t see the garuda’s attacks at all, but she didn’t have Kuro’s beastkin skills.

It made sense now that the guild staff had warned them about the garuda. It was just one more reason for Mil to act fast.

“All right! I’ll support you from the rear!” Mary readied her scythe for a fight.

“Mary, wait!” Mil cried.

“What? But your barrier’s not going to hold up much longer!”

Mary was right. They’d be in even more trouble once Yulia’s barrier failed. But Mil had come too far to stop now. There was something she had to do before letting Mary defeat the bird.

“I wanna touch those fluffy feathers! Then maybe I can put a collar on it and keep it as a pet!”

I wanna make a strong garuda mine!

Mary flatly rejected Mil’s pleas. “I’m taking it down.”

As the garuda flew at Mil’s party, screeching, Mary swung her scythe.

“*Death scythe!*”

She scored a direct hit on the garuda’s body with the dark blade.

“Gukeh!” The bird’s pained screech made it clear Mary’s attack had worked.

“Ooh! Not bad!” Kuro said. “Hm…? Look out, something’s coming at us!” Kuro pointed in a different direction.

Another garuda had risen from the canyon and was headed straight for them. The second bird’s rage was unmistakable. It was probably the first garuda’s mate.

“Ah wah wah wah… They must be the mom and dad!”

The pair of garudas both began firing shock waves from above. Yulia’s magic barrier blocked each one, but…

“It w-won’t hold out much longer.”

Cracks were appearing in the barrier dome. It was only a matter of time until it shattered.

Even Mary, despite her ability to fight in the air, couldn’t do

anything about two garudas at once.

“I can’t handle them by my—ah!”

A shock wave grazed Mary’s skin. It wasn’t a serious wound, but it was enough to make her take her eyes off the birds.

“Kukekeeh!” The birds now turned their attention to Mary and made her the focus of their shock waves.

Unable to stand by and watch, Mil ran outside the dome.

“Mil, it’s not safe!” Yulia warned.

“I hate to do it, but I can’t let them hurt Mary... *Blast end!*”

There was a series of explosions right in front of the garudas.

“Kukeeh!”

Blast end was localized explosion magic, and the garudas had gotten within range when they tried to swoop at Mary. Mil had been worried about triggering a rockslide earlier, but that wasn’t a problem as long as the explosions were in midair.

“Kukeeeh!” Unable to endure Mil’s attacks, the garudas whined feebly before turning to flee.

“Aww, they ran away. Bye-bye!” Mil waved to the giant birds as they flew off into the distance.

“Thanks, Mil, you saved me. But didn’t you want to make them your pets? Why did you chase them away?”

“It’s fine. Your safety’s more important than any pet. I’m glad you’re all right.” Mil breathed a sigh of relief. Thankfully, Mary wasn’t badly injured.

Mary looked shocked for a moment, then she simply said “Oh” and bashfully looked away.

All the while, Yulia and Kuro were watching them and grinning.

“Doesn’t it feel romantic?” Yulia asked.

“It does,” Kuro replied. “Look at the way Mary’s blushing.”

Mary glared at them. “Shut up, you two.”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Mary?” Mil asked.

She’d noticed Mary’s face had turned bright red and was starting to worry that her new friend might have taken more of a beating than she’d thought.

“Nothing. I’m just starting to see why Crowell was so fond of you.”

“Huh?”

“Anyway, I’ll go grab another two eggs.” Mary flew back down the cliff.

Why'd she bring up Crowell? Mil wondered.

✧✧✧

The group of four was back at the adventurer's guild in the fortress town of Algram, which was just as bustling as last time.

In front of each party member was a plate loaded with the finest egg-based cuisine around—garuda eggs benedict. They could already smell the crispy ham and bacon, as well as the soft garuda egg, as they each put their hands together in gratitude for their food.

"Let's eat!"

The other adventurers could only look at their feast in envy and speculate in hushed voices.

"They defeated the garuda...?"

"What, those kids? No way."

The quest had been known for its high difficulty throughout the guild. And no wonder—it had been quite the challenge.

Mil picked up some of the egg and flatbread muffin with her fork.

"Mmmmmm..."

It was so sweet she couldn't help but smile. She wanted to share her impressions with the others, but she couldn't stop herself from filling her mouth with even more of it.

On the opposite side of the table, Mary's face was already covered in egg, but she was too busy eating to wipe it away.

After less than ten minutes, Mil's party had completely cleared their plates and were all staring at the ceiling as they basked in the aftertaste.

"That was very good," Yulia said.

"I never ate anything as delicious as this back in my village," Kuro agreed.

"I tried a lot of things in the royal capital, but nothing as good as this. What did you think, Mary?" Mil asked.

"I think we should have grabbed another egg," she said.

For just a moment, they all shared the same regret. They wished this meal could have lasted the whole day.

"Oh, but Mary, you did grab an extra egg, didn't you?" Mil said.

Mary had taken enough eggs for five people, so there was still

one left in her bag.

"This is...for my father." Mary muttered while avoiding eye contact.

"For your father?" Mil was confused.

"That's right," Mary said while looking down. "I had an argument with him before leaving the castle."

"An argument?! What happened?"

The Demon King had always been gentlemanly and understanding toward Mil even while abducting her, so she found it hard to believe he didn't get along with his daughter.

"It was over him not wanting me to go out traveling," Mary mumbled as she prodded the fork on her plate.

"Traveling?! You mean you wanna be an adventurer, Mary?!"

Back when the two had met at the castle gate, Mil suspected Mary was also interested in adventuring. This all but confirmed it.

"Is that all you care about? I don't necessarily want to adventure. It's just, to be honest, when I compared myself to a fellow princess, I felt jealous of you." Mary was sharing the feelings she'd had at the castle gate.

"And that's why you left?"

"I didn't get angry and storm out of the castle at random. I overheard soldiers talking about the garuda. It was causing problems for them. And father had been telling me I had no combat experience, so I thought..."

I want to prove him wrong. That had been the thought on her mind as she scaled the mountain. Mil's party had found her after she'd collapsed from exhaustion from the climb.

Kuro folded her arms and nodded. "I know the feeling. It was the same for me. I started learning the sword to show the village chief I was capable. Well, that was back when I was a child."

"It's not just me wanting to show off my skills," Mary explained. "What bothers me is that father tells me I can't do *anything*, but he never even gives me a chance to prove myself. But even so, I..."

"You love him," Mil said.

"Th-That's not what I was saying." Mary turned red. "I just wish he'd see me as more than his successor! You had the same problem, right?"

"Me...?" Mil had to think about it.

If she hadn't been a goddess's priestess, she might not have

seen adventurers each day. When her father praised her, it was usually because she'd helped someone using *Goddess Eye* and *Blessings of the Goddess*.

She never felt she wasn't loved. She didn't hate her father at all either. If anything, he was good to her.

"I never wanted to prove anyone wrong. What held me back was myself."

"Really?"

"I never argued about it with my father. I'd already accepted that princesses can't be adventurers. Insisting otherwise wouldn't have been very princess-like."

Mil felt she'd always been looking up at the sky, fantasizing about the outside world. And she'd been content to live her whole life like that. But everything had changed on the day the Demon King appeared in her room.

"That's not quite like me, but still, it sounds like humans have problems just like we do."

"I'm glad I went to the Demon King's Castle. The demonkin were surprisingly nice to me. Maybe some aren't so nice, but I'm glad to know they're not so different from humans."

Mil felt the need to do something. The Demon King wasn't just some stranger—he'd changed her life. If he'd fallen out with his daughter, Mil wanted to help them make up.

"I still don't trust you," Mary added with a pout.

That took Mil by surprise.

"But," Mary continued, "I know you're...not a bad person."

"Mary!"

"Why are you looking at me like that? It's hardly a compliment. I'm only curious about you since Crowell took a liking to you, that's all."

"Crowell? Oh, that's right. I wish I'd gotten a chance to thank her. She taught me so much... What's wrong, Mary?"

For some reason Mary's eyes were wide with surprise. "I'd forgotten," she said. "Crowell was dispatched to—"

"To find you, Lady Mil," said a soft voice belonging to someone standing beside their table.

Mil turned to see a demonkin man and women dressed in light armor. It was Crowell and Graun.

"Crowell?!" Mil said in surprise. "And Graun too. Um. What

brings you two here?”

Crowell turned to look at Mary. “And Princess Mary, I didn’t expect to find you here. Do you realize how worried His Majesty is?”

Crowell’s demeanor was nothing like it had been in the Demon King’s Castle. Likewise, Graun regarded Mil with eyes far colder than in the throne room.

Mary’s chair clattered loudly as she jumped to her feet. “Father gave you orders, didn’t he? Did he tell you to take me home?”

“As I’m sure you’re already aware, Princess Mary, my orders were to…” Crowell turned to Mil again. Mil had never seen her eyes look so cold. “…track down and apprehend Lady Mil.”

Mil looked at her once-upon-a-time attendant. “Crowell…”

Crowell placed her hand on her sword’s hilt. “Prepare yourself.”

A single slash from Crowell’s silver blade cut their table in half and destroyed the wall separating the inside of the building from the main street. The sound was deafening as the remains of the wall were blown into the road. Similarly loud were the cries of the panicked patrons inside the guild.

Mil’s party quickly leaped back out of the way, but if they’d remained in their seats, they would have joined the rubble lying on the ground outside.

“Crowell!” Mil cried. “What’s gotten into you?!”

“The Demon King’s orders are absolute.” Crowell sheathed her sword, then stood ready to draw.

If they fought in the guild, other people were likely to get hurt. Mil shot glances at Yulia and Kuro, then they all jumped out through the hole Crowell had made. There were plenty of people outside too, all wanting to see what was going on, but they kept some distance.

“And I’ve long been under orders to ensure your safety, Princess Mary. I’d like you to return to the castle with me as well.”

“I knew you’d come to take me back!”

“Of course. You are the Demon King’s daughter. This is no place for you.”

One of the onlookers cried, “Hey, she just said ‘Demon King’s daughter.’”

“You must’ve misheard,” said another.

“But look, they’re higher demonkin.”

Graun grabbed Crowell's hand. "Crowell, if we cause a scene here..."

"We weren't ordered to handle matters quietly, Graun. Don't underestimate the scale of this task. You could die here." Crowell shook her arm loose from Graun's grip and stepped out into the main street.

"That's not what I meant, but you're right." Graun drew the narrow blade affixed to his waist. "I'll lose my head if I try to hold back."

Fully aware that Crowell was serious, Mil knew there was no reasoning with her. She could sense that her old swordmaster would carry out her orders with a cold devotion, no matter who might get caught in the cross fire.

Mil drew her sword, Ragnarok.

"Mil... Are you really prepared to fight Crowell?" Mary whispered in her ear.

Mil nodded. "Yep! There's no way my journey's ending here!"

"Crowell climbed the ranks of my father's forces. She could wipe an entire town off the map with ease if she wanted. No matter how strong you might've gotten, you're no match for her."

"I know she's strong, but I only just started traveling. And I've only just met Yulia and Kuro...and you too, Mary. I can't stop now!"

"Girls like you are—"

"You can run if you like," Mil told her. "We can handle this without you."

Kuro and Yulia were ready to fight too.

Mary sighed in astonishment. Then she raised her scythe. "What are you talking about? I've got no choice but to fight—I haven't paid you back yet."

"Mary..."

"But you're going to stop calling me by my first name once this is over."

"Sure thing, Mary!"

"I'm going to hold you to that."

While Mil was thankful for the help, her biggest concern was to make sure the townspeople weren't harmed.

"Are you done chatting, Lady Mil?" Crowell readied herself to draw her sword again. She was in the same stance she'd taught Mil in the Demon King's Castle.

“Yep… I’m gonna make you go home, Crowell!”

Mil adopted the same stance. If they were using the same technique, she was determined not to be outdone.

A flash of reflected light came from both blades in the same instant. “*Demon slash!*”

From their weapons came shock waves, like two black blades, that flew at each other and then collided with a metallic clash that made the onlookers scream.

“Huh…?!”

The collision sent Mil’s shock wave completely off target while Crowell’s kept traveling straight at full speed, forcing Mil to parry it with her sword.

“But why?!”

“I’ve been honing this technique for far longer than you have.” Crowell adopted the same stance once more.

“*Slave chain!*”

This forbidden spell could bind an opponent, but Crowell had no trouble cutting each chain the moment it sprang from a black orb floating in the air.

By this point, the fight had gotten too intense for the crowd of onlookers, sending them fleeing in all directions. Now that the townspeople were less likely to get hurt, Mil could focus on finding a way to stop Crowell and Graun.

“*Wind blast!*” Yulia fired a ball of compressed air at Crowell.

But Graun got between Crowell and the spell, effortlessly blocking it. “Crowell, I’ll leave Princess Mil—”

“Yah!” In the short time they were distracted, Kuro had made her move.

Graun had no trouble blocking the slash from Kuro’s katana. Their blades met three more times, and each time Kuro was parried.

Kuro clicked her tongue, forced to back off.

“I’ll leave Princess Mil to you. Let me handle the beastkin and the mage child.”

“Be careful,” Crowell warned Graun. “You may find those two alone are quite a handful.”

The two sets of opponents faced off.

“Princess Mary, Lady Mil… I must confess, this has gotten me excited.”

“Huh?”

“I rarely get to fight with powerful adventurers.” Crowell vanished the moment she finished her sentence.

She’s fast!

Crowell had gone from being a safe distance away to crossing swords with Mil in an instant.

“Guh!” Mil was forced to take one step back after another as she struggled to block Crowell’s attacks. “I knew you liked adventurers, Crowell.”

“I won’t deny it.”

“But I’m not going easy on you! *Mind break!*”

As Mil was thrown backward, she cast a forbidden magic spell designed to induce a mental breakdown.

Black beams of light flew at Crowell, but she dodged them effortlessly.

Meanwhile, Mil had been blown clear across the street and sent flying through a restaurant window. When she finally landed, she found herself lying on a table and noticed a terrified customer backed against a wall, staring right at her.

“Gah!”

Before Mil had time to get up, Crowell entered through the broken window and slashed at Mil without mercy. She rolled across the table to dodge, then threw a chair to give herself a chance to break through another window and jump back outside.

“You won’t escape me that easily.”

Mil had to stay on the defensive to endure Crowell’s attacks. Then once she found an opening she leaped a good distance away and tried again to bind Crowell. “*Slave chain!*” But casting her spell was a little too distracting.

“Oops.”

Mil’s foot slipped on a piece of debris, sending her tumbling onto her behind. It gave Crowell more than enough time to break apart the chains and close in on Mil.

Crowell grabbed Mil’s right arm, restraining her and rendering her helpless.

“Ugh.”

“I’ve apprehended you, Lady Mil.”

“Ouch.”

Mil’s face contorted in pain as she fought against Crowell’s grip.

She was held too tightly to break free—Crowell's thin arms were much stronger than they looked. She was a demonkin after all.

"Mil!"

The black blade of Mary's scythe came flying at Crowell. Knowing she had no other choice, Crowell released Mil and leaped backward.

"Thanks, Mary." Mil slowly climbed to her feet.

"Here she comes again!"

Crowell unleashed a *demon slash* from afar, forcing Mil and Mary to dive to avoid it. At the same time, a dark mist filled their surroundings.

"What is this?!" Mil asked.

"One of Crowell's skills!" Mary explained. "Watch out! She can see us through the mist!"

Countless slashes, including several small *demon slashes*, came at Mil as she struggled to get her bearings.

"Ugh... Kuh."

As shallow cuts appeared on Mil's arms and legs, she didn't know where to turn.

"Mil! Look up!" Mary cried.

Just as the mist cleared, a shadow was cast over Mil from above. Crowell had leaped high into the air with her sword held in both hands, and she swung it down. But this was no small *demon slash*. The dark, crescent-shaped shock wave that came from Crowell's blade cleaved the road in two.

A cloud of dirt and dust filled the air, blinding Mil.

"Ngh."

But Mil still caught sight of a glint of silver within the dirt cloud. She met Crowell's sword with her own, redirecting Crowell's strike.

Crowell was slow to react, as if she'd never expected Mil to block her attack.

I can do this!

Mil leaped back and held out her hands. "*Blast end!*"

The spell created an explosion right in front of Crowell, blowing away the cloud of dirt.

"Not bad," Crowell said. Her gear was a little scorched in places, but she was unharmed.

She has dark magic resistance... Mil thought back to when she'd checked Crowell's stats and remembered seeing *dark magic*

resistance listed as one of her passive skills. The spells Mil had learned in the Demon King's Castle's library weren't going to be much use here.

"Mil, I've got an idea," Mary whispered into Mil's ear. "Charge straight at Crowell and do your best to keep her close. Can you use a smoke bomb attack?"

"I know *dark mist*."

"Okay. Use that when you get an opportunity. It'll give me a chance to strike—I've got *night vision*."

Mil readied her sword. "Got it," she replied without hesitation. She'd seen that skill when she'd checked Mary's stats in the castle.

"Got it...?" Mary said. "I'm glad you've agreed, but aren't you going to ask any questions? You don't want the specifics?"

Mil remained focused on Crowell as she spoke. "You've got a plan, right? I believe in you."

"I don't get people like you... But okay, I'll count on you." With a beat of the wings on her back, Mary took to the air.

"Here I come, Crowell!"

"Whenever you're ready, Lady Mil."

Mil began running.

Metal crashed against metal. Mil shifted her weight from her right foot to her left then took another half a step toward her opponent. She was using the footwork Crowell had taught her.

"You're good," Crowell said. "I see you haven't forgotten the fundamentals."

Crowell didn't seem pressured at all. As much as Mil hated to admit it, she had no chance of winning in a pure sword fight. However...

As they crossed swords, Mil cast a spell. "*Dark mist!*"

"Ah." For a brief moment, Crowell frowned.

Since Mil hadn't extended her hand, the mist poured from her entire body, making it impossible to see anything around her. Even Mil herself couldn't even see Crowell's face right in front of her.

"Nicely done, Mil!"

"Ah! Princess Mary?!" Crowell drew back her sword to protect herself.

Mil heard their weapons colliding loudly several times, but she couldn't tell what was happening because of the effects of *dark mist*.

“Mary!” Mil cried. “Where are—ahh!”

A gust of wind cleared away the dark mist. It was another of Crowell’s spells.

When the mist cleared, Mil saw Crowell clutching her arm and breathing heavily, while Mary stood composed and still holding her great scythe.

“No matter how dark it gets, I can always see. I’ve got good eyes.”

Mary had been able to keep track of Crowell within the mist thanks to the *night vision* skill.

“You’ve certainly improved, Princess Mary.”

“I’m glad I listened when you recommended that I use this scythe,” Mary said while twirling the scythe in a sort of dance. “It suits me far better than a sword.”

Graun crashed to the ground beside Crowell, wounded from his fight with Kuro and Yulia. It looked like he was no match for the both of them together.

“Crowell, when was the last time you took a hit like that?” Graun asked.

“Long ago… It hasn’t happened since we both fought together against His Majesty and lost. We’ve been underestimating Princess Mary. We can approach this fight more seriously without any fear of accidentally killing her.”

Crowell grinned as a cloud of miasma suddenly enveloped her and her brother.

“More magic…?”

The skin on Crowell’s and Graun’s arms and necks first turned black, then white patterns formed. At the same time, their horns and wings grew bigger.

“Wow… Mary! What is this?!”

They were transforming. Now, instead of being close to human, they both looked like sinister beasts.

“Higher demonkin have a skill called *awaken*,” Mary explained. “It converts their mana into miasma and strengthens their bodies.”

Mil remembered seeing *awaken* in their passive skills lists, though she’d never imagined it could transform them like this.

“This is so *cool*!” Mil could hardly contain herself. It felt like a showdown with the final opponent, just like in the stories of heroes.

“How can you think like that?! Now we’ve no chance of win—Here they come!”

Mary blocked a swing from Crowell’s sword with her scythe, then used her wings to take flight. Crowell gave chase, and the two then continued their fight in midair. They were blindingly fast, moving in and out of range far too quickly for Mil to offer any support.

“I’ll handle this somehow!” Mary called. “You take care of things on the ground, Mil!”

“All right!” Mil replied.

Graun was silently glaring at her.

“Yulia! Kuro! Back me up!”

“You can count on me!”

“O-Okay!”

Mil charged at Graun, picking up a piece of rubble from the ground in her left hand as she ran.

“Princess… I’m done being gentle.”

Mil stopped just out of reach of Graun’s narrow blade and threw the piece of rubble at his face.

“What?!”

It created the opening she needed. She closed the distance and swung her sword up from below.

Graun quickly knocked her blade off course, but then Kuro came in from the side to follow up with a diagonal sword slash.

“Kuh.”

As Graun struggled to defend himself, Yulia launched a fireball that scorched Graun’s clothes.

“I must say…you’re even more trouble than a party of experienced adventurers.” Graun casually wiped his face with the back of his hand. His clothes aside, the combination of attacks hadn’t harmed him at all.

“Aaaaahhh!” Mary came crashing down from above.

“Mary! Are you all right?!”

It was obvious who’d won the battle for control over the sky.

Crowell carefully folded her wings as she touched down on the ground. “Do you still intend to resist? If you’ll agree to come quietly, then there’ll be no need to injure you all further.”

Mil’s party was putting up a good fight, but neither Crowell nor Graun showed the slightest sign of exhaustion. If they got serious

—if they fought with the intent to kill—Mil's party surely wouldn't hold out for long.

"Crowell... Ngh." Mil's vision blurred. Her legs felt unsteady. She hadn't taken any decisive blows, but the total damage was mounting.

Graun pointed the tip of his narrow sword at Mil. "Maybe if you'd had, say...another year or so, you'd have enough experience that neither I nor my sister would be able to stop you. Princess, I'm not going to hold back this—"

Just as Graun was preparing to charge at Mil, Crowell placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

Graun looked at his sister. "Crowell...?"

"How did it feel to go adventuring, Lady Mil?" Crowell asked.

"Huh...?"

"Did you visit lots of places and see lots of different types of monsters and people? Did your experiences change you? Are you different now compared to when your journey started?"

Mil nodded. "I wanna keep doing exciting things. Since meeting Yulia, then Kuro, and now Mary, everything's been exciting! Adventuring's even more fun than I imagined!"

"But there are obstacles in your path. Not only the Heavenly Four, but also the ordinary troubles that all adventurers experience. And His Majesty the Demon King surely hasn't given up on you. You may have avoided one member of the Heavenly Four, but I'm not convinced he was trying very hard."

"Crowell..."

"Now please show me, Lady Mil. Show me you have the power to overcome these obstacles. Come at me like you mean it." Crowell fell quiet as she sheathed her sword then stood ready to draw.

Mil had felt the need to hold back the entire time because they were in the middle of a town. It was true that she hadn't swung her sword in earnest. But just as Crowell said, Mil had to be ready for the countless obstacles awaiting in her adventures to come. The incident at the beastkin village was probably just the first of many unpleasant experiences.

Although not everything about adventuring had been fun, a lot of it was. Such as meeting new friends and doing things together. But when someone got in the way of it all, she'd have to fight them

seriously.

Crowell… Mil wordlessly sheathed her sword. *Okay, I'll show her. I'll show her how fun this adventure is. And how serious I can be.*

For a moment there was total silence. Then their swords cut through the air simultaneously.

"*Demon slash!*"

The two black blades collided. Mil had put everything into the attack—the demonkin sword skill Crowell had taught her.

"That wasn't enough?!"

Mil still couldn't quite match up to Crowell. Having gotten to grips with the technique just recently, she couldn't compare to the master. No matter how serious Mil got, Crowell would remain unbeatable.

But then a status window opened in front of Mil. She hadn't been using any of her goddess's priestess powers—it had appeared all by itself.

```
Learned: holy demon slash
Requirements: Use demon slash a given number of
times. Available to saints.
```

Mil had gained a new skill. She'd been using *demon slash* heavily since starting her adventure, and it seemed she'd fulfilled some condition as a result.

Mil hurriedly sheathed her sword and prepared to draw once more. "*Holy demon slash!*"

Unlike *demon slash*, this attack unleashed a cross-shaped shock wave consisting of two blades, one black, one white.



“Ngh! Lady Mil, you can’t have—”

Mil’s attack erased Crowell’s *demon slash*, and then both of her own shock waves landed a direct hit.

“Uhrrraahh!”

“Crowell!” Graun cried.

Crowell was thrown into the middle of the street, where she landed on her back.

“Haah, haah,” panted Mil. “I did it.”

It had taken all of her strength, leaving her so exhausted she felt ready to collapse.

“I expected no less of you, Lady Mil.” Crowell slowly rose to a sitting position. She must have lost her awakened effect, because her skin had returned to its normal color and the white patterns had disappeared.

“Are you all right, Crowell?!” Mil hurried over and held her.

“Your kindness could be your undoing, Lady Mil. If I attempted a surprise attack now, you’d have no means of dodging.”

“Oh… But…”

“Regardless, I admit defeat. I was ordered to apprehend Lady Mil. When I restrained you by your arm a short while ago, I did, for a moment at least, apprehend you. Now I may return.”

Crowell suddenly got to her feet and brushed the dirt off her clothing. Although it looked like she’d attacked with all she had, she wasn’t out of energy yet.

Graun sighed and sheathed his sword.

“Crowell, why are you helping me like this? Not just now, but in the Demon King’s Castle as well.”

“If I had to say, it’s probably because I miss adventurers.”

Mil didn’t know what that meant, but before she could ask, Mary came running over.

“Crowell! Um…how’s father doing?”

“He’s worried about you. What would you like to do? Will you come home with me?”

Mary shook her head. “I’m not going back! I’ve finally found something I enjoy! I’m going to go adventuring with Mil. And…next time he sees me, I want him to see how I’ve grown after I’m done adventuring!”

“Mary…” Mil was delighted to learn that Mary was going to join her.

Crowell smiled at Mary. “I’m so glad,” she said.

“You are?”

“You never opened up to me or the Demon King because you were ignoring your own feelings. You never had ambitions to share with us.”

“I didn’t…?”

Crowell’s eyes met Mil’s. “I believe you provided the spark, Lady Mil.”

Mil had no idea what she’d done to encourage Mary.

“Well then… I’ll return to His Majesty and inform him that I briefly grabbed you by the arm.”

“Crowell, wait!” Before the two siblings could fly away, Mary came over with the garuda egg that she’d left inside the guild. “Take this! I collected it by myself! Well…Mil helped a little too, but it’s not like I’m totally powerless!”

Crowell accepted the egg and nodded. “I’ll make sure I inform His Majesty. Lady Mil, please take good care of Princess Mary.” Crowell bowed low.

“A-All right,” Mil replied, suddenly feeling nervous.

“Oh, and,” Crowell muttered just as she was about to take off. “I think the Heavenly Four and others are going to pursue you and your party more seriously after this. Do take care, Lady Mil.”

Crowell and her brother both spread their black wings then disappeared high into the sky.

Mil thought back to her encounter with Grood. If someone else just as coldhearted came for her, she might have to fight like her life depended on it.

Mil stared up into the sky until the two demonkin were both gone from her sight.

“M-Mil!” Yulia cried. “Wh-What are those?!”

“Huh?” Mil touched her head and felt two small growths. Each one had a rough and unsettling surface texture, just like the ones she’d felt on Graun’s head some time ago, feeling to her as though she’d grown demon horns.

“You’re turning into a demonkin. You’ve been using the magic from the library, haven’t you?” Mary asked as she touched Mil’s horns. “Whenever humans use that sort of magic, the demonkin miasma seeps into their body. It’ll normally leave by itself given enough time, but your body will start to gain demonkin traits if

you overdo it.”

Kuro eyed Mil’s transformation with concern, while Yulia started to panic. “Ah wah wah… Are you okay, Mil?”

Mil touched a horn with her right hand and said, “This is…”

“It’s?”

“Amazing! I’m like a demonkin now! Hey, will I get wings too? Can I fly just like you, Mary?!” Simply touching someone else’s horns had been satisfying, but to have horns of her own was even better. Mil couldn’t help but get excited about it.

“Hold on, Mil,” Mary said. “You should turn back if you don’t use any forbidden magic for a while. But keep using it, and the effects might be worse than a little transformation.”

“Wh-What’ll happen…?” Yulia stammered.

Mary sighed. “If her body can’t handle the miasma, she could die.”

“Ah! N-No! Mil! No magic for a while! Okay?!”

“Well, I don’t wanna die. But I don’t wanna lose the horns either.”

“No! You can’t use it anymore!” Yulia sounded genuinely worried.

It seemed even Yulia would get angry if Mil stood her ground over this, so she decided she’d better give in and stop using magic until she returned to normal.

“Can we really afford to take it easy like this?” Kuro asked.

“Oh… Someone’s coming,” Yulia said. “Are those soldiers?”

About ten armored soldiers came running toward them along the main street. They were the town’s guards, and all the commotion had drawn their attention.

“Which one of you is the Demon King’s daughter? We received a report just a moment ago.”

“Is all this damage the work of a berserk demonkin? You…you’re a demonkin, aren’t you?”

The soldiers began to approach. If they realized that Mary was the Demon King’s daughter, they’d definitely imprison her.

“Let’s run!” Mary said.

Mil and the others reacted quickly.

“Hey, wait!”

The soldiers tried to chase them, but it was no use in their heavy armor. Mil and the others shook them off in no time.

Am I in trouble? Mil wondered.

Mary had had the same thought. “You’re a princess too, aren’t you? Won’t you be in trouble if you get caught?”

“You’re right. You were worrying about me, Mary?”

“Hmph.”

Mary might have put up a cold front, but she was kind in her own way. She was always thinking about others.

Mil couldn’t resist grabbing Mary’s hand and then hugging her arm tight.

Mary blushed and asked, “Wh-What are you doing?”

“Let’s start our adventure!” Mil replied.

Mil felt she’d made a friend who wasn’t just dependable but also kindhearted.

In the days that followed, rumors spread through the fortress town of Algram that the Demon King’s daughter had destroyed the Adventurer’s Guild. A quest was soon issued…but that’s a story for another day.

Epilogue

“We have returned, Your Majesty.”

The Demon King was sitting on his throne as Crowell and Graun knelt before him and bowed their heads.

The Demon King rested his elbow on the armrest, his head on his hand, then sighed deeply. “Let’s hear your report.”

“As one might expect from a student I taught the fundamentals myself, Lady Mil has refined her sword skills significantly during the short time she has been adventuring.”

“Um…Crowell…” Graun said quietly.

Crowell cleared her throat. “My apologies. After tracking down Lady Mil, we fought against her in the fortress town of Algram, but she escaped us. Thus ends my report.”

The Demon King pressed his fingers against his brow and shook his head.

“I was however able to carry out Your Majesty’s orders,” Crowell added. “At one point I successfully apprehended Lady Mil by grabbing her arm.”

“I’m terribly sorry!” Graun cried, hanging his head when he saw the clear disappointment on the Demon King’s face. “It all happened under my watch!”

“Tell me, Crowell.”

“Sire?”

“Why are you supporting Mil? Is it because you empathize with her given how she’s been treated? Explain yourself.”

“Sire… There is always but one thing on my mind. I wish for order and prosperity for you and your forces.”

“And is apprehending Mil not part of that?”

“Forgive me for being so bold, Sire, but I assume you are aware of the changing attitudes among the lords of the various territories.”

“Yes, I’m aware. It’s not just the Heavenly Four; all of them have designs on my throne.”

The Demon King reigned over a number of territories, each under the control of a demonkin lord. Although these lords were

ostensibly loyal to the Demon King, those in control of the larger territories with great military might harbored secret ambitions of becoming king themselves.

Crowell continued, “It is my understanding that Lady Mil was abducted for the sake of bolstering your forces and thus alleviating their fears of a coup d’état. Has this goal not already been fulfilled?”

After Mil had been abducted by the Demon King, she’d used her goddess’s priestess powers to awaken skills in almost every soldier in his army. Whenever she hadn’t done so, it was only because of the soldier’s lack of potential.

“Are you saying I’d be better off letting her escape?”

“If the alternative is that her powers might be used by another.”

“By a demonkin lord…?”

“I was thinking of the Heavenly Four.”

The Heavenly Four, like all demonkin, obeyed the Demon King because he was stronger than all four of them. Demonkin existed in a hierarchy with the strong at the top and the weak at the bottom. Their obedience was simply a product of their inferiority to the Demon King.

However, if one of them obtained Mil and her powers, the relationship might be reversed, prompting the Heavenly Four to rebel against the Demon King.

“Crowell, do you think that’s likely?”

“In my opinion, it would be overly optimistic to consider it unlikely.”

If Mil was kept close, she was more likely to fall into the wrong hands. She was like a volatile substance, too dangerous to mix with the Demon King’s forces.

“In other words, securing Mil will eliminate the possibility of a rebellion,” the Demon King said.

“But Sire—”

“Be silent. That’s an order. Bring Mil back to me. Tell the Heavenly Four to do the same.”

“The Heavenly Four as well…Sire?”

“That’s right. But keep a close eye on them. If someone tries to claim Mil for themselves, immediately declare them a traitor. It will serve as a lesson. Now is the time to demonstrate my authority.”

Mil could be useful for an internal purge. If the Heavenly Four

were considering a coup, this was one way to expose their plan. But it was a double-edged sword. The Demon King could only guess how far the Heavenly Four and the demonkin lords might have gone in plotting a rebellion.

Regardless, any command from the Demon King to his subordinates was absolute.

“As you command, Sire.”

Crowell and Graun each placed a hand on their chest as a salute.

Meanwhile, just outside the throne room door, an ogre with sharp tusks protruding from his cloak was listening.

“I see… This could be an opportunity. If I were to prove that the rest of the Heavenly Four are plotting a rebellion, then I’d ascend to become the Demon King’s right hand. I’d be well positioned to take his place when he finally falls.”

With a sinister grin, the robed ogre—Grood—quietly walked away.

✧✧✧

“Mister fish! You’re so fast!”

Mil’s party had arrived at an eastern lake after hearing of a great fish that served as the lake’s guardian. What they found there exceeded their expectations. The fish was a monster big enough to swallow a human whole.

Mil had succeeded in hooking the guardian fish, but ended up riding on its back when she tried to pull it in.

“Mil! Th-That’s dangerous!” Yulia cried out in concern from the edge of the lake.

But Mil wasn’t about to stop. She felt a new sense of freedom as she was carried swiftly through the water. The water pressure hurt a little, but that just added a little spice.

“Looks like Mil’s having fun,” Kuro said. “Are you going to ride it, Mary?”

“I’ll pass! But what about the fish right here? They’re about to burn.”

The three on the shore were around a campfire, roasting and eating the fish they’d caught so far. Naturally, there were some for Mil too, but she was so determined to catch the lake guardian that

riding on its back had taken priority over her appetite.

It was several days since they'd left the fortress town. Mil had been abstaining from forbidden magic the whole time, and just as Mary predicted, she'd turned back to normal. Mil was a little disappointed, but she didn't want to worry Yulia. She told herself that, from that point on, she'd avoid using forbidden magic unless it was really necessary.

"This feels so nice. Oh?"

As the fish dove underwater and pulled Mil along, a large opening came into view. It looked like a cavern near the bottom of the lake.

Mil let go of the fish and swam back up to the others.

"Had enough, Mil?" Kuro asked.

"Yep! But listen to this! There's a cavern down there."

Bursting with excitement, Mil's mind had quickly filled up with the possibility of treasure deep within the cavern. No adventurer could pass something like this up.

Mary threw Mil a towel. "Dry yourself off before you catch a cold."

"Thanks! Achoo!" A sudden chill wind left Mil shivering and sneezing.

"Are you okay, Mil?" Yulia asked. "Why not change your clothes?"

"Good idea. Oh, is the fish done yet?"

Mil sat down near the campfire, where Yulia helped her out of her wet things.

"There's still some left, though they're a little burnt," Kuro said. "Now tell us, how wide was that cavern?"

"I dunno."

"Are you sure it's not just a small cave?" Mary said. "I'm assuming you only caught a glimpse of it while riding the fish."

She had a point. But Mil wasn't about to give up that easily.

"We'll find out for sure when we go down there and check it out! Yulia, do you have any magic for swimming underwater?" Mil asked between big bites of fish.

"Hmm... I have a spell for moving us around inside a bubble."

"Then it's decided!" As soon as Mil finished her fish, she stood up.

"Wait a moment!" Mary said. "What if there are dangerous monsters in the water? We can't fight underwater, can we?"

“It’ll be fine! We’ll just run away in that case!”

Mary sighed in disbelief. “Really… You’re nothing but trouble.”

“There’s no talking Mil out of something once she makes up her mind,” Kuro agreed.

“Here goes. *Bubble barrier!*”

Once Yulia had created a bubble around the whole party, they jumped into the lake.

Mil wondered what adventures awaited them. The way ahead might lead to suffering and defeat, but she’d gone too far to turn back. She was finally exploring a world she could only dream of from within the confines of castles.

Mil wasn’t ready to end her journey just yet. Nor was she going to pass up any exciting detours along the way.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, or perhaps, long time no see. My name is Hiroshi Nagamatsu, and I'm starting to worry about my sugar intake lately because I've been drinking too much café au lait.

First of all, thank you for choosing to read this book. How did you enjoy *Abducted Princess Running Rampant: Wielding Forbidden Magic in the Demon King's Castle*?

It's the story of a princess who's abducted by a Demon King and then lucks into finding forbidden spells and magic swords in his castle before going on a rampage. The concept sounds a little wild out of context, doesn't it? Though it actually develops into a rather simple story about a princess traveling home.

This is a change in subject, but I like video games. Hear me out before you ask, "Why'd you suddenly bring that up?"

I particularly like the RPG genre, and I especially love a particular RPG series with "Dragon" in the name. I played it over and over as a child, and sometimes still play it now. Whenever there's a new game in the series, I always check it out.

I arrived at the idea for this work after playing a few classic RPGs of that sort. Mil was conceived when I asked myself, "Wouldn't it be interesting if a princess started stealing items from the Demon King's Castle after getting kidnapped?"

In this story, Mil beats up the soldiers in the Demon King's Castle using the magic and weapons she stole from them. When you put it like that, it makes it hard to judge whether the princess or the Demon King's forces are the bad guys. On the one hand, the Demon King is in the wrong for kidnapping her, but still...

Anyway, Mil was born thanks to RPG games, and companions are a big part of RPGs. The first companion often becomes a reliable partner who sticks around to the end.

In this book, Mil's first companion becomes the first friend she makes after leaving the castle. As a bonus, she's every bit as powerful as Mil herself.

A friendly party of girls who go hunting for ferocious monsters. I hope I'm not the only one who thinks it sounds scary when

described like that.

My hope is that you'll agree that this work breaks from RPG norms a little.

One such RPG norm is that the story starts in front of a king, in a starting town populated by humans. Having the adventure start from the Demon King's Castle—usually the scene of the final showdown—is a little unconventional.

Adventurers normally journey from the royal capital to the Demon King's Castle, with the aim of defeating the Demon King. In this work, it was reversed—Mil started from the Demon King's Castle and headed for the royal capital. It's another little break from the norms.

If these things made you laugh at all, or if they entertained you, then that's everything I could hope for as an author.

This is another change in topic, but RPG games are also what inspired me to be an author in the first place. It wasn't part of the RPG series with "Dragon" in the name, but a certain RPG had a story so interesting that I enjoyed writing fanfiction for it in my notebook in bed each night.

Without that RPG, it's hard to say whether I would have written a novel like this. I'm sure everyone has encountered works that leave a lasting impression on them. And it's not just novels; many forms of entertainment can change someone's life. It's such a wonderful thing that I guess it's what made me want to write a novel of my own.

All this serious talk is making me feel embarrassed, so I'll talk about my beloved café au lait that I just can't quit instead.

I rarely drink proper drip coffee. I normally enjoy café au lait that's sold in a can or a cup since it's convenient and I can drink it immediately. I've loved café au lait for over ten years.

Oh, I'm running out of page space, so I'll have to leave this discussion for another time.

Thank you once again.

Firstly, I'd like to express my gratitude to the readers who chose this book. It would please me to know I'd entertained you at least a little.

Also to Tsubame Nozomi-sama who drew the illustrations. It excited me to see such a strong yet cute Mil.

To my editor, thank you for always being there. I always

benefited from the advice you gave me during all of our scheduled phone calls. I'm happy to have met such a good editor.

My sincere gratitude to everyone else who assisted with this work as well.

Well then, I hope we'll meet again some time.

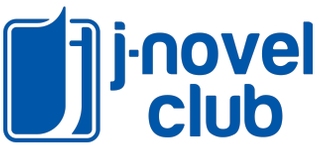
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Abducted Princess
Running Rampant
Wielding Forbidden
Magic in the Demon
King's Castle


Kuro
A girl with animal ears who lives in a beastkin village. Her sword skills are honed to perfection. She's a little greedy and has often dreamed of all the delicious foods in the world beyond her village.
I can't let this human make fools of us like this!
I want to visit the outside world and eat all kinds of tasty food and lots of it!
Mary Garland
The Demon King's daughter. She had a sheltered upbringing because she was raised to be her father's successor, but she dreams of someday leaving his castle and going on adventures. Though she often hides her true feelings, she's caring and considerate.
Mil Arphilia
A princess of the Holy Arphil Kingdom, and a saint with the divine powers of a goddess's priestess. It was always her dream to leave the royal capital's castle and go on an adventure.
I'd like to go to the royal capital... I'd like to learn more magic.
I wanna go adventuring. I can't stand being here anymore.
Yulia Neumann
A girl living in a village near the Demon King's Castle. Her shy personality belies an exceptional talent for magic. Her long-held dream is to learn magic in the royal capital.


It was also Mil's first time in an open-air bath. She'd never known how good it felt to soak in hot water while exposed to a cool breeze.
"We've got a bath back home, but it's just a big tub. There's no hot spring."
"Really?"
"Ooh. This feels so good. They don't have hot springs in the royal capital, so this is all new to me."
Kuro, sitting beside Mil, was surprised. A short distance away, Yulia was floating on her back with her arms spread wide.



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Abducted Princess Running Rampant: Wielding Forbidden Magic in the Demon King's Castle Volume 1
by Hiroshi Nagamatsu

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