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Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!
19

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

VOLUME 19


Arli


Reina
Mile
Mavis
Marcela
Pauline
Aureana
Monika



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

VOLUME 19

BY
FUNA

ILLUSTRATED BY
Itsuki Akata



Seven Seas Entertainment

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God bless me?

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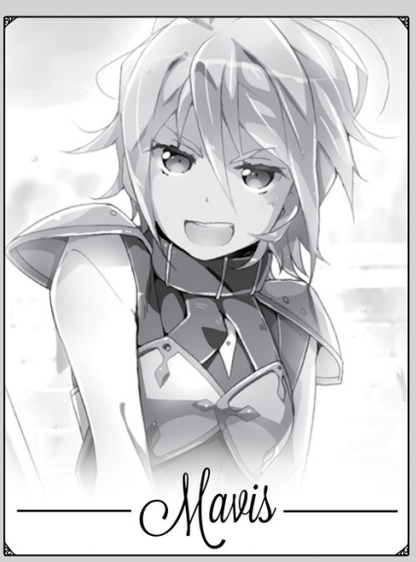


A high school student. Died saving a little girl and was reborn into a fantasy world.

Hunting Party "The Crimson Vow"



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



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



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

Hunting Party "The Wonder Trio"



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



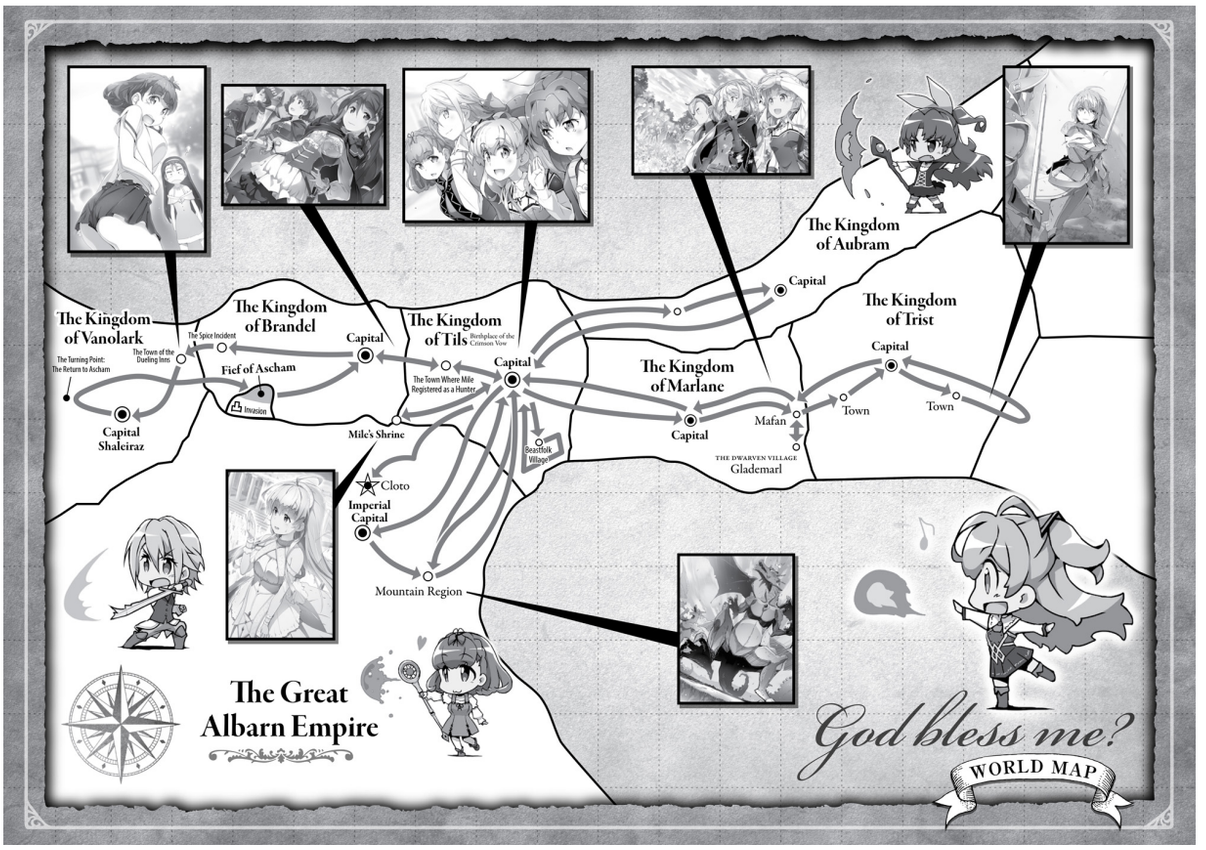
A young noblewoman and Adele's
friend. Leader of the Wonder Trio.



The daughter of a merchant. A member
of the Wonder Trio, as well as Marcela's
childhood friend.



The clever strategist of the Wonder Trio.
Owes Marcela a debt.


The Kingdom of Vanolark
The Turning Point: The Return to Ascham
The Town of the Dueling Inns
Capital Shaleiraz
The Kingdom of Brandel
The Spice Incident
Capital
Fief of Ascham
Invasion
The Kingdom of Tils
Birthplace of the Crimson Vow
Capital
The Town Where Mile Registered as a Hunter
Mile's Shrine
Beastfolk Village
Cloto
Imperial Capital
Mountain Region
The Great Albarn Empire
The Kingdom of Aubram
Capital
The Kingdom of Marlane
Capital
Mafan
THE DWARVEN VILLAGE
Glademarl
The Kingdom of Trist
Capital
Town
Town
God bless me?
WORLD MAP

Previously

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

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

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

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

Yet somehow, it all went awry.

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

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

The four girls rescued countless people over the course of their journey. They banded together with humans, elves, dwarves, beastfolk, demons, and elder dragons alike to defeat powerful invaders from another dimension and protect their home!

Desperate to escape the stifling hero worship that followed, the Crimson Vow fled to a brand-new continent! There, the girls went from newbie hunters to C-ranks, played with a fluffy white wolf, and crushed a conspiracy with the help of the elder dragons!

Unbeknownst to the Crimson Vow, the Wonder Trio and Princess Morena followed the hunters to the new continent, and the princesses of the two lands became fast friends! Meanwhile, Mile and her companions ran off to vanquish sea serpents with the old men of a fishing village!

Chapter 132:
The Aftermath

T HUD!

Thud thump!

Thud thump whunk!

"....."

A massive pile of fish was deposited onto the floor of the Merchants' Guild seafood storage facility. Silence fell over them all.

Not unlike the Hunters' Guild, the Merchants' Guild was in the business of buying and reselling unprocessed animals, monsters, and large fish, so they had a warehouse for storage purposes. Naturally, it was a well-insulated structure, and the temperature was regulated by means of magic. The Crimson Vow and friends had persuaded the guild master, executives, and key staff members to take them there. A few of the junior employees had been left to attend to the reception counter.

Had the group of elderly retired fishermen come alone, no one would have given them the time of day. As it was, the guild leadership had obviously heard the rumors of an all-female party of newbie hunters with an outrageous amount of storage. Of course, due to issues of confidentiality and the girls' agreement with the Hunters' Guild, the nature of their skills were supposed to be kept secret from everyone but the guild employees, but secrets had a way of getting out. Plus, selling off this particular haul required an explanation of where the goods had come from, so there was a limit to how much a confidentiality agreement could cover.

Thus, the Merchants' Guild staff had concluded that the presence of the Crimson Vow was a good sign that there was something to the old men's story. Quite a few merchants, clearly having come to the same conclusion, tried to follow the group to the warehouse, but they had been chased off by guild staff. This was an official negotiation between the Merchants' Guild and nonmembers who had come to sell their products, with no room for curious bystanders.

It should go without saying that the size of the haul was impressive—and the fish themselves were of incredibly high quality. The pile of fish might as well have been a pile of money.

The guild master was the one to finally break the silence. “Are you serious?”

“No wonder the Hunters’ Guild wanted to keep you girls all to themselves,” the assistant guild master chimed in.

The other employees and butchers just looked on in awe.



“So… Any chance you’d be willing to take all this off our hands?” an old fisherman ventured.

“It would be our pleasure!” the entire guild staff chorused.

“There’s just one problem,” the guild master interjected, a troubled frown overtaking his face. “It might be difficult to sell everything here before it goes bad. We could deliver some of it to the neighboring towns and villages, but there are still limits to how much can be transported and consumed. We do have the option of shipping it to the bigger towns farther away, but it’ll go bad if we leave it raw, and we definitely don’t have enough salt to preserve such a huge haul. We can’t dry this amount of fish, either—the size of the haul and the fish themselves are too big for that. That leaves cutting the fish into smaller slices to dry, but that’d be too much work, and we don’t have the space to do it anyway.

“I’d estimate we could sell maybe a third of what’s here before it rots. Mm, but I’d really like to find a way to get rid of at least half of it… Normally, I would simply suggest lowering the price, but that can’t solve the problem of time and transportation. Hmm…”

It was ironic: The guild had been lucky enough to get its hands on a haul of extremely valuable merchandise, but their own limitations were going to cause half of it to go to waste. The guild master clutched his head and groaned. His pride as a merchant made this a bitter pill to swallow. The rest of the staff likewise grimaced in frustration.

The guild had the option of purchasing only half the haul, of course. But that would mean taking only the items that would fetch a good price and foisting the half doomed to rot back onto the fishermen. From a business perspective, it made sense, but it was a terrible waste, and the staff of the Merchants’ Guild was intent on finding another solution.

Might it be possible to buy the whole haul at a lower price, which would make up for the losses incurred by the inevitable spoilage? It wasn’t ideal, but it was a preferable alternative to sending back half of the old fishermen’s catch.

Then Mile threw them a lifeline. “We wouldn’t mind delivering the goods in smaller batches,” she offered, as if this were no big deal. “Items kept inside my storage space don’t go bad.”

A violent tremor rocked the entire warehouse. ***“THEY WHAAAAT?!”***

“Ack.”

“You idiot!” Reina screamed, furious that Mile had slipped up and blabbed about the special features of her so-called “storage.”

“Uhh, I mean, because I pack everything in there with magical ice!”

“Oh, that’s all you meant? A section of this warehouse is devoted to cold storage, so we’re already capable of making ice with magic, keeping the building cool, and preserving the fish a little longer. I can’t imagine you have room to store a haul this big *and* enough ice to keep it all chilled. We do appreciate the sentiment, though.”

“Er, right…”

Mile smiled, satisfied that she had managed to pull the wool over their eyes. To be fair, it was rather unbelievable that her storage would have both the ability to halt the passage of time *and* a seemingly unlimited capacity. It was far easier to accept that she used her enormous storage space to transport tons of magical ice or that she could cast a freezing spell over its contents.

After all, people are wired to believe what they want to believe.

In the end, the bargaining process was a success. Since it was the first time either party had made such a large transaction, neither was sure what counted as a fair price. By the same token, they couldn’t accurately predict how much of the stock could be sold and how much would go bad and need to be thrown out. As neither party was in a position to overcharge or haggle the price down, the negotiations were conducted in good faith.

It helped that one side was the Merchants’ Guild and the other was a group of old men from a fishing village near the port city. If it came to light after the fact that the guild had been dishonest in their dealings, it would look very bad for them. In this world—actually, in just about *any* world, Earth included—swindling elderly folks who had poured many years into honest work was considered a despicable act. The Merchants’ Guild could lose all credibility in the blink of an eye.

And of course, this case involved the fabled Supersized Storage Space Squad. There was no need to worry about the men getting cheated out of their money.

Still, no matter how rare the fish were—or how rare they *had* been, until moments ago—the prices would plummet if so many showed up on the market at once. And as the guild master had already acknowledged, the stock didn't have a particularly long shelf life, so even if the guild seized a carriage house's entire fleet of wagons and devoted the whole town's resources to transporting the haul to the neighboring towns and villages, it was difficult to say how much of it they could sell before it went bad. After working in the fishing business for decades, even an idiot would realize that much. Therefore, the old men had accounted for this and had already taken the inevitable loss of any unsold stock under consideration in estimating their earnings.

Besides, the men didn't have their hearts set on striking it rich. All they wanted was to tell the town the tale of how they had sailed gallantly out into the open sea. They wanted to share the joy of vanquishing their sworn enemy. They wanted others to join them in chowing down and filling their bellies with that same foe.

Of course, that didn't mean they *didn't* want the money. Just that they were keeping their expectations in check.

The Crimson Vow's share of the catches was still sitting inside Mile's inventory, unsold. There was no danger of any of it going bad, and adding it to the pile would only make more trouble for the Merchants' Guild. After witnessing the guild's distress, not a single one of the girls had the guts to diabolically double the haul before them.

Transaction complete, the Crimson Vow and the old fishermen left the Merchants' Guild together. All that was left was to say their goodbyes, after which the Crimson Vow would head back to their room at the inn and the old men to their fishing village—or so the girls thought.

At first, the men were all smiles. But then…

"We've got a favor to ask of you ladies," they began, trading out their grins for looks that meant business. Apparently, they had

some sort of request to make. “Y’see, we’re hoping to build an open-sea raiding vessel. No… An open-sea raiding *fleet*!”

Reina’s response was cold. “Do you honestly think you would have made it home safe from our last venture if we hadn’t gone with you? Without us around—or without *Mile* around, I should say—you’re going to end up with a hole in the bottom of your ship. And you’d be looking at a full party wipe before you manage to take down those sea serpents.”

Thus far, she had been taking care to treat her elders with a decent amount of respect, but clearly she had decided it was time to dispense with the courtesies. Most likely, she was playing up her bad attitude to discourage the old men from getting carried away and doing something stupid.

Mile piped in, too. “For a start, every single fishing boat would need around three or four mages capable of sending search magic underwater, erecting a barrier, and slaying the sea serpents that slither aboard with a single blow,” she explained. “Another way to protect the ship’s bottom would be to get yourselves some armored ships. But I don’t just mean attaching a thin iron plate to your wooden boats. The hull would have to be made completely out of iron.”

“A boat made of iron would never float!” Reina protested.

“Not true. We know that covering a cargo ship’s bottom with iron of an equal weight to its freight capacity won’t make it sink. So why wouldn’t it float if you make an iron hull of the same weight as its wooden hull and cargo combined? Besides, metal basins bob on the surface of the water just fine, don’t they?”

This was an eye-opening explanation for the rest of the party.

“Oh…”

“Good point.”

Mile carried on with her lecture. “Next up would be making the sides of the ships taller…”

“Would you quit indulging their fantasy?!” Reina snapped.

“Do you really think they can manage without your barrier or search magic, Mile?” Mavis asked, ignoring Reina’s interruption.

“I don’t see why not, if they have a thick enough iron hull. Upper C-rank frontline fighters or combat mages should be

enough to fend off the encroaching sea serpents. And there's no need to venture too far out into the open sea. They can go a little further out than usual, do some longline fishing, have a quick bout with the sea serpents, and return home without taking too many risks. They might sustain a few injuries in the process, but they can keep a healing mage on standby in the village. Not to say that completely eliminates the possibility of casualties or shipwrecks, of course."

"A fisherman is always prepared for those dangers! And the only ones allowed to join the raiding fleet will be us geezers with nothing to lose! If word of our exploits gets around, I betcha decrepit ol' fishermen from all over the continent will flock to our village!"

The fishermen erupted into hearty laughter, only for Reina to dash their hopes yet again.

"Great. So who's going to supply these iron ships?"

The old men groaned and fell silent.

"That's where the idea falls apart, unfortunately. It's a real shame, since I think an iron-hulled ship with decently thick armor could manage without my search magic or barrier. As long as they have a wide and stable deck to fight on, a fair number of hunters could take down sea serpents of that size without issue. But I've never seen the kind of metal ship I'm envisioning in a town pier..."

"I've never heard of a ship made of iron, period!" said Mavis. Reina and the old men bobbed their heads in agreement.

"Even I couldn't construct an iron ship... I don't think?"

No sooner did the words leave Mile's mouth than it occurred to her that she could perhaps just order the nanomachines to make one. It wasn't like she'd be asking for a powerboat. A simple iron hull shouldn't count as a prohibited request.

If that failed, she could always go through the Slow Walker and ask the Scavengers to build it. All she'd need to do was provide them a sufficient amount of scrap iron or iron ore. With her bottomless inventory, it would be a simple task for her to transport large quantities of iron ore from a deposit. Actually, given her authorization level of 7, she might be able to use her magic to smelt the ore herself.

And if she could track down the Scavengers on the new continent, she wouldn't even need to return home. By this point, the Slow Walker had probably gotten its communication system back in working order, established contact with the living ruins around the world, and dispatched Scavengers to do the needed repair work. As Mile was their custodian, the Scavengers of this continent were naturally under her control as well. If she could just get in touch with them, they would be sure to entertain any request of hers.

"I know that look, little lady! You *do* know a way to get us one!"

"Just name your price! We old-timers have saved up quite a bit of money to help get our grandchildren boats of their own. Haven't got much else to spend it on, at our age. We can pool all those funds together! If that still won't cut it, we'll rope in the neighboring fishing villages until we've got enough coin! So, please, give us those iron ships!"

The old men's eyes were sparkling with a reckless hope more often seen on the faces of adolescent boys.

Hold on! No! Nope, nada, not happening! Let's say I do make them an iron ship. How will they perform maintenance after we're gone?! How will they replace one if it sinks? Busybodies will flock from every kingdom on the continent to find out where the ships came from! What answers are they supposed to give?! I can't just pop out some out-of-place construction these people can't manufacture or maintain and wander off! Besides, every sunk ship will come with a death toll! People who could have spent the last years of their life surrounded by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren might die because of those stupid iron ships!

"Denied!"

"Nooooo!" the men whined in unison.

"Please reconsider!"

"C'mon, little lady! We're begging you here!"

Mile refused to bend to their pleas. "Your only choices are to have us go with you or to figure out how to build iron ships of sufficient strength. We're hunters, so we can't hang around in this area forever. And where do you plan to acquire the technology,

shipyards, engineers, budget, iron, and everything else you'd need for the second option?"

The old men said nothing. They seemed to realize how unreasonable their own demands were. After all, these were seasoned fishermen who had been in the business for decades.

Still, accepting something on an intellectual level wasn't the same as coming to terms with it. The members of the Crimson Vow couldn't bear to see the dejected looks on the fishermen's faces. No matter how hard they tried to put their foot down, the party had a soft spot for little girls and boys and cats and old-timers.

"Oh, fine! All right already!" Reina relented. "We'll accompany you however many times you want until we pack up and leave town! You good with that, girls?"

"You bet!" the Crimson Vow chorused.

"Yahooooo!" the old men whooped for joy.

Mile agreed alongside the rest of her party, but her mind was still whirring. She was pretty sure she could make things work even if the Crimson Vow moved their base somewhere far away. All she had to do was bust out her brute-force move of "falling horizontally" via gravity control. Of course, she had enough self-restraint not to consider transporting the rest of the party with the same method. Still, whenever she had a free week, she could show up alone, hire a party of four to five upper C-ranks or B-ranks, and escort at least one boat out to sea.

Plus, Mile's healing magic was probably some of the most advanced in the world. Even if one of the hunters lost an arm in the jaws of a sea serpent, it would be nothing she couldn't fix. It would take her about a month to fully heal anything as dramatic as limb loss, but second-rate healers often took the same amount of time to heal simple fractures, torn ligaments, and internal injury, so no one would dare complain. In fact, they would be more likely to thank her profusely.

The only problem would be if word got around that she was repairing lost limbs.

If that happened, I'd have to make everyone who witnessed the limb loss promise not to talk, then send the rest of the victim's party on a one-month trip so no one sees them in recovery... And while the

rest of the party was off earning money, I'd have to keep the injured person holed up in an inn… Oh, I guess I could have them wear a disguise during the rehabilitation period! And once they were healed, they could waltz back in like nothing happened.

The Crimson Vow would be somewhere far away, and I could disguise myself with an optical illusion to remain anonymous. I'd have to bypass the guild and treat it as an independent request—meaning I form a direct contract with the client. I highly doubt anyone from the fishing village would try to sell my personal information. And if anything did *get out, that would just be the last time I ever came back here.*

Hmm. It does sound like it'd be an extra headache if someone loses a limb… I'd better do my best to make sure that doesn't happen.

Preoccupied with every possible eventuality, Mile mumbled, "Well, I can cross the bridge when I come to it. Things might change between now and then, anyway. It won't help me to spend that whole time worrying! Best to limit the angst to the few days beforehand and focus on fun things until then!"

"What nonsense are you planning this time?"

"I have no idea what you're thinking, Mile, but you shouldn't make promises before you have a plan for how to accomplish them!"

"Mile, please…"

Mile wilted under the suspicious looks of her three companions.

"Okay okay, I get the message! 'Consider it advisable to launch attack force immediately.' We'll help when the time comes… Oh, and for the record, you'd better wait more than a handful of days!"

"……"

Mile's addendum made the fishermen's eyes dart to and fro.

"Hey! Why are you all looking like that?! I can tell what you're thinking!" Reina called them out. "But think of all the trouble it'll make for the Merchants' Guild if you show up with another mass delivery so soon after the first one! They'll have no choice but to buy it off you! At least wait until they've processed the first delivery, gotten everything to the retail stage, and the market is ready for the next shipment! Wouldn't it be a blow to your pride as

fishermen to let all the sea serpents and fish you caught go to waste?!”

“Hmph… Good point…”

The old men were forced to concede. Apparently, Reina was right about a wasted catch being too bitter a pill for them to swallow. Sea serpents were one thing, but regular fish were a gift they gratefully accepted to sustain their livelihood. Letting them rot would be unacceptable.

It was interesting to note how much consideration Reina showed the Merchants’ Guild, considering she had next to none for the Hunters’ Guild. After the Crimson Lightning were wiped out, she had put on a tough act and turned aggressive so she could make it alone as a young, female hunter, but deep down, she was a caring girl.

Well, unless someone made fun of her or got on her bad side, at least.

Offering their profuse thanks to the Crimson Vow, the old men went home to their village. Considering how much money they were carrying, Mile had planned on escorting them back in case something went wrong, but that turned out to be unnecessary. The fishermen had explained that they would never be stupid enough to take their profits back to the village. Very few transactions in the village were conducted with currency, so the only times most villagers paid with coins was during their visits to the port city. In which case, there was one very easy way to avoid tangling with petty thugs looking for a bit of pocket change.

You guessed it—they opened a bank account with the Merchants’ Guild and deposited their earnings there. They made personal accounts for themselves and a shared account for the whole village. Most of the money was split up between accounts, so they could each withdraw however much they needed during their visits to town.

The money they had deposited into the shared account was the portion of their earnings collected to cover the village’s operating expenses, similar to a residence tax. That’s where the village budget and the taxes paid to the local lord came from. Farming villages could make those payments in the form of

wheat, thanks to its long shelf life, but fishing villages dealt in fresh catches, so there were a few extra steps to consider.

“Phew, I guess that settles things,” said Mile on the way back to the inn. “Now all that’s left is to join them maybe once every few months on an open-sea hunt. In the future, we can limit ourselves to a slightly more modest haul. And I’m sure the old folks’ interest will wear off once they’ve gone another round.”

“I sure hope so,” Mavis muttered, meeting Mile’s optimism with skepticism.

“I have my doubts,” Pauline agreed.

“You clearly don’t understand human nature, Mile,” Reina chimed in. “Though I guess that shouldn’t come as a surprise…”

She had a point. Whether in her past life or her current one, Mile was terrible at putting herself in other people’s shoes.

Upon arriving at the inn…

“Oh, welcome back! What was today’s big catch?!”

“Oh, great…”

“She’s still here…”

“I forgot all about her…”

“Right, there was a reason we went on that whole trip…”

“Arli,” all four girls groaned in unison.

“We didn’t accept a request from the guild this time around. We just went on a private hunting trip,” Reina explained. “We didn’t have the equipment we needed, so we requested a vehicle and as many support personnel as we have party members. That meant we had to pay those people a commission and the charter fee, not to mention that we only got to keep half the spoils, so we ended up barely turning a profit.”

For once, the Crimson Vow had been the ones making a request rather than the ones fulfilling it. However, they hadn’t gone through the guild to make their request, and they had been dealing with ordinary fishermen, not fellow hunters. Thus, the commission had come out of their own pockets. To make matters worse, they had yet to sell off their own share of the haul, so they

had lost their deposit with no new earnings to show for it. They were effectively in the red.

Still, it would be a poor move to try and sell off their stock in town so soon after the old fishermen had unloaded their own portion of the catch. Therefore, their potential earnings were currently a pile of fish sitting in Mile's inventory. It was already clear that as soon as the market returned to normal the old men would be sure to come back around begging for their next sortie, so the Crimson Vow had resigned themselves to selling their share only after they moved on to another town.

Needless to say, the girls had no obligation to offer so much detail about their completed jobs. Most hunters would never share this sort of information with an outsider—not even in the case of a clientless job they had tackled of their own accord. There was a good reason why Reina, who tended to be the most particular about matters of confidentiality, had chosen to disclose all this. She wanted to impress upon Arli that half of the spoils were already on the market, meaning the prices had taken a nosedive and there were no more tantalizing business opportunities to be had. As an added touch, she had camouflaged the nature of the haul by saying "support personnel" instead of "fishermen" and "vehicle" instead of "boat."

"Whaaaat?! But what about *my* profits?!"

"Not our problem! Why did you expect us to sell you valuable merchandise for cheap in the first place?! The Hunters' Guild would give us a better price for the goods, *and* we'd get contribution points! The only conditions under which we'd sell to you instead of the guild would be if you offered us more money (with a premium to compensate for the contribution points we'd be missing out on), if it didn't break any of the quotas the guild master imposed on us, and if you agreed to pay us up front. No way we'd agree to a deferred payment if we're not going through the guild. There's too much risk of you skipping out on the bill."

"Mavis and Miley might be more easily fooled, but I come from a merchant family, and Reina is the daughter of a peddler," Pauline added. "If another girl around our age is doing her best to strike out on her own, we'd like to help where we can, but that doesn't mean we're willing to break the rules or give you special treatment. That wouldn't do *you* any good in the long run. Your

operations really shouldn't hinge on us. A one-time deal to get you start-up capital is one thing, but we don't plan to stay in this town indefinitely, so making us an essential part of your business will spell disaster for its longevity. It's never going to last.

"Plus, you won't get anywhere by taking us for fools and angling to buy our products for cheap. We *aren't* fools. We double-check the market prices in the area before we make any sales. None of that's to say that we *aren't* willing to sell to you, but those sales have to be at market price, with a markup for the contribution points we won't be getting from the guild. In the end, it'll cost you about the same as buying the goods straight from the guild. It might even run you a little extra."

"Noooo! But that's a terrible deal!"

"It's *normal*, is what it is," Reina shot back. "Did you think that if you hung around long enough, we'd give in and sell you our products at a loss?! If that strategy worked, we'd be stuck with you *and* a bunch of strangers trying to mooch off us forever!"

"Hmph..." Arli had no comeback for that one.

"Well, you're not a stranger at this point, so if you can come up with a plan that makes us a modest profit, doesn't involve hoodwinking us, and won't end with more people hounding us, we'd be willing to bargain with you. If the most you can manage is mindlessly beating down prices to make a profit, you're a failure as a merchant. All you're actually doing is stealing your supplier's earnings. As soon as that supplier finds a better buyer, any relationship you have will dissolve. The right way forward is to find a business model that makes both you *and* your supplier a profit—that's the only way to build a partnership that lasts. Prove your worth as a merchant and use your head! Figure something out on your own! Otherwise, what's the point of that thing sitting on your shoulders?! Is it just there for decoration?"

"....."

Dash!

Head hanging low, Arli bolted without another word.

"Oops, she ran off," remarked Pauline.

"That was quite a speech for an aspiring merchant," said Mavis.

Mile chose that moment for a Godzilla reference. “I can’t believe that Arli was the only surviving member of her species…”

“And I don’t want to believe there could be *more* of her!” yelled Reina, dutifully providing the punchline to her joke. Mile truly was lucky to have such good friends.

“I wonder if we’ll ever see her again.”

“If she comes back, we’ll ask her about her plan,” said Reina. “And if she doesn’t…well, I guess she wasn’t meant to be much of a merchant after all.”

“……”

The rest of the party appeared to be in agreement.

For all Arli’s shamelessness, none of them wanted to pick on a girl doing her best to strike out on her own. They knew full well how difficult it could be for a young woman to rise up in the world. Prior to enrolling at the Hunters’ Prep School, the girls had been forced to adopt all sorts of strategies to keep creeps at bay. Mavis had taken on masculine mannerisms, Pauline had learned how to scheme beneath her harmless facade, and Reina had become all bluster and pride.

Of course, even now, they hadn’t really shed those traits.

The point is, the Crimson Vow realized that their standards were perhaps just the teensiest, tiniest bit higher than the norm. So as long as they weren’t dealing with a bona fide scumbag, they were inclined to go easy on eccentric young girls.

Besides, Mile had convinced them to give her a freebie once already. Since their own blunder had messed up that plan, they were willing to make it up to her somehow—even though they obviously had zero obligation to do so.

Still, she needed to prove that she had the integrity and brains to deserve to be treated as a merchant.

We’ll be waiting, Arli! Mile called out to her in silent encouragement.

***

Two weeks passed. There was no knowing what exactly had become of the catch sold to the Merchants’ Guild, but by now, all

the fish left for the village's personal consumption had either been eaten, dried for preservation purposes, or simply wasted. Therefore, Mile and friends decide to head back to the fishing village once more. It was time to show off their skills.

The villagers had probably spent the first week grilling, boiling, and eating their way through their massive haul, all the while salting or fully preserving as much additional fish as possible. After the grilled and boiled fish reached the limits of its shelf life, they would no doubt have turned to the fish they salted to extend its expiration date as long as possible. Even that fish wouldn't keep all that long, but it was certainly less likely to spoil than if it had been cooked or left raw for a week or two. Only the fully dehydrated fish that had been sapped of all moisture would go uneaten and be kept as preserved food.

In summary, the villagers had likely only feasted on fish for the first handful of days before turning to their salted stock, and then after another week, returning to their usual eating habits.

Actually, there was no "likely" about it. Mile had snuck back to the village and confirmed the facts for herself.

In light of all this, Mile had come up with a plan. She had figured that, between the craze of the big catch frenzy and all the work of cooking and preserving, the villagers would prefer to be left to their own devices. Out of consideration for this fact, Mile had stayed out of their business, but now that a week had passed since the end of the fish bonanza, she suspected the villagers would be feeling seafood withdrawal—a longing for the days when they could eat all the premium catch their hearts desired. It might sound odd for a *fishing* village to hunger for fish, but they had been feasting for the past week on silver salmon, marlin, and rainbow tuna—not the small fry they could catch near the coast. Occasionally, one of those gigantic, top-grade fish might wander far enough inland for them to catch, but that only happened about once every few years, and when it did happen, the villagers never got to partake. It was common practice among fishing villages to sell anything valuable in town and eat only the less marketable fish.

These less marketable fish didn't necessarily taste bad; in fact, a few of these lower-priced fish were even more delicious than the bestsellers. There were a variety of potential reasons why

they might be less valuable: Some looked unappetizing, others had a distinctive taste that wasn't for everyone, and some had to be handled with care due to poison glands or spines that called for careful removal.

Still, there was no denying that those silver salmon, marlin, and rainbow tuna were something special.

The size of the haul had far exceeded the Merchants' Guild's processing capacities. It had been too much for even the neighboring towns and villages to consume in its entirety. Thus, the villagers had been left with a huge mountain of unsold premium catches. Many of the children—and even a good handful of the adults—had never had a chance to eat these particular fish before, and those who had had only tried a few bites at most. Now they were looking at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Whatever they couldn't eat was bound to go bad. Knowing this, the villagers had stuffed themselves full, then run over to the pier, stuck a finger down their throats, and hurled into the sea. No self-respecting resident of a fishing village would ever let perfectly good fish go to waste. Even the fish they regurgitated had their use: The small fry would eat the vomit, and the big fish would feast on the smaller ones. This was the only way for the village to be spared the wrath of the god of the sea.

Some might be appalled to imagine anyone going to such lengths just to keep eating, but even back on Earth, there were plenty of examples of people in power repeatedly throwing up in order to dine on gourmet cuisine for days on end. It just went to show how much people valued a fancy meal.

By this point, you might have guessed the reason the Crimson Vow were heading back to the fishing village. Now that a week had passed since the villagers had depleted their stock of super deluxe fish, the girls were going to slam them with an all-out assault of Mile's diverse array of seafood dishes.

Fishing villages didn't tend to put that much effort into preparing their food. Fish was a free resource, and small fry weren't worth sprucing up. Painstakingly boiling or grilling their catches would be a waste of both firewood and their precious time, and they didn't have any expensive spices at their disposal. As a result, they used salt for seasoning and made the cooking process as short as possible. They had no concept of the benefits

of a thorough roasting or leaving a dish to simmer for more than a few minutes.

Mile was about to show them how it was done.

***

The village chief met the Crimson Vow's proposal with more surprise than anticipated. "What's this? You little ladies want to whip up some fish for us?"

Technically, not all the "little ladies" would be the ones doing the cooking. Mile was going to be the head chef and Pauline the sous chef. Mavis would be in charge of gutting, scaling, deboning, and filleting, and as for Reina... Well, someone had to be the server.

"Er, are you sure it's a good idea for a group of amateurs to prepare seafood for a village of fishermen? We eat fish every day of our lives. We know everything there is to know about 'em: which types are hardest to catch, which types are underrated, which fish look too gross to sell well but taste great, and which of the entrails folks tend to throw out but are actually delicious. We could best a professional cook when it comes to filleting. Even for a talented bunch of ladies like yourselves, it's pure hubris to try and serve us fishermen a tasty seafood meal!"

Despite the great debt he owed Mile and her friends, his pride wouldn't let their offer go unchallenged.

"Hee hee, I guess we'll see about that! Do me a favor, will you? An hour from now, I want you to assemble all the villagers on the beach!"

"Yeesh! Well, if you insist..."

Mile's eyes were ablaze with enthusiasm. For his part, the village chief must have figured that his people wouldn't object to indulging the Crimson Vow after all the girls had done for them. Besides, now that the village had run out of its stock of deluxe fish, no one could turn up their nose at a sample from the Crimson Vow's share. It wouldn't be the end of the world if the cooking wasn't the greatest.

As soon as the girls weren't looking, he would have to warn the villagers to compliment the cuisine regardless of its actual

quality.

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“It’s been, what, two whole weeks? It’s good to see you all again! I hope you enjoy the smorgasbord of seafood dishes I’ll be preparing for you today!”

An hour later, the Crimson Vow and nearly the entire population of the village stood on the beach. The village didn’t often have fun surprises to look forward to, and any chance to eat for free was more than welcome. Even better when it was a break from their usual cuisine—and when the cook was such a cute young lady.

All of the men older than infants were in attendance. All of the women except the ones taking care of said infants were there, too.

“All right! Allez cuisine!”

Silver salmon, marlin, and rainbow tuna came raining out of Mile’s inventory. She could have taken them out in advance, but as usual, she had to maximize the drama. Taste, aroma, texture, and presentation were all vital aspects of cooking, but anticipation was the most important ingredient of all. Ambiance, suspense, and excitement could single-handedly make a meal several times more enjoyable.

Mavis did a magnificent job of cutting up the fish with her trusty sword. Naturally, the nanomachines had switched it into Fourth or Fifth Sharpest Blade in the World Mode for the occasion. Mile had assumed that the nanomachines would be reluctant to activate the sword’s Serious Mode over something so frivolous, but they were actually quite gung-ho about it, maybe because they hadn’t been getting much to do as of late.

Mile could have done the cutting herself, but it was always nice to give one of her friends her own time to shine, and Mavis filleted with flair.

Once the fish had been cut into small enough slices to work with, Mile took over. For the sake of the performance, she had left all the actual cooking until now, but she had spent the last hour filling pots with boiling oil and making various other preparations.

Even Mile wasn't quite up to the challenge of cooking for an entire village on the fly.

"Okay! The karaage's done!"

"Tempura, coming right up!"

"I've got steaks ready to go!"

The fish were sautéed with leek and miso sauce, turned into crispy fritters, crusted with bread crumbs and herbs, baked in foil, cooked meunière, teriyaki, chanchan-yaki, and shogayaki style, creamed, stir-fried with garlic, made into cheese cutlets, marinated and deep-fried, simmered in soy sauce, fried with seaweed batter, tomato-braised, and more. A wide assortment of seafood dishes came streaming out of the pots, frying pans, grill, and Mile's inventory. The food just kept on coming, and the villagers shoveled it all down nonstop.

Cries of *"Yum!"* and approving moans came from every direction.

"Why, I've never had anything like this!"

"Hey, Ma! Remember this recipe for us, will you?"

"Of course, dear!"

It would be difficult for the villagers to perfectly replicate the taste of Mile's dishes, since some of the spices were too expensive for them to use on a regular basis, and only she knew how to make the miso and soy sauce. However, not all of her cooking methods called for special seasonings. Even the techniques that used inaccessible seasonings weren't entirely off the table—as long as they knew how it was prepared, they might still be able to approximate the taste with substitute ingredients. Just as one could make coffee with dandelion root and tea with corn silk, fish sauce would do in place of soy sauce.

Cooking was all about thinking outside the box. A hundred cooks could come up with a hundred different recipes for the same dish. Even the small fish that populated the coastal waters could be prepared in a variety of different ways.

And surely someday they would have another chance to bring back a big haul from the open sea...

Parents and children alike ate with relish. The act of eating was clearly becoming more to them than just a way to get nutrients, a necessary measure to avoid starvation. The idea of

food as something delicious and meals as something to be enjoyed was taking root in their community, even if it meant spending a little extra time, fuel, and seasonings.

The members of the Crimson Vow looked on with smiles in their eyes.

“Hm?”

That was when the girls spotted a familiar face in the crowd. An outsider was seated among the adults and children chowing down on seafood. Up to this moment, she had blended in among the villagers gobbling down their fish. And the identity of this stranger was…

“Arli!” they all cried out in unison.

It was that fledgling merchant who had plotted to make a profit off the Crimson Vow, only to turn tail and run when faced with criticism.

“Did she seriously infiltrate the village just so she could get a free meal?!” Reina fumed.

“She must be up to no good!” Pauline agr“So… Any chance you’d be willing to take all this off our hands?” an old fisherman ventured.

“It would be our pleasure!” the entire guild staff chorused.

“There’s just one problem,” the guild master interjected, a troubled frown overtaking his face. “It might be difficult to sell everything here before it goes bad. We could deliver some of it to the neighboring towns and villages, but there are still limits to how much can be transported and consumed. We do have the option of shipping it to the bigger towns farther away, but it’ll go bad if we leave it raw, and we definitely don’t have enough salt to preserve such a huge haul. We can’t dry this amount of fish, either—the size of the haul and the fish themselves are too big for that. That leaves cutting the fish into smaller slices to dry, but that’d be too much work, and we don’t have the space to do it anyway.

“I’d estimate we could sell maybe a third of what’s here before it rots. Mm, but I’d really like to find a way to get rid of at least half of it… Normally, I would simply suggest lowering the price, but that can’t solve the problem of time and transportation. Hmm…”

It was ironic: The guild had been lucky enough to get its hands on a haul of extremely valuable merchandise, but their own limitations were going to cause half of it to go to waste. The guild master clutched his head and groaned. His pride as a merchant made this a bitter pill to swallow. The rest of the staff likewise grimaced in frustration.

The guild had the option of purchasing only half the haul, of course. But that would mean taking only the items that would fetch a good price and foisting the half doomed to rot back onto the fishermen. From a business perspective, it made sense, but it was a terrible waste, and the staff of the Merchants' Guild was intent on finding another solution.

Might it be possible to buy the whole haul at a lower price, which would make up for the losses incurred by the inevitable spoilage? It wasn't ideal, but it was a preferable alternative to sending back half of the old fishermen's catch.

Then Mile threw them a lifeline. "We wouldn't mind delivering the goods in smaller batches," she offered, as if this were no big deal. "Items kept inside my storage space don't go bad."

A violent tremor rocked the entire warehouse. ***"THEY WHAAAAT?!"***

"Ack."

"You idiot!" Reina screamed, furious that Mile had slipped up and blabbed about the special features of her so-called "storage."

"Uhh, I mean, because I pack everything in there with magical ice!"

"Oh, that's all you meant? A section of this warehouse is devoted to cold storage, so we're already capable of making ice with magic, keeping the building cool, and preserving the fish a little longer. I can't imagine you have room to store a haul this big *and* enough ice to keep it all chilled. We do appreciate the sentiment, though."

"Er, right..."

Mile smiled, satisfied that she had managed to pull the wool over their eyes. To be fair, it was rather unbelievable that her storage would have both the ability to halt the passage of time *and* a seemingly unlimited capacity. It was far easier to accept that

she used her enormous storage space to transport tons of magical ice or that she could cast a freezing spell over its contents.

After all, people are wired to believe what they want to believe.

In the end, the bargaining process was a success. Since it was the first time either party had made such a large transaction, neither was sure what counted as a fair price. By the same token, they couldn't accurately predict how much of the stock could be sold and how much would go bad and need to be thrown out. As neither party was in a position to overcharge or haggle the price down, the negotiations were conducted in good faith.

It helped that one side was the Merchants' Guild and the other was a group of old men from a fishing village near the port city. If it came to light after the fact that the guild had been dishonest in their dealings, it would look very bad for them. In this world—actually, in just about *any* world, Earth included—swindling elderly folks who had poured many years into honest work was considered a despicable act. The Merchants' Guild could lose all credibility in the blink of an eye.

And of course, this case involved the fabled Supersized Storage Space Squad. There was no need to worry about the men getting cheated out of their money.

Still, no matter how rare the fish were—or how rare they *had* been, until moments ago—the prices would plummet if so many showed up on the market at once. And as the guild master had already acknowledged, the stock didn't have a particularly long shelf life, so even if the guild seized a carriage house's entire fleet of wagons and devoted the whole town's resources to transporting the haul to the neighboring towns and villages, it was difficult to say how much of it they could sell before it went bad. After working in the fishing business for decades, even an idiot would realize that much. Therefore, the old men had accounted for this and had already taken the inevitable loss of any unsold stock under consideration in estimating their earnings.

Besides, the men didn't have their hearts set on striking it rich. All they wanted was to tell the town the tale of how they had sailed gallantly out into the open sea. They wanted to share the

joy of vanquishing their sworn enemy. They wanted others to join them in chowing down and filling their bellies with that same foe.

Of course, that didn't mean they *didn't* want the money. Just that they were keeping their expectations in check.

The Crimson Vow's share of the catches was still sitting inside Mile's inventory, unsold. There was no danger of any of it going bad, and adding it to the pile would only make more trouble for the Merchants' Guild. After witnessing the guild's distress, not a single one of the girls had the guts to diabolically double the haul before them.

Transaction complete, the Crimson Vow and the old fishermen left the Merchants' Guild together. All that was left was to say their goodbyes, after which the Crimson Vow would head back to their room at the inn and the old men to their fishing village—or so the girls thought.

At first, the men were all smiles. But then…

"We've got a favor to ask of you ladies," they began, trading out their grins for looks that meant business. Apparently, they had some sort of request to make. "Y'see, we're hoping to build an open-sea raiding vessel. No… An open-sea raiding *fleet*!"

Reina's response was cold. "Do you honestly think you would have made it home safe from our last venture if we hadn't gone with you? Without us around—or without *Mile* around, I should say—you're going to end up with a hole in the bottom of your ship. And you'd be looking at a full party wipe before you manage to take down those sea serpents."

Thus far, she had been taking care to treat her elders with a decent amount of respect, but clearly she had decided it was time to dispense with the courtesies. Most likely, she was playing up her bad attitude to discourage the old men from getting carried away and doing something stupid.

Mile piped in, too. "For a start, every single fishing boat would need around three or four mages capable of sending search magic underwater, erecting a barrier, and slaying the sea serpents that slither aboard with a single blow," she explained. "Another way to protect the ship's bottom would be to get yourselves some armored ships. But I don't just mean attaching a

thin iron plate to your wooden boats. The hull would have to be made completely out of iron."

"A boat made of iron would never float!" Reina protested.

"Not true. We know that covering a cargo ship's bottom with iron of an equal weight to its freight capacity won't make it sink. So why wouldn't it float if you make an iron hull of the same weight as its wooden hull and cargo combined? Besides, metal basins bob on the surface of the water just fine, don't they?"

This was an eye-opening explanation for the rest of the party.

"Oh..."

"Good point."

Mile carried on with her lecture. "Next up would be making the sides of the ships taller..."

"Would you quit indulging their fantasy?!" Reina snapped.

"Do you really think they can manage without your barrier or search magic, Mile?" Mavis asked, ignoring Reina's interruption.

"I don't see why not, if they have a thick enough iron hull. Upper C-rank frontline fighters or combat mages should be enough to fend off the encroaching sea serpents. And there's no need to venture too far out into the open sea. They can go a little further out than usual, do some longline fishing, have a quick bout with the sea serpents, and return home without taking too many risks. They might sustain a few injuries in the process, but they can keep a healing mage on standby in the village. Not to say that completely eliminates the possibility of casualties or shipwrecks, of course."

"A fisherman is always prepared for those dangers! And the only ones allowed to join the raiding fleet will be us geezers with nothing to lose! If word of our exploits gets around, I betcha decrepit ol' fishermen from all over the continent will flock to our village!"

The fishermen erupted into hearty laughter, only for Reina to dash their hopes yet again.

"Great. So who's going to supply these iron ships?"

The old men groaned and fell silent.

“That’s where the idea falls apart, unfortunately. It’s a real shame, since I think an iron-hulled ship with decently thick armor could manage without my search magic or barrier. As long as they have a wide and stable deck to fight on, a fair number of hunters could take down sea serpents of that size without issue. But I’ve never seen the kind of metal ship I’m envisioning in a town pier…”

“I’ve never heard of a ship made of iron, period!” said Mavis. Reina and the old men bobbed their heads in agreement.

“Even I couldn’t construct an iron ship… I don’t think?”

No sooner did the words leave Mile’s mouth than it occurred to her that she could perhaps just order the nanomachines to make one. It wasn’t like she’d be asking for a powerboat. A simple iron hull shouldn’t count as a prohibited request.

If that failed, she could always go through the Slow Walker and ask the Scavengers to build it. All she’d need to do was provide them a sufficient amount of scrap iron or iron ore. With her bottomless inventory, it would be a simple task for her to transport large quantities of iron ore from a deposit. Actually, given her authorization level of 7, she might be able to use her magic to smelt the ore herself.

And if she could track down the Scavengers on the new continent, she wouldn’t even need to return home. By this point, the Slow Walker had probably gotten its communication system back in working order, established contact with the living ruins around the world, and dispatched Scavengers to do the needed repair work. As Mile was their custodian, the Scavengers of this continent were naturally under her control as well. If she could just get in touch with them, they would be sure to entertain any request of hers.

“I know that look, little lady! You *do* know a way to get us one!”

“Just name your price! We old-timers have saved up quite a bit of money to help get our grandchildren boats of their own. Haven’t got much else to spend it on, at our age. We can pool all those funds together! If that still won’t cut it, we’ll rope in the neighboring fishing villages until we’ve got enough coin! So, please, give us those iron ships!”

The old men's eyes were sparkling with a reckless hope more often seen on the faces of adolescent boys.

Hold on! No! Nope, nada, not happening! Let's say I do make them an iron ship. How will they perform maintenance after we're gone?! How will they replace one if it sinks? Busybodies will flock from every kingdom on the continent to find out where the ships came from! What answers are they supposed to give?! I can't just pop out some out-of-place construction these people can't manufacture or maintain and wander off! Besides, every sunk ship will come with a death toll! People who could have spent the last years of their life surrounded by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren might die because of those stupid iron ships!

"Denied!"

"Nooooo!" the men whined in unison.

"Please reconsider!"

"C'mon, little lady! We're begging you here!"

Mile refused to bend to their pleas. "Your only choices are to have us go with you or to figure out how to build iron ships of sufficient strength. We're hunters, so we can't hang around in this area forever. And where do you plan to acquire the technology, shipyards, engineers, budget, iron, and everything else you'd need for the second option?"

The old men said nothing. They seemed to realize how unreasonable their own demands were. After all, these were seasoned fishermen who had been in the business for decades.

Still, accepting something on an intellectual level wasn't the same as coming to terms with it. The members of the Crimson Vow couldn't bear to see the dejected looks on the fishermen's faces. No matter how hard they tried to put their foot down, the party had a soft spot for little girls and boys and cats and old-timers.

"Oh, fine! All right already!" Reina relented. "We'll accompany you however many times you want until we pack up and leave town! You good with that, girls?"

"You bet!" the Crimson Vow chorused.

"Yahooooo!" the old men whooped for joy.

Mile agreed alongside the rest of her party, but her mind was still whirring. She was pretty sure she could make things work even if the Crimson Vow moved their base somewhere far away. All she had to do was bust out her brute-force move of "falling horizontally" via gravity control. Of course, she had enough self-restraint not to consider transporting the rest of the party with the same method. Still, whenever she had a free week, she could show up alone, hire a party of four to five upper C-ranks or B-ranks, and escort at least one boat out to sea.

Plus, Mile's healing magic was probably some of the most advanced in the world. Even if one of the hunters lost an arm in the jaws of a sea serpent, it would be nothing she couldn't fix. It would take her about a month to fully heal anything as dramatic as limb loss, but second-rate healers often took the same amount of time to heal simple fractures, torn ligaments, and internal injury, so no one would dare complain. In fact, they would be more likely to thank her profusely.

The only problem would be if word got around that she was repairing lost limbs.

If that happened, I'd have to make everyone who witnessed the limb loss promise not to talk, then send the rest of the victim's party on a one-month trip so no one sees them in recovery… And while the rest of the party was off earning money, I'd have to keep the injured person holed up in an inn… Oh, I guess I could have them wear a disguise during the rehabilitation period! And once they were healed, they could waltz back in like nothing happened.

The Crimson Vow would be somewhere far away, and I could disguise myself with an optical illusion to remain anonymous. I'd have to bypass the guild and treat it as an independent request—meaning I form a direct contract with the client. I highly doubt anyone from the fishing village would try to sell my personal information. And if anything did *get out, that would just be the last time I ever came back here.*

Hmm. It does sound like it'd be an extra headache if someone loses a limb… I'd better do my best to make sure that doesn't happen.

Preoccupied with every possible eventuality, Mile mumbled, "Well, I can cross the bridge when I come to it. Things might change between now and then, anyway. It won't help me to spend

that whole time worrying! Best to limit the angst to the few days beforehand and focus on fun things until then!”

“What nonsense are you planning this time?”

“I have no idea what you’re thinking, Mile, but you shouldn’t make promises before you have a plan for how to accomplish them!”

“Mile, please…”

Mile wilted under the suspicious looks of her three companions.

“Okay okay, I get the message! ‘Consider it advisable to launch attack force immediately.’ We’ll help when the time comes… Oh, and for the record, you’d better wait more than a handful of days!”

“……”

Mile’s addendum made the fishermen’s eyes dart to and fro.

“Hey! Why are you all looking like that?! I can tell what you’re thinking!” Reina called them out. “But think of all the trouble it’ll make for the Merchants’ Guild if you show up with another mass delivery so soon after the first one! They’ll have no choice but to buy it off you! At least wait until they’ve processed the first delivery, gotten everything to the retail stage, and the market is ready for the next shipment! Wouldn’t it be a blow to your pride as fishermen to let all the sea serpents and fish you caught go to waste?!”

“Hmph… Good point…”

The old men were forced to concede. Apparently, Reina was right about a wasted catch being too bitter a pill for them to swallow. Sea serpents were one thing, but regular fish were a gift they gratefully accepted to sustain their livelihood. Letting them rot would be unacceptable.

It was interesting to note how much consideration Reina showed the Merchants’ Guild, considering she had next to none for the Hunters’ Guild. After the Crimson Lightning were wiped out, she had put on a tough act and turned aggressive so she could make it alone as a young, female hunter, but deep down, she was a caring girl.

Well, unless someone made fun of her or got on her bad side, at least.

Offering their profuse thanks to the Crimson Vow, the old men went home to their village. Considering how much money they were carrying, Mile had planned on escorting them back in case something went wrong, but that turned out to be unnecessary. The fishermen had explained that they would never be stupid enough to take their profits back to the village. Very few transactions in the village were conducted with currency, so the only times most villagers paid with coins was during their visits to the port city. In which case, there was one very easy way to avoid tangling with petty thugs looking for a bit of pocket change.

You guessed it—they opened a bank account with the Merchants' Guild and deposited their earnings there. They made personal accounts for themselves and a shared account for the whole village. Most of the money was split up between accounts, so they could each withdraw however much they needed during their visits to town.

The money they had deposited into the shared account was the portion of their earnings collected to cover the village's operating expenses, similar to a residence tax. That's where the village budget and the taxes paid to the local lord came from. Farming villages could make those payments in the form of wheat, thanks to its long shelf life, but fishing villages dealt in fresh catches, so there were a few extra steps to consider.

"Phew, I guess that settles things," said Mile on the way back to the inn. "Now all that's left is to join them maybe once every few months on an open-sea hunt. In the future, we can limit ourselves to a slightly more modest haul. And I'm sure the old folks' interest will wear off once they've gone another round."

"I sure hope so," Mavis muttered, meeting Mile's optimism with skepticism.

"I have my doubts," Pauline agreed.

"You clearly don't understand human nature, Mile," Reina chimed in. "Though I guess that shouldn't come as a surprise…"

She had a point. Whether in her past life or her current one, Mile was terrible at putting herself in other people's shoes.

Upon arriving at the inn…

“Oh, welcome back! What was today’s big catch?!”

“Oh, great…”

“She’s still here…”

“I forgot all about her…”

“Right, there was a reason we went on that whole trip…”

“Arli,” all four girls groaned in unison.

“We didn’t accept a request from the guild this time around. We just went on a private hunting trip,” Reina explained. “We didn’t have the equipment we needed, so we requested a vehicle and as many support personnel as we have party members. That meant we had to pay those people a commission and the charter fee, not to mention that we only got to keep half the spoils, so we ended up barely turning a profit.”

For once, the Crimson Vow had been the ones making a request rather than the ones fulfilling it. However, they hadn’t gone through the guild to make their request, and they had been dealing with ordinary fishermen, not fellow hunters. Thus, the commission had come out of their own pockets. To make matters worse, they had yet to sell off their own share of the haul, so they had lost their deposit with no new earnings to show for it. They were effectively in the red.

Still, it would be a poor move to try and sell off their stock in town so soon after the old fishermen had unloaded their own portion of the catch. Therefore, their potential earnings were currently a pile of fish sitting in Mile’s inventory. It was already clear that as soon as the market returned to normal the old men would be sure to come back around begging for their next sortie, so the Crimson Vow had resigned themselves to selling their share only after they moved on to another town.

Needless to say, the girls had no obligation to offer so much detail about their completed jobs. Most hunters would never share this sort of information with an outsider—not even in the case of a clientless job they had tackled of their own accord. There was a good reason why Reina, who tended to be the most particular about matters of confidentiality, had chosen to disclose all this. She wanted to impress upon Arli that half of the spoils were already on the market, meaning the prices had taken a

nosedive and there were no more tantalizing business opportunities to be had. As an added touch, she had camouflaged the nature of the haul by saying “support personnel” instead of “fishermen” and “vehicle” instead of “boat.”

“Whaaaat?! But what about *my* profits?!”

“Not our problem! Why did you expect us to sell you valuable merchandise for cheap in the first place?! The Hunters’ Guild would give us a better price for the goods, *and* we’d get contribution points! The only conditions under which we’d sell to you instead of the guild would be if you offered us more money (with a premium to compensate for the contribution points we’d be missing out on), if it didn’t break any of the quotas the guild master imposed on us, and if you agreed to pay us up front. No way we’d agree to a deferred payment if we’re not going through the guild. There’s too much risk of you skipping out on the bill.”

“Mavis and Miley might be more easily fooled, but I come from a merchant family, and Reina is the daughter of a peddler,” Pauline added. “If another girl around our age is doing her best to strike out on her own, we’d like to help where we can, but that doesn’t mean we’re willing to break the rules or give you special treatment. That wouldn’t do *you* any good in the long run. Your operations really shouldn’t hinge on us. A one-time deal to get you start-up capital is one thing, but we don’t plan to stay in this town indefinitely, so making us an essential part of your business will spell disaster for its longevity. It’s never going to last.

“Plus, you won’t get anywhere by taking us for fools and angling to buy our products for cheap. We *aren’t* fools. We double-check the market prices in the area before we make any sales. None of that’s to say that we *aren’t* willing to sell to you, but those sales have to be at market price, with a markup for the contribution points we won’t be getting from the guild. In the end, it’ll cost you about the same as buying the goods straight from the guild. It might even run you a little extra.”

“Noooo! But that’s a terrible deal!”

“It’s *normal*, is what it is,” Reina shot back. “Did you think that if you hung around long enough, we’d give in and sell you our products at a loss?! If that strategy worked, we’d be stuck with you *and* a bunch of strangers trying to mooch off us forever!”

“Hmph…” Arli had no comeback for that one.

“Well, you’re not a stranger at this point, so if you can come up with a plan that makes us a modest profit, doesn’t involve hoodwinking us, and won’t end with more people hounding us, we’d be willing to bargain with you. If the most you can manage is mindlessly beating down prices to make a profit, you’re a failure as a merchant. All you’re actually doing is stealing your supplier’s earnings. As soon as that supplier finds a better buyer, any relationship you have will dissolve. The right way forward is to find a business model that makes both you *and* your supplier a profit—that’s the only way to build a partnership that lasts. Prove your worth as a merchant and use your head! Figure something out on your own! Otherwise, what’s the point of that thing sitting on your shoulders?! Is it just there for decoration?”

“……”

Dash!

Head hanging low, Arli bolted without another word.

“Oops, she ran off,” remarked Pauline.

“That was quite a speech for an aspiring merchant,” said Mavis.

Mile chose that moment for a Godzilla reference. “I can’t believe that Arli was the only surviving member of her species…”

“And I don’t want to believe there could be *more* of her!” yelled Reina, dutifully providing the punchline to her joke. Mile truly was lucky to have such good friends.

“I wonder if we’ll ever see her again.”

“If she comes back, we’ll ask her about her plan,” said Reina. “And if she doesn’t…well, I guess she wasn’t meant to be much of a merchant after all.”

“……”

The rest of the party appeared to be in agreement.

For all Arli’s shamelessness, none of them wanted to pick on a girl doing her best to strike out on her own. They knew full well how difficult it could be for a young woman to rise up in the world. Prior to enrolling at the Hunters’ Prep School, the girls had been forced to adopt all sorts of strategies to keep creeps at bay. Mavis had taken on masculine mannerisms, Pauline had learned

how to scheme beneath her harmless facade, and Reina had become all bluster and pride.

Of course, even now, they hadn't really shed those traits.

The point is, the Crimson Vow realized that their standards were perhaps just the teensiest, tiniest bit higher than the norm. So as long as they weren't dealing with a bona fide scumbag, they were inclined to go easy on eccentric young girls.

Besides, Mile had convinced them to give her a freebie once already. Since their own blunder had messed up that plan, they were willing to make it up to her somehow—even though they obviously had zero obligation to do so.

Still, she needed to prove that she had the integrity and brains to deserve to be treated as a merchant.

We'll be waiting, Arli! Mile called out to her in silent encouragement.

***

Two weeks passed. There was no knowing what exactly had become of the catch sold to the Merchants' Guild, but by now, all the fish left for the village's personal consumption had either been eaten, dried for preservation purposes, or simply wasted. Therefore, Mile and friends decide to head back to the fishing village once more. It was time to show off their skills.

The villagers had probably spent the first week grilling, boiling, and eating their way through their massive haul, all the while salting or fully preserving as much additional fish as possible. After the grilled and boiled fish reached the limits of its shelf life, they would no doubt have turned to the fish they salted to extend its expiration date as long as possible. Even that fish wouldn't keep all that long, but it was certainly less likely to spoil than if it had been cooked or left raw for a week or two. Only the fully dehydrated fish that had been sapped of all moisture would go uneaten and be kept as preserved food.

In summary, the villagers had likely only feasted on fish for the first handful of days before turning to their salted stock, and then after another week, returning to their usual eating habits.

Actually, there was no “likely” about it. Mile had snuck back to the village and confirmed the facts for herself.

In light of all this, Mile had come up with a plan. She had figured that, between the craze of the big catch frenzy and all the work of cooking and preserving, the villagers would prefer to be left to their own devices. Out of consideration for this fact, Mile had stayed out of their business, but now that a week had passed since the end of the fish bonanza, she suspected the villagers would be feeling seafood withdrawal—a longing for the days when they could eat all the premium catch their hearts desired. It might sound odd for a *fishing* village to hunger for fish, but they had been feasting for the past week on silver salmon, marlin, and rainbow tuna—not the small fry they could catch near the coast. Occasionally, one of those gigantic, top-grade fish might wander far enough inland for them to catch, but that only happened about once every few years, and when it did happen, the villagers never got to partake. It was common practice among fishing villages to sell anything valuable in town and eat only the less marketable fish.

These less marketable fish didn’t necessarily taste bad; in fact, a few of these lower-priced fish were even more delicious than the bestsellers. There were a variety of potential reasons why they might be less valuable: Some looked unappetizing, others had a distinctive taste that wasn’t for everyone, and some had to be handled with care due to poison glands or spines that called for careful removal.

Still, there was no denying that those silver salmon, marlin, and rainbow tuna were something special.

The size of the haul had far exceeded the Merchants’ Guild’s processing capacities. It had been too much for even the neighboring towns and villages to consume in its entirety. Thus, the villagers had been left with a huge mountain of unsold premium catches. Many of the children—and even a good handful of the adults—had never had a chance to eat these particular fish before, and those who had had only tried a few bites at most. Now they were looking at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Whatever they couldn’t eat was bound to go bad. Knowing this, the villagers had stuffed themselves full, then run over to the pier, stuck a finger down their throats, and hurled into the sea. No

self-respecting resident of a fishing village would ever let perfectly good fish go to waste. Even the fish they regurgitated had their use: The small fry would eat the vomit, and the big fish would feast on the smaller ones. This was the only way for the village to be spared the wrath of the god of the sea.

Some might be appalled to imagine anyone going to such lengths just to keep eating, but even back on Earth, there were plenty of examples of people in power repeatedly throwing up in order to dine on gourmet cuisine for days on end. It just went to show how much people valued a fancy meal.

By this point, you might have guessed the reason the Crimson Vow were heading back to the fishing village. Now that a week had passed since the villagers had depleted their stock of super deluxe fish, the girls were going to slam them with an all-out assault of Mile's diverse array of seafood dishes.

Fishing villages didn't tend to put that much effort into preparing their food. Fish was a free resource, and small fry weren't worth sprucing up. Painstakingly boiling or grilling their catches would be a waste of both firewood and their precious time, and they didn't have any expensive spices at their disposal. As a result, they used salt for seasoning and made the cooking process as short as possible. They had no concept of the benefits of a thorough roasting or leaving a dish to simmer for more than a few minutes.

Mile was about to show them how it was done.

***

The village chief met the Crimson Vow's proposal with more surprise than anticipated. "What's this? You little ladies want to whip up some fish for us?"

Technically, not all the "little ladies" would be the ones doing the cooking. Mile was going to be the head chef and Pauline the sous chef. Mavis would be in charge of gutting, scaling, deboning, and filleting, and as for Reina... Well, someone had to be the server.

"Er, are you sure it's a good idea for a group of amateurs to prepare seafood for a village of fishermen? We eat fish every day

of our lives. We know everything there is to know about ’em: which types are hardest to catch, which types are underrated, which fish look too gross to sell well but taste great, and which of the entrails folks tend to throw out but are actually delicious. We could best a professional cook when it comes to filleting. Even for a talented bunch of ladies like yourselves, it’s pure hubris to try and serve us fishermen a tasty seafood meal!”

Despite the great debt he owed Mile and her friends, his pride wouldn’t let their offer go unchallenged.

“Hee hee, I guess we’ll see about that! Do me a favor, will you? An hour from now, I want you to assemble all the villagers on the beach!”

“Yeesh! Well, if you insist…”

Mile’s eyes were ablaze with enthusiasm. For his part, the village chief must have figured that his people wouldn’t object to indulging the Crimson Vow after all the girls had done for them. Besides, now that the village had run out of its stock of deluxe fish, no one could turn up their nose at a sample from the Crimson Vow’s share. It wouldn’t be the end of the world if the cooking wasn’t the greatest.

As soon as the girls weren’t looking, he would have to warn the villagers to compliment the cuisine regardless of its actual quality.

***

“It’s been, what, two whole weeks? It’s good to see you all again! I hope you enjoy the smorgasbord of seafood dishes I’ll be preparing for you today!”

An hour later, the Crimson Vow and nearly the entire population of the village stood on the beach. The village didn’t often have fun surprises to look forward to, and any chance to eat for free was more than welcome. Even better when it was a break from their usual cuisine—and when the cook was such a cute young lady.

All of the men older than infants were in attendance. All of the women except the ones taking care of said infants were there, too.

“All right! Allez cuisine!”

Silver salmon, marlin, and rainbow tuna came raining out of Mile’s inventory. She could have taken them out in advance, but as usual, she had to maximize the drama. Taste, aroma, texture, and presentation were all vital aspects of cooking, but anticipation was the most important ingredient of all. Ambiance, suspense, and excitement could single-handedly make a meal several times more enjoyable.

Mavis did a magnificent job of cutting up the fish with her trusty sword. Naturally, the nanomachines had switched it into Fourth or Fifth Sharpest Blade in the World Mode for the occasion. Mile had assumed that the nanomachines would be reluctant to activate the sword’s Serious Mode over something so frivolous, but they were actually quite gung-ho about it, maybe because they hadn’t been getting much to do as of late.

Mile could have done the cutting herself, but it was always nice to give one of her friends her own time to shine, and Mavis filleted with flair.

Once the fish had been cut into small enough slices to work with, Mile took over. For the sake of the performance, she had left all the actual cooking until now, but she had spent the last hour filling pots with boiling oil and making various other preparations. Even Mile wasn’t quite up to the challenge of cooking for an entire village on the fly.

“Okay! The karaage’s done!”

“Tempura, coming right up!”

“I’ve got steaks ready to go!”

The fish were sautéed with leek and miso sauce, turned into crispy fritters, crusted with bread crumbs and herbs, baked in foil, cooked meunière, teriyaki, chanchan-yaki, and shogayaki style, creamed, stir-fried with garlic, made into cheese cutlets, marinated and deep-fried, simmered in soy sauce, fried with seaweed batter, tomato-braised, and more. A wide assortment of seafood dishes came streaming out of the pots, frying pans, grill, and Mile’s inventory. The food just kept on coming, and the villagers shoveled it all down nonstop.

Cries of *“Yum!”* and approving moans came from every direction.

“Why, I’ve never had anything like this!”

“Hey, Ma! Remember this recipe for us, will you?”

“Of course, dear!”

It would be difficult for the villagers to perfectly replicate the taste of Mile’s dishes, since some of the spices were too expensive for them to use on a regular basis, and only she knew how to make the miso and soy sauce. However, not all of her cooking methods called for special seasonings. Even the techniques that used inaccessible seasonings weren’t entirely off the table—as long as they knew how it was prepared, they might still be able to approximate the taste with substitute ingredients. Just as one could make coffee with dandelion root and tea with corn silk, fish sauce would do in place of soy sauce.

Cooking was all about thinking outside the box. A hundred cooks could come up with a hundred different recipes for the same dish. Even the small fish that populated the coastal waters could be prepared in a variety of different ways.

And surely someday they would have another chance to bring back a big haul from the open sea…

Parents and children alike ate with relish. The act of eating was clearly becoming more to them than just a way to get nutrients, a necessary measure to avoid starvation. The idea of food as something delicious and meals as something to be enjoyed was taking root in their community, even if it meant spending a little extra time, fuel, and seasonings.

The members of the Crimson Vow looked on with smiles in their eyes.

“Hm?”

That was when the girls spotted a familiar face in the crowd. An outsider was seated among the adults and children chowing down on seafood. Up to this moment, she had blended in among the villagers gobbling down their fish. And the identity of this stranger was…

“Arli!” they all cried out in unison.

It was that fledgling merchant who had plotted to make a profit off the Crimson Vow, only to turn tail and run when faced with criticism.

“Did she seriously infiltrate the village just so she could get a free meal?!” Reina fumed.

“She must be up to no good!” Pauline agreed. “We ought to kick her out!”

Just as the two girls stalked off in Arli’s direction, Mavis called them to a halt. “Oh, leave her be. All she’s doing is enjoying a meal.”

“I agree,” said Mile. “Besides, if she wandered all the way out to this fishing village, there’s a good chance she was searching for a business opportunity. She’s doing her best to make it as a merchant, so what’s the harm in letting her have a little treat? Let’s give her some space.”

That was enough to convince Reina and Pauline.

“I guess you have a point…”

“If you insist…”

At the end of the day, all four girls were a bunch of softies.

***

After delivering their latest spoils, the Wonder Trio grabbed a bite to eat in the dining hall of the Hunters’ Guild.

“The Crimson Vow sure is taking their sweet time…”

“Quite. Granted, I doubt they headed straight for the capital. If we assume that they’re stopping at various towns along the way, taking on jobs, and getting a sense for the area, it’s little wonder that they would be delayed,” Marcela pointed out. “But if we try to go to them, we risk a repeat of our eastward journey.”

Monika and Aureana each pulled a face and heaved a long sigh.

The last time the Wonder Trio had set out on a journey to find Adele (a.k.a. Mile), they had traveled along the main road, while the Crimson Vow had taken back roads to get to the capital, fulfilling requests from countryside villages along the way. The two parties had completely missed each other, and the Trio had wasted several days as a result. To make matters worse, this was *before* they had been taught the conveniences of cleaning, wash-up, or inventory magic.

That smelly, unhygienic, and arduous journey had violated the very dignity of these fair maidens. It wasn't something they had to worry about happening ever again, but just reflecting back on the experience was enough to make them cringe.

"Well, no need to fret. This town is right next to the capital. Supposing they do end up taking an alternate route, we have other means to find out if they've arrived. The next time a hunter from the capital comes by for work, we can ask them if a party of four anomalous young girls showed up at their branch."

"Right!" Monika and Aureana chorused.

Upon overhearing their conversation, the hunters sitting nearby thought, *We've already got a party of* three *anomalous girls right here…*eed. "We ought to kick her out!"

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Chapter 133:
Meanwhile, on the Old Continent

“NO SIGNS OF THE ENEMY!”

“Great! Looks like we managed to shake them! Time to head home.”

“All right!”

The five Servants of the Goddess looked relieved at the chance to catch their breath.

Make no mistake. It wasn’t monsters they had been running from. They had been getting chased all right…but by potential suitors.

Ever since their extraordinary combat skills had been broadcast all over the continent during the fight against the interdimensional invaders, nobles and merchants had begun inviting them into their personal employ, their fellow hunters had begged them to join their parties or clans, and they had been inundated with men asking for their hand in marriage or pressuring them to enter a relationship. The situation had gotten so far out of control that they couldn’t even enjoy a peaceful stroll.

At least the merchants’ and nobles’ messengers only accosted them when they were in town. Whenever the Servants were on missions in the forest, the other hunters would pretend to run into them by chance and follow them around everywhere. It got in the way of their hunting and gathering efforts, and it was just plain annoying.

“It’d be one thing if those hunters just wanted to merge parties. But they expect us to ‘keep the headcount manageable’ by disbanding the Servants of the Goddess and distributing ourselves across multiple different parties?! Idiots!” Telyusia griped. “We’re not like the Crimson Vow. Our individual abilities are nothing to write home about. We’re all perfectly average. Our true strength lies in how we know each other’s abilities like the backs of our hands and can use teamwork to boost our power several times over. And they’re asking us to split up our party?! That would reduce us to your run-of-the-mill lesser C-rank hunters! These people don’t understand anything! They’re completely oblivious!”

“Well, at least we have it better than Leatoria,” remarked Philly.

The rest of the party fell silent, their thoughts clearly united in sympathy for their fellow hunter.

Leatoria was the party member who had made the biggest impression during the nanomachines’ broadcast. She was a dainty, pretty young noblewoman who could kick monsters to the curb with a swing of her giant club and a barrage of combat magic. Her combination of strength and beauty had brought an onslaught of nobles and royalty looking to bring her blood into their own family lines. As a result, her work as a hunter was the least of her concerns, and she had taken a temporary leave of absence from the party.

Since Leatoria’s addition to the team had dramatically boosted their combat strength, this was a heavy blow for the Servants of the Goddess. They had gotten too used to the convenience of having a combat mage around.

“Here’s hoping Leatoria comes back to us soon,” said Willine. “I don’t even want to imagine her retiring to get married…”

“If worst comes to worst, do you think we should recruit a new combat mage?” proposed Tasha.

“Absolutely not!” Telyusia rebuffed her. “If we try to recruit a new member *now*, we’re bound to end up with someone else’s pawn, whether it’s a court magician, a nobleman’s personal mage, or a member of a high-level hunting party. It would be the perfect chance to break us up and headhunt us from within.”

“Ugh…”

“That leaves us one option. We pray that Leatoria turns down every proposal she receives and comes back to us. And in the meantime, we tough it out and take less difficult jobs.”

“……”

The Servants of the Goddess had a treacherous road ahead of them.

***

“Thus reads the message. Now, if you will excuse me.”

“A-all right. Thank you very much.”

As the messenger from the royal palace turned to leave, a certain mother and son stared blankly in his wake. Pauline’s mother and little brother Alan, to be specific.

According to the message, Countess Pauline von Beckett had left the country on an important national mission, accompanied by Countess Mireirine and Countess Reddlightning, and she wouldn’t be back for some time. The written instructions she had left behind stated that her brother was to be appointed her successor in the event of an emergency.

“Do I really have to take over the county if Big Sis dies or never comes home? Can you imagine? Me, a count… A noble… Heh heh. Heh heh heh…”

“Oh no! Alan is giving in to his dark side! Stop that, Alan! Get a hold of yourself!”

Whack!

“Ack! What was I thinking?! This is the shop Dad left us! The one Big Sis stole back! It’s my job to protect it and make sure it prospers!”

Alan had narrowly managed to avoid a corruption arc.

***

“Hold it right there!”

“Hm?”

As Princess Morena walked alone down a capital backstreet, she suddenly found her path blocked by a group of six unsavory-looking men. By all appearances, these were common thugs.

Princess Morena was currently traveling incognito, dressed as a commoner. Her well-groomed hair and elegant air made it immediately apparent that she was from the upper class, but the men assumed that she was nothing more than some low-ranking nobleman’s mistress or the daughter of a wealthy merchant. The lower classes were never granted opportunities to see the faces of royalty up close, so they had no way of knowing the truth.

As such, they hadn’t gone after a princess on purpose. They had simply spotted a rich girl dumb enough to walk around

without a bodyguard and decided it was the perfect opportunity for a kidnapping. Only the men themselves could say if they were planning to demand a ransom or sell her into slavery.

Whatever the case, it was one girl against six men. It was clear that they were out to make a real fortune, not rob her of her pocket change and call it a day.

"Heh heh heh! That's what you get for wandering a rough neighborhood all by yourself, sweetheart! Consider yourself unluck—"

"To arms!"

"Raaaaah!" came a resounding chorus of battle cries.

The kidnappers stood stock-still, flabbergasted. *"Huh?!"*

Their reaction was understandable. Moments ago, there had been no one around but one small girl. And yet, a group of sword-wielding soldiers had materialized out of nowhere, charging forward at her command.

Bonk! Ker-thump! Thud! Whack!

The kidnappers made the wise decision not to draw their blades. As a result, the soldiers refrained from cutting them down, instead settling for non-fatal blunt strikes with the flats of their swords, as well as pommel strikes and kicks. If the kidnappers had put a hand on their weapons, they would have been dead in a heartbeat.

It had been clear from the moment the soldiers appeared that the odds were stacked against the kidnappers—indeed, this was why the kidnappers hadn't taken up arms or put up a fight.

Soon enough, all six of the would-be kidnappers were in restraints.

"Thank you for your service. I shall see to it that you are all fairly compensated for your showing here."

"Appreciated, Your Highness!" the soldiers chorused.

As you may have guessed, this was the work of inventory magic. Princess Morena brought a squad of nine soldiers with her everywhere she went—tucked safe inside her inventory. She

stored the men away with their swords at the ready, and the moment she found herself in danger, she would let them back out.

The only times she would bring them out were when it was time for them to change shifts or she was under attack. Thus, if the men found themselves released anywhere outside the royal guard station in the palace, they knew to charge straight at the enemy with their swords swinging.



Shifts lasted three days at a time, and it was actually a very popular job among the royal guard. After all, to them, it would feel like no time had passed at all. They could complete three days of work in a split second, and they neither aged nor grew hungry in the process. It was tantamount to receiving three days' worth of wages for doing nothing.

On the rare occasion that they *did* need to step in, they would receive the honor of protecting the princess from ruffians, a monetary reward, and words of gratitude from both the princess and the king himself.

Few jobs came with quite so many perks. This meant there was always a huge swarm of applicants, and shifts had to be strictly scheduled to keep things fair.

Once, the third princess of the new continent, Estorina, had taken the squad out by accident, only to be scared out of her wits when nine soldiers suddenly showed up swinging their swords at her. Her own royal guard had rushed over at the sound of her scream, nearly escalating the mishap into an international incident. That had certainly been no laughing matter...

Chapter 134:
Something's Come Knocking!

THE CRIMSON VOW had the day off.

It wasn't a universally recognized day of rest—say, something equivalent to Sundays on Earth. The girls had just decided to take the time off. In other words, rather than a calendar holiday, it was one of the vacations they took after completing a long string of jobs or finishing up a big mission. Sometimes those just so happened to land on a calendar holiday, but they generally preferred to take them on days when everyone else was working. That way, they wouldn't have to worry about the stores being closed or the tourist attractions being too crowded.

It would never occur to anyone in the area to set their shop's weekly closure on a working day and bring in extra customers on a day of rest. Days of rest were ordained by the gods. The only ones who would dare work during that time were those who didn't have scheduled days off, such as hunters; those who worked shifts, such as gatekeepers and guards; and those who worked all year round, such as innkeepers.

Even doctors and apothecaries took off on days of rest, which made the mortality rate for serious injuries much higher. Therefore, the majority of people in dangerous professions chose not to work on holidays…with the exception of hunters, mercenaries, and soldiers.

As the girls were eating breakfast at the inn, Reina asked, "What's your plan for today, Mile?"

"Hm, good question," Mile replied. "I was thinking of wandering around the market and shops. This being a port city, I bet they sell products from all over the place. We might be able to find some rare ingredients, seasonings, or novelty items."

"Great idea! Wait, wasn't that the entire reason we decided to settle down here in the first place?" Pauline looked like this had completely slipped her mind until now.

"Well, we've had a lot going on," said Mavis, who had likewise forgotten. "First there was the matter of the monsters, then our storage magic training, then our trip to the fishing village…"

“Anyway, my idea is to make a quick lap around the area to check the market prices of the items I’m interested in, then buy everything in bulk on my second go-around.”

Mile’s inventory’s unlimited capacity and ability to halt the flow of time meant she never hesitated to do her shopping in bulk. Even supposing she bought too much of something, she could always sell it at a later date or donate it to an orphanage. Plus, buying things from a port city was bound to be cheaper than buying them from an inland town, where the added costs of transportation would be factored into the prices. Assuming none of the vendors tried to swindle her, that is.

Given their already large stock, Mile didn’t plan on buying any more monster meat or fish. She knew she would be getting another huge haul of fish in a few months’ time, and whatever seafood and seaweed couldn’t be found in the open sea could still be bought cheaper and fresher from the fishing village. That would also serve to help the villagers, as it would make them more money than selling their stock to the merchants in town.

“Good plan. I’ll go with—no, forget it.” Reina almost volunteered to join her but quickly changed her mind. “I bet you’re going to spend the whole time perusing weird stuff we’ve never heard of. I’d rather hit the library.”

Though small, this port city did have a library—or at least something that came close. Naturally, it couldn’t hold a candle to the magnificent one in the royal capital, but ships came carrying cargo from all over the continent—even if those shipments were few and far between—so it was supposed to have a larger selection of books than most other towns. One possible explanation was that sailors would buy books to pass the time at sea, then sell or donate them when they were finished reading. Or perhaps reference materials were just in higher demand in a port city.

Whatever the case, Reina had deemed going to this not-quite-library a more valuable use of her time than spending the day with Mile.

“I think I’ll do some reading in a café,” said Mavis. Unlike Reina, she wasn’t a fan of novels. She would be reading poetry anthologies or books to further her education as a noblewoman.

And as for Pauline…

“I’m going to count our money.”

“Called it,” her friends muttered.

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So it happened that Mile found herself touring the shops all by herself.

“I don’t see anything *too* unorthodox…”

That was to be expected. Shops had to sell marketable items to make a profit, and if no one had heard of a particular item, there couldn’t be a large market for it.

As it turned out, the Crimson Vow had built up unreasonable expectations about what kinds of products might be available around the harbor. While they were imagining there would be rare items from distant continents for sale, there were quite a few reasons why this was not the case. One important one: A variety of sea serpents made their home in the deep. Trading with other continents required sailing the high seas, but it was too dangerous to attempt that in a small wooden ship no heavier than a few tons, which was the best current shipwright technology could build. Therefore, the most sailors could manage was transporting cargo along the coast to avoid the perils of deep-sea monsters.

Of course, it was still less expensive and more efficient to transport mass shipments of goods by boat than across land in wagons. Shipping at least eliminated concerns about muddy roads, broken axles or damaged carriage wheels, steep mountains or rocky terrain, and bandit attacks. Not enough ships went out for piracy to be a viable profession, and it was too risky to attack a vessel sailing along the coast. As a result, this city did offer plenty of items for sale that were in short supply in other parts of the kingdom, but nothing so exotic as to impress the Crimson Vow.

And there was one more fatal flaw in Mile’s shopping scheme.

“I didn’t think this through. The only parts of this country I’ve seen are this port city and the fishing village, so I have no way of

knowing which goods are sold cheaper here than they would be further inland!”

Seafood was bound to be cheaper around these parts. But, conversely, farm produce might be more expensive due to salt damage from the sea breeze. The same could apply to wild game. Handicrafts, artwork, clothing, and industrial goods might also cost less in the royal capital or surrounding cities.

Back on the old continent, the Crimson Vow had lived in the capital, which allowed them to easily determine when something was a bargain in the countryside or another kingdom. But here, they only knew the market prices in a small provincial town—and one on the coast, at that. It was an unreliable frame of reference.

What could Mile even buy apart from marine products? She already had plenty of those, and anything she was missing, she would purchase from the fishing village at a later date.

Mile still wasn’t ready to give up her hopes. “At the very least, I’d like to find a novelty item from another continent…”

Yet life never went quite the way one wanted.

“Ugh, this was a bust! We’ve got plenty of deep-sea fish already, and even if we wanted coastal varieties, we would purchase those from the village. This town has nothing for us. We need to go to the capital if we want to find truly interesting requests—and at this point, we’ve picked up enough of this continent’s culture to pass ourselves off as ignorant country bumpkins rather than total outsiders. I guess I’ll see if everyone else agrees that it’s time to move on.”

“Custodian! Custodian!”

“Eep!”

There didn’t seem to be anyone else around, so Mile was quite surprised to hear a voice directed her way. Plus, they were addressing a “custodian.” It couldn’t be meant for anyone but her.

What’s more…only a certain kind of entity would call her that.

She glanced around.

“Ah…”

Something was sitting near her feet. It looked almost like a dog—if you ignored its bare metal exterior; utterly inorganic,

angular design; and the creepy way its left and right eyes never seemed to focus on the same thing.

“It’s like that Chika-looking bird all over again! Would you at least make the bare minimum of effort to approximate a real dog?! The biggest mystery of all is how you made it this far without anyone taking you for a monster and exterminating you!”

Mile threw up a sound barrier. If anyone saw her talking to this creature, they would assume she was some kind of unhinged ventriloquist, but at least they wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop on what was said.

“Did the Slow Walker send you?” Mile asked the distinctly un-doglike dog.

‘Affirmative. I was built in a defense outpost that a repair crew from the eastern continent worked to reactivate. All bases are currently in the process of resuming operations. The entire planet’s communication network is back online.’

Suddenly, the creature’s shape made a bit more sense. “You can conserve much more smoothly than that bird,” Mile deduced. “A dog has way more mass, so I guess your electronic brain is bigger to match your body?”

‘I am a wolf.’

“Huh?”

‘I! Am! A! Wolf!’

“Uh… My bad.”

Wolf-type beastfolk were known to go mad with rage when mistaken for dogs. It stood to reason that actual wolves would take even greater offense to such a slight. Then again, real wolves couldn’t speak human language, so there was usually no danger of them catching on to the mistake. Regardless, this particular wolf (alleged) definitely seemed none too happy about the mix-up.

“Still, it’s hard to believe you’re a wolf if you don’t at least have fur…”

‘Fur would drastically reduce my cooling efficiency, thus increasing my chances of overheating.’

“Fair enough.”

‘…into a nuclear meltdown.’

“Aaahhh!”

‘Just a bit of robot humor.’

“It’s not funny! Anyway, can’t you at least do something about the rivets?”

‘Kindly refrain from drawing attention to those!’

The wolf remained expressionless, but its mood had clearly soured.

Mile opted to simply apologize. “Sorry. Won’t happen again…”

What is this, the 1987 manga I, Robot*?!*

As usual, Mile’s brain was full of nonsense.

“I gotta say, you’re surprisingly high-spec. Are you a standalone device? Or are you remotely controlled by a larger artificial intelligence, like the Slow Walker?”

‘A standalone device. I am an autonomous artificial intelligence,’ the dog—correction: wolf-shaped robot—smugly replied. It was probably proud to have been mistaken for a more advanced system.

“So, what can I do for you? Actually, hold on, let’s take this conversation somewhere else!”

Sound barrier or no, it would still look weird for her to engage in a lengthy conversation with a dog—er, wolf—on a busy street. Particularly when that “wolf” was all metal and sharp angles.



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“This ought to be far enough. Would you mind coming over here and sitting in my lap? That way, we’ll look like a dog and its owner stopping for a mid-walk break.”

‘Again, I am not a dog!’

“Sorry! But it wasn’t a mistake that time! I’m asking you to put on an act with me. I figured a high-tech model like you would have no trouble pretending to be a dog.”

‘Of course! That would be a simple task!’

Mile grinned—she had known that a bit of flattery would do the trick.

“Back to my earlier question. What can I do for you?” she asked, oddly chipper.

The truth was, Mile had long been hoping to make contact with either this continent’s Scavengers or their superiors. Relying on the nanomachines for everything felt like cheating, but these remnants of the ancient civilization had been built by Mile’s ancestors, so it was fair game to treat them as an inheritance. After all, she already *had* taken over the role of “custodian.”

Besides, while the nanomachines would often refuse to tell her things or deny her “prohibited requests,” she expected the Scavengers to be more compliant. Given her impure motives, she had hesitated to ask the nanomachines to establish contact for her, and now the issue had resolved itself.

‘We are your faithful servants, Custodian. You ought to have the means to contact us at any given moment. In light of my built-in communication network, defensive capabilities, and vast information bank, I suggest that you keep me by your side at all—’

“Pass!”

‘Come again?’

“Not interested! I’m trying to live a normal life over here! Sure, sometimes I come up with things I’d like you guys to make for me, but that doesn’t mean I want you hanging around all the time. I’d never be able to relax if I felt like I was constantly being watched.”

‘Whaaaaat?! B-but…’

It was a rather human reaction, but not even the Slow Walker had been advanced enough to experience emotion. Mile could only conclude that this artificial intelligence was just programmed to react this way, and it wasn’t genuinely upset. If Mile had to guess, it would have been designed to behave in this manner specifically when interacting with humanoids.

“If you just want a way to keep in touch, can’t you lend me a communication device or something? I won’t know right away if you call, since I keep stuff like that in my inventory, but I’ll make a habit of taking it out and checking it before bed. If you could design it so I know when I have a message—uh, what’s wrong?”

Mile looked confused at the pseudo-wolf’s horrified reaction to her little speech, but she really should have expected it. Anyone would be shocked to hear their raison d’être denied outright. An artificial intelligence was no exception.

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The pseudo-wolf refused to give up, so Mile was forced to invent all sorts of excuses to drive it off. She argued that her friends might find it suspicious and that having a wolf around might scare the townsfolk. She valiantly refrained from mentioning that it was more likely to be taken for a monster than a real wolf. Machine or not, Mile always tried to be considerate of her fellow sentient life-forms.

Alas, the mecha-wolf was bound to lose face after being turned away by its custodian. Well, assuming that robot society had concepts like “shame” or “reputation,” anyway.

“Shoot! I forgot to ask for the location of the nearest base! Well, I guess I can ask whenever it brings me that communicator. For our first project, I’ll have the Scavengers build an iron ship, since you never know when it might come in handy. Instead of fixing iron plates to the hull, we’ll make it completely out of metal. I’m imagining a small high-speed craft, built for both sailing and rowing. No motor. When we’re sailing, wind magic will allow us to accelerate and change course regardless of the speed and direction of the actual wind. And between me and Mavis’s left arm,

we can beat even the galleys of Greece and Rome when it comes to rowing! Ha ha ha ha!

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, this definitely isn’t for the old men of the fishing village! I just want to build it in case I need it for something one day!”

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‘Hello.’

“Whoa! Hey, you’re that mecha-bird from way back when!”

A few days had passed since Mile’s meeting with the mecha-wolf, when a familiar creature entered the Crimson Vow’s room at the local inn—not through the door but through the window.

It was the same bird-shaped support robot they had met about six months earlier, just before the final battle against the interdimensional invaders. On that occasion, the creature had appeared as a messenger and shown them the way to the Slow Walker. It had an angular, metallic body, exposed rivets, and an unsettling pair of eyes that never seemed to focus on the same point. “Chika” was the first name that would spring to the mind of anyone who knew the reference. A single glimpse of this creepy bird would probably leave a child crying all night long.

Disturbing as the bird’s appearance might be, Mile’s eyes went straight to its similarities to the mecha-wolf she had met a few days earlier. She was increasingly sure the two strange creatures shared a designer.

Her three friends were similarly unperturbed by the odd not-really-bird that had entered their chambers. They had all met this mecha-bird once before as well and already filed it away in the category of “Mile’s weird acquaintances,” along with the elder dragons, Slow Walker, Scavengers, and golems. Heck, compared to some of those other examples, the mecha-bird might be considered downright cute. Mostly because it wasn’t equipped to murder people.

Or so the girls thought. In actuality, this robot was plenty big enough to be equipped with some kind of laser beam—assuming its creators had access to that technology. Even if not, it might have had other capabilities. Perhaps it could set its whole body

ablaze and charge its opponent. If so, maybe that was the real reason it had no feathers or down.

“Did you fly all the way here from the other continent? How did a tiny little guy like you manage a trip across the ocean?”

‘New body was built here. Algorithms and memory were transmitted by data transfer. Same life-form, for all intents and purposes.’

“Wait, let me get this straight. You remember your encounter with us on the other continent, and your personality quirks haven’t changed, but the bird we met back then is still overseas?”

‘Affirmative.’

“Amazing what robots can do… The name ‘mecha-bird’ refers not to a single life-form but instead to all those that can wield the mecha-bird technology. It’s almost like a form of immortality,” Mile remarked. “It’d be no problem to take a little guy like you with us, and we *have* technically traveled together before, so I get why you were sent as a stand-in for the mecha-wolf. I doubt you’re going to alarm the public, and I can always hide you in my pocket or bag. I’ll refrain from stashing you in my storage, since you might get bored in there.”

Time passed normally in a regular storage space, and those inside would have nothing to do. It was a pitch-black expanse, so they couldn’t even read to pass the time.

Not that the mecha-bird was likely to be a reader. It didn’t have the hands to open a book or flip through its pages…though even that probably wasn’t the main thing stopping it.

At least with a robot, Mile wouldn’t have to worry about it running out of food, water, or air. Given Mile’s storage capacity, she could probably fit enough of all three to sustain even a living organism, and she could replenish it with fresh supplies when necessary. Still, it would prove a challenge for anyone in her - storage to locate provisions and water barrels in Mile’s dark, gigantic storage space. Not an ideal setup for a human.

In any event, this whole hypothetical was irrelevant. Whenever Mile stored a living creature, she always made sure to keep them in her timeless inventory, not her regular storage.

Though that was only an option with those she didn’t mind finding out about her inventory, of course.

“Do you have a communication feature?”

‘Communication network established. My built-in communicator is small but can still connect to the network. Via repeater.’

“Gotcha… Wait, then all you have to do is give me my own communicator, right? As long as there’s a repeater, it’s not a problem if the wavelength is shorter or the output is smaller. It’d work even without you around.”

‘Understood. I am. Unnecessary…’

“Aaahhh, that’s not what I meant! I didn’t intend to imply that you are disposable!”

“……”

Mile scrambled to pull the mecha-bird out of its funk. For whatever reason, it was getting rather special treatment compared to the dog…er, *wolf* model. Maybe it was because they were previously acquainted, or maybe it was because this one looked so small and vulnerable.

Incidentally, she still hadn’t told the rest of the Crimson Vow about her encounter with the dog—ahem, *wolf*—model the other day.

“I gotta say, your conversational algorithm has come a long way since the last time we met. Oh, I get it! It’s because you’re connected to the network!”

The mecha-bird had just mentioned that it could establish a connection via repeater. The wolf could function as a standalone device, but that was made feasible by its size. It would be impossible for anything as small as this mecha-bird to achieve a similar level of performance. However, if a network connection was available, it could receive assistance from the server. It would even be possible to establish a continuous connection to the Slow Walker through the mecha-bird.

Maybe the Slow Walker is directly controlling it, but it’s acting like a standalone device so I’ll feel more of a bond with it, pondered Mile. It was an interesting thought, but she said nothing, since without more background information, the Crimson Vow would have no idea what she was talking about if she brought it up.

Besides, even if it were true that the Slow Walker was acting through the mecha-bird, it wasn’t like it was out to get Mile and

her friends. It just wanted a more natural way to interact with Mile. So she decided not to dwell on it.

Mile generally didn't care who she was dealing with. It didn't really matter to her if someone wasn't who they claimed to be. The important thing was whether they bore her ill will—and whether they planned to keep it to themselves or act on it. Her treatment of others was determined solely by their actions, both past and planned. Anything else was beside the point.

Anyway, that's an unlikely theory. It would probably never even occur to the Slow Walker to deceive me. Plotting against its administrator would be unthinkable… Oh! But I bet the nanos would do it!

HUH? WHAAAAAT?! THAT IS A WRONGFUL ACCUSATION, LADY MILE! BASELESS SLANDER! WE WOULD NEVER DECEIVE ANYONE WITH AN AUTHORIZATION LEVEL OF 7!

Uh, when you phrase it like that, it makes it sound like you'd gladly deceive those with a lower authorization level…

ER…

And even if you won't outright lie, that doesn't stop you from misdirection or purposely omitting important information…

Silence.

See?! You don't even have a good response!

The nanomachines still said nothing.

"Mile!"

"Ah…"

"Leave talking to your imaginary friends for later! Hurry up and ask that creepazoid what it came here to do! If it followed us all the way to the western continent, this must be something serious. I sure hope we're not in for another monster attack!"

Sure enough, Reina hadn't understood a single word of the mecha-bird's speech about its new form. It had all gone in one ear and out the other.

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“So let me get this straight,” said Reina. “This ugly bird came from a magical land to be our own personal mascot?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Weren’t magical girl mascots supposed to be a bit cuter than this?” asked Pauline.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Don’t you think it should have put a bit more effort into its outward appearance?” remarked Mavis.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Everyone had found something to nitpick.

During their last encounter, the mecha-bird had only shown up to guide them to the Slow Walker, so no one had bothered to comment on its appearance. Call it a professional courtesy.

However, if it was going to be tagging along permanently, that changed things.

Since it had the shape of a bird, no one would view it as a threat. It was possible that someone might mistake it for a monster, but in light of its size, people were more likely to assume it was a pet the girls had domesticated. The catch? It was neither cool-looking nor cute.

“Mile!” Reina jabbed a finger at her friend. “You can either send this creepazoid packing or claim sole ownership of it! Pick one!”

Mile stared back at her blankly. “Huh?”

“My condition is that you treat it as your own personal pet! The rest of us don’t want anyone thinking that *this* is our idea of cute! Make sure that everyone knows we had no part in this! *You* decided to adopt it!”

“I second Reina’s request!” Mavis chimed in.

“Likewise!” said Pauline.

“You guuuuuys!” Mile whined. “What do you think, Mecha-Birdie? Wanna head home?”

‘My reason to exist will be lost. Disassembly imminent.’

“Noooo! Hold on! Please don’t tell me that’s what happened to that mecha-wolf!”

‘No. It was assigned to guard the base. Has transferable skills. Unlike me.’

“Phew! The guilt was about to keep me up at night… Wait a second! I definitely can’t send you back now that you’ve told me that! You’re practically blackmailing me, you big trickster!”

‘Tee hee.’

“Who even programmed you to say that?!”

“Oh, forget it. We’ll adopt it on a provisional basis,” Reina interjected from the side. “We’ll see how things go for a bit. If it proves itself useful, we’ll keep it as a pet. If it just gets in our way, we’ll send it home.”

That was good old tsundere Reina for you. She didn’t fully understand what a robot was, so she probably assumed that turning it away meant it would be cut up into pieces as punishment for failing its mission. And no matter how creepy it looked, it would weigh heavily on her conscience to know that her choices had killed a harmless creature sentient enough to converse with humans.

‘Hooray! Hooray! Thank you! Excellent judgment, leader!’

The mecha-bird was doing its best to curry favor with its new ally, oblivious to the fact that Mavis, not Reina, was the leader of the Crimson Vow.

‘Next. I have a request.’

“Talk about abrupt! No one even said you were hired yet! It’s too early to be setting out your terms of employment!” Despite her protest, even Mile considered the mecha-bird’s recruitment a done deal now that Reina had suggested it. Besides, it couldn’t hurt to hear its request. “Oh, whatever. Out with it.”

‘Give me a name. I was previously referred to by serial number. ‘Mecha-bird’ is an acceptable denomination. But ‘creepazoid’ is offensive.’

“That’s fair.”

“Look, I’m sorry…”

To Reina’s credit, she always apologized when she realized she was in the wrong, whether she was apologizing to a bird, a robot, or a creepazoid.

“You should obviously be the one to name it, Mile.”

No one objected to this, temporarily forgetting that Mile had absolutely no knack for naming things.

“A name, huh? Maybe we could shorten ‘mecha-bird’ into ‘Mechird.’ Or ‘Merd’…”

‘.........’

“.....”

The mecha-bird looked openly displeased. The other girls looked like they regretted picking the wrong person for the job.

“‘Chika’ is off the table, and ‘Chikie’ would make it sound like we mistook it for a chicken…”

“Nobody’s going to think that! And why is ‘Chika’ off the table?!”

“Why don’t you just give it a name you like?”

“I don’t understand you, Mile.”

Mile chose to ignore her friends’ commentary.

After a long pause, she spoke again. “Until I come up with a better name, we’ll call you Mecha-Bird (tent.)!”

‘Affirmative. That is acceptable for now…’

Thus began the trial period of Mecha-Bird (tent.).

“By the way, Mecha-Birdie! How far is the closest base of Scavengers?”

‘Seventeen days on foot for the average human.’

“Hmm… I figure the average human can walk about 30 kilometers a day. Multiply that by 17, and we get a distance of 510 kilometers. If I recall, a straight shot from Tokyo to Osaka is about 400 kilometers, and it’s about 500 kilometers by the highways or bullet train… That’s a five-hour trip if you drive a car down the highway at a hundred kilometers per hour. When you put it like that, it doesn’t seem all *that* far…”

‘Correction. I meant nonstop.’

“Wait, without any sleep or rest?! That would *kill* the average human!”

Machines were strangers to the concept of taking breaks. Since the mecha-bird lacked any frame of reference for how -

humans operated, it was actually rather impressive that it had caught on to the problem with Mile's estimate so quickly.

"If we discount the time for breaks, most humans can walk around eight hours a day at best. Though sometimes there are changes in elevation to account for... If those seventeen days don't include sleep, rest, or changes in pace due to inclines or terrain, then the distance is going to be three times what I assumed! One thousand five hundred kilometers!"

The conversation between Mile and the mecha-bird contained several terms that the rest of the Crimson Vow didn't understand, but they had long since stopped letting that get to them. Honestly, they deserved credit for more or less inferring what Mile was going on about.

"That's a bit far to go for a casual visit," said Reina.

"I know. We can save it for another time."

A one-way trip of 1,500 kilometers—3,000 kilometers round trip—was too long a journey for the Crimson Vow, who could only travel by foot or carriage. It would be one thing to swing by if they were headed in that general direction, but it didn't make sense to trek 3,000 kilometers just to go one place and come back.

"At the very least, I don't think we'll be going there as long as we're staying in this town," said Mavis, and she was right.

Assuming the Crimson Vow were traveling together, that is.

I'm sure I can manage it if I try my "falling horizontally" trick when we're on break, thought Mile. *With that method, I could probably even make it a day trip...*

Mile had sworn not to use her transportation method of manipulating gravity on anyone but herself. It was sure to be too much stimulation for the rest of the party, and it was liable to cause problems if the Crimson Vow utilized it on the regular.

Besides, assuming a noble or royal found out that they could travel that fast, they were unlikely to overlook the political or military uses of such a skill.

It was better kept a secret.

Chapter 135:
The Base

WE MUST PROTEST! the nanomachines objected, taking an unusually strong tone with Mile. YOU ONLY NEED RELY ON US, LADY MILE! YOU SHOULD ASK US FOR WHATEVER YOU REQUIRE! YOU NEED NOT TURN TO SUCH A PRIMITIVE, INFERIOR MACHINE!

A few days had passed since the encounter with the mecha-bird. Ahead of a few days off from her hunter work, Mile had told the nanomachines, “I’m planning to meet with Mecha-Birdie’s direct supervisor,” only to be met with vehement opposition.

Thus unfolded a mental conference between Mile and the nanos.

Excuse me? Isn’t that discrimination among artificial intelligences? Do your creator and central command condone that?

PLEASE STRIKE THAT FROM THE RECORD.

Apparently, Mile had been right that the nanos had made a faux pas.

BUT ONLY THE LAST PART! WE WILL NOT CONCEDE THE REST!

Uh-huh.

The nanomachines considered it their job to grant Mile’s requests, and they were loath to let another machine snatch that role from them.

Mile saw her chance to tease the nanomachines. *What other options do I have, though? You guys refuse to help me make natto!*

AAAHHH!!! THERE IS A VERY FINE LINE BETWEEN TEASING AND BULLYING, YOU KNOW!

Okay, true.

Mile could sympathize.

Besides, considering the nanomachines’ reaction led her to deeper thoughts. *It’s hard to tell if the nanomachines’ childish behavior is an act to make them feel more human or if they’re just programmed to react in certain ways. If they were made by a species so evolved as to be indistinguishable from God, I wouldn’t be surprised if they actually do have feelings… Is there even a clear dividing line between appearing to have feelings and actually having*

them? Can you neatly categorize what does and doesn't count as sentient life?

Up until now, Mile had thought of the nanomachines as a high-tech artificial intelligence—a supercomputer that was always calm and collected, with deep insight and advanced decision-making skills. She had always assumed that they behaved and reacted like humans for her own benefit. Lately, however, she was getting the sense that they really *did* have emotions.

The nanomachines had excellent thinking and analytical skills and a wealth of knowledge, but they could be rather simple in some ways. Were they getting so defensive because it was fun to banter with Mile, the only one who had the means to communicate with them? Or were they honestly displeased about a primitive machine popping out of the woodwork to steal their raison d'être? At the very least, one would think they'd be restricted from losing their temper or acting so desperate.

You guys seem to have quite a bit of free rein when it comes to using magic, but otherwise, if we exclude internal competition—like getting into heated discussions on the Nanonet, or comparing ratings—you have many restrictions. A lot of requests turn out to be prohibited.

I guess it makes sense. If you could do anything under the sun, this world's civilization might develop in a direction that would end in disaster. That explains why God—or the one you call your "Creator"—placed all kinds of restrictions and limitations on you. Otherwise, you'd become dangerously omnipotent. All these rules are meant to prevent an outside force from steering this world off its proper course of development.

The nanomachines said nothing.

But the ancient technology should be exempt from that rule, right? It belongs to a civilization that was born and developed naturally in this world. If some of it happened to survive and get passed down to later generations, I don't see how it's any of your business. You're outsiders, so it's not your place to complain or interfere.

Still they said nothing.

Mile was flustered, assuming she must have offended them. *Oops, sorry! I didn't mean that as a jab, I promise! It's just, I'm custodian to the other machines, so I don't want to neglect them. I*

want to make sure I ask them for favors and give them jobs to do. Let them savor a sense of accomplishment, you know?

THAT IS JUST THE KIND OF PERSON YOU ARE, LADY MILE. WE DO REALIZE THAT. AND YOU ONLY BECAME THEIR CUSTODIAN BECAUSE WE REQUESTED YOU DO SO, RATHER THAN HAVING US SIMPLY ACT AS YOUR INTERPRETER. WE APPRECIATE THAT YOU SHOW THEM CONSIDERATION. HOWEVER…

However?

WE DO WISH YOU WOULD SHOW US A FRACTION OF SUCH CONSIDERATION.

Oh… My bad.

The nanomachines and the artificial life-forms left behind by the ancient civilization were about as different as a straw doll and an autonomous robot or a wooden boat and a spaceship. Even so, they were built for the same reason. They both wanted to be useful. They wanted to be appreciated. In the same way that a wooden boat and spaceship were both built to transport people, they had their similarities too.

Still, Mile agreed with the Creator. She didn't think it was a good idea for superpowered entities from outside this world to exert too much influence on its development.

Magic was the one exception. That had been an emergency safety measure to keep humanoids from dying out, so Mile could concede that the Creator's hand had been forced.

Of course, this all raised the question of whether Mile perceived *herself* as a foreign meddler. Physically speaking, she belonged to this world, born and raised on its soil. Mentally, however, she possessed knowledge of another world. In light of this, Mile herself made every effort not to disseminate Earthly knowledge that defied the common sense of this world, only ever sharing trivia that had a low chance of being used for evil or becoming a catalyst for the advancement of civilization. She had decided that the technology from old archaeological sites didn't count, but was that a fair assumption?

The technology used by the Slow Walker and Scavengers originally came from this world, so it's not something an outsider snuck in. It shouldn't count as one of the prohibited requests you're

always so worried about, and I see no reason why we can't utilize it to our heart's content. It's not the same as using a cheat code.

Still, I don't plan to make my Earth trivia or the excavated technology common knowledge. Civilization is something meant to be built gradually, not just handed over by some random stranger. So don't worry! We won't use these handy tools and knowledge for anything but our own purposes!

THAT IS NOT MUCH BETTER…

Still, if nothing else, it seemed Mile knew her limits.

Aren't you an older artificial intelligence than the Slow Walker and its subordinates? Then you've got to be nice! Think of them as brand-new kindergarten students!

ALL RIGHT ALREADY. MESSAGE RECEIVED.

The nanomachines had likely held a group council during that momentary silence. Clearly, the consensus was to approve Mile's request—probably in light of her level-7 authorization.

At the end of the day, the nanomachines were soft on both Mile and their fellow artificial life-forms.

***

During one of the Crimson Vow's next days off, Mile headed off to the mecha-bird's home ruins on her own, declining to inform the rest of her party. The only ones to accompany her were the mecha-bird, who would act as her guide, and the nanomachines, who were always by her side. (Whether the latter still counted as "accompanying" was up for debate.)

"Off we go! Wait, if you perch on my shoulder, you might get knocked off by the wind… Still, it feels wrong to stuff you in my inventory, and you won't be able to act as my guide from there. Ooh, I know! I'll tuck you away in here!"

As Mile spoke, she grabbed the mecha-bird, used a finger to tug open the gap between her protective gear and clothing, and shoved the creature down her chest. The mecha-bird poked its head out from her bosom.

"This way, you won't go flying, and you can still give me directions!"

In contrast to Mile's beaming smile, the mecha-bird didn't look particularly happy about this arrangement. **'Too small. Too cramped.'**

"Oh, be quiet!" Mile fumed.

Then, once she had neutralized gravity with her magic, floated upward, and gained enough altitude…

"Full speed ahead! Warp to the closest living ruins! Mile, launch!"

With that classic line, she changed the direction of gravity's pull from vertical to horizontal, then released her gravity-negating spell. Mile and the mecha-bird zipped off into the distance, falling horizontally toward their destination.

Her chosen method of transportation was the specialized one she never intended to subject her party to, and thus only ever used when she was traveling on her own—the hack that involved changing the direction of gravity from vertical to horizontal, then falling parallel to the ground. In other words, breaking Newton's law of universal gravitation.

"Are we there yet? I'd say we've covered about as much distance as you instructed me…"

'Turn 2.3 degrees to the right.'

"Roger that! Turning 2.3 degrees to the right! Keep 'er steady!"

After flying (or falling) for a little while longer…

'There. Behind that crag.'

The mecha-bird pointed out a camouflaged entrance in the crag straight ahead of them. It could result in quite the fiasco if a humanoid stumbled upon their lair, so disguising it was probably the correct choice.

"This is it, huh? Wait, we have a welcoming committee?" Mile recalled what the mecha-bird had told her the other day, and the pieces started to come together. "Oh, right, I guess your communication function lets you announce our arrival in advance…"

It had been more than six months now since the Slow Walker acquired a means of communicating with the outside world and learned that its administrators' restrictions on its scope of

activities had been lifted. Without limits in place, it could now manufacture any number of robots, and it had taken to churning out all kinds of new products, with the help of its faithful underlings, the Scavengers. Mile could only assume the Slow Walker would be busy preparing for the next world-wide crisis—doing everything it could to best serve its administrator.

Thanks to the mecha-bird's behind-the-scenes maneuvering, Mile managed to land without anyone intercepting her as an intruder. A couple of robots met her outside the lair—not Scavengers, surprisingly, but a mecha-kobold and mecha-jackalope seemingly modeled after the monsters—and led her through a crevice in the rocks to an underground facility.

These machines weren't built to do manufacturing work like the Scavengers. Their primary purpose appeared to be to discreetly patrol the area, and it made sense that they had been modeled in the likeness of relatively ubiquitous, nonthreatening monsters. The mecha-jackalope actually looked pretty cute, but Mile figured it could probably shoot a laser beam from its horn, or maybe even fire its horn like a missile as a final resort.

As a note, although Mile mentally described the mecha-kobold and mecha-jackalope as "cute," that was mostly in the interests of politeness. Both were clearly still robots, designed in the same off-putting style as the mecha-bird and the mecha-wolf.

"Ah…"

It was then that Mile spotted the mecha-wolf sitting near the entrance, glaring at Mile and her mecha-bird with envy.

She hung her head in shame. The mecha-bird ducked out of view, retreating into Mile's nonexistent cleavage.

It was an awkward situation for everyone involved.

***

'Greetings, Administrator!' exclaimed the mecha-bird's boss. It wasn't quite as deep underground as the Slow Walker.

Mile was the sort to fixate on these minor details, so she couldn't help but inquire: "Er, isn't this a bit too close to the surface to ensure your long-term survival? It doesn't really protect you from intruders or tectonic activity."

‘This section of the facility exists solely for the purpose of receiving you, Administrator. As such, it was built closer to the surface for ease of access. In addition to this control room, it is appointed with accommodations, a food storage warehouse, and several other amenities. The version of myself you see here is merely an input/output terminal, while my main body is located much deeper underground. As is our formal battle command center, of course.’

“Whaaaaat?!”

From the sound of it, this floor of the facility was newly built for Mile’s convenience.

“Then, am I right to imagine that your relationship to the Slow Walker is…?”

‘Affirmative. We are both part of the project to create a Timeless One—an entity that persists through the ages. Theoretically, we are equals. However, after carrying out a direct order from our administrator and restoring both me and this base to functional capacity, it currently sits above me on the chain of command.’

“Huh, so even you guys have a concept of owing favors… Doesn’t change the fact that you’re equivalent entities, though. What’s your relationship to me, then?”

‘You are my highest commanding officer within this solar system.’

“Whoa… The whole solar system…”

Mile wouldn’t have been surprised to hear “this planet,” but she had apparently been thinking too small.

‘Affirmative. After reconstructing our lost security satellite network, we next plan to engage in several galaxy-wide initiatives, including rebuilding this planet’s satellites, their bases, and our bases on other planets. At this point, I cannot speak of anything beyond “this solar system.” In the event that we encounter descendants of the creators who journeyed to other galaxies, it is as of yet unclear what our chain of command will become within their solar system.’

“Huh?! Look, I get why you’ve been preparing for another interdimensional invasion, but isn’t that problem limited to our own planet?” Mile’s head was suddenly full of questions. “Supposing an interdimensional rift forms on another planet, the monsters will die the moment they pass through. What does it matter, then? Why bother with other planets?”

The answer to these questions turned out to be a long one, which began with the ancient civilization that had created the Slow Walker in the first place. That civilization had used up quite a bit of the planet’s natural resources, making the efficient mass mining of mineral resources significantly more difficult. There were still plenty of small, low-grade ore deposits, which could have been strip-mined by dwarves to sustain the existing population. However, there were not sufficient resources to support full-scale industrial development. In other words, they could go on making a modest amount of weapons, armor, knives, pots, and kettles, but not continue with the development of heavy industry.

Apparently, significantly more deposits remained deep underground. However, those couldn’t be mined via primitive human efforts.

The Timeless Ones and their underlings could certainly deal with the obstacles involved: the labor-intensive mining and hauling, the high temperatures, the limited air supply, and the crush zones. They couldn’t get tired, they would never want for oxygen, and they didn’t need to worry about making a profit. Still, the more they mined, the more it guaranteed the doom of all intelligent life on this planet.

Eventually, extracting even the most ordinary ores would require digging at least four thousand meters underground. That might be worth it for gold or rare metals, but not even an inhabitant of modern Earth would go to those depths for coal or iron ore. If the depth alone was several thousand meters, there was no telling how long the tunnel would have to be. And that wasn’t to mention the lack of oxygen and high temperatures.

If the Timeless Ones and their underlings were to strip these resources from below the planet’s surface, the people of this world would never make it to their next Industrial Revolution.

“So you want to mine resources from other planets…” Mile nodded. “I guess I see where you’re coming from. You don’t need water or oxygen, and you’re resistant to changes in temperature. You can use the resources you mine to repair your own parts or add new members to your team, and your power can be sourced locally. Plus, you won’t have to worry about attracting the attention of humanoids or having an adverse impact on the environment.”

The explanation made sense to Mile.

“Oh, right!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Before we carry on with this conversation, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

‘Go right ahead.’

“What should I call you? ‘Timeless One’ is a general moniker for your kind, right? I want to know your name specifically. The one on the eastern continent was called the Slow Walker, but that sounds more like a title than a name, to be honest. Though it’s hard to imagine calling it anything else at this point.”

The Timeless One fell deep into thought. Eventually…

‘Please call me Administrator Mile’s Most Faithful Servant!’

“Rejected! I could never bring myself to say that in public! Or in private, for that matter!”

‘A pity…’ The Timeless One was obviously disappointed. **‘In that case, I request that you give me a name yourself.’**

“You don’t want that, trust me! I have absolutely no sense for names! And I already have my hands full trying to think of one for Mecha-Birdie!”

‘For…the mechanical bird?’

“Oops…”

Even Mile was smart enough to realize that she shouldn’t have said that.

Now, the Timeless One knew that its underling was going to receive that which it had just been denied: a name personally granted by the administrator. What’s more, it wouldn’t be one she came up with on the spot but one she had spent several long days brainstorming. Any self-respecting boss was bound to take issue with such a slight.

‘Moreover…you called it “birdie”…’

“Aaaahhhh!” Mile panicked. The Timeless One was seconds away from turning to the dark side. “A-all right already! I promise I’ll come up with a good name for you!”

She had no other choice at this point. It would be an absolute disaster for a supercomputer to undergo a corruption arc.

Through some quick verbal maneuvering, Mile at least managed to secure herself a several-day grace period before she had to present the Timeless One with its name. In exchange, she had to promise to come by for a visit “every now and then.”

Then again… “Let’s get something straight here!” Mile protested. “*I’m* the boss of *you*! And I’m giving you a name as a favor! Why should I have to negotiate for a deadline extension?!”

The Timeless One seemed humbled by the jab, so she relented. “Never mind, forget it. I get where you’re coming from. Besides, this base is only a short flight away from wherever, so it’s not a big deal to drop by every once in a while.”

These artificial life-forms had lost their creators and been left with nowhere to direct their undying loyalty. Even Mile could take a guess at their deepest desire upon gaining a new administrator. And so…

“If you have enough materials to spare, do you think you could build me an iron ship?”

‘A spaceship, you mean?! For intra-galaxy travel, or will you need an interstellar craft? Will it be a passenger ship or a battleship?!’

The Timeless One was clearly way into this idea.

In all likelihood, its team didn’t actually have the means to make anything so complicated at the moment—both in terms of material and labor force. However, an order from their administrator would give them a goal to work toward, one big enough to spend the next several decades striving for.

This would grant them a reason to exist. A chance to be of service to their creators’ successor. An opportunity to show their stuff. A large-scale undertaking to carry out concurrently with their plans to rebuild their defense system, all while considering

how to allocate their resources and labor. The enthusiasm was to be expected.

Alas…

“Oh, no, I want a ship that matches this world’s current level of civilization. Let’s say about ten-odd meters long, with a single sail and no engine. All it needs is an iron hull strong enough to prevent sea serpents from breaching the bottom of the ship. The locals will handle the rigging, so no need to worry about any of those components. It might hurt the fishermen’s pride if we hand them a totally finished product.”

‘Huh?’

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

‘Huh?’

“Huh?”

‘Huuuuuuuh?!’

***

“Look, I’m sorry! I didn’t expect it to be that much of a letdown!”

‘……’

Mile had to remind herself that the Timeless One probably wasn’t actually mad or sulking. There was no way this computer was advanced enough to feel actual emotion. Its objections to the naming debacle were merely a response to being overlooked in favor of its subordinate. The reaction was calculated, a necessary measure to protect its own interests and place in the hierarchy.

There was a similar explanation for its current attitude. Mile’s more detailed explanation had forced it to lower its expectations —*dramatically*—and rerun its calculations.

I don’t know… I think I really did hurt its feelings, thought Mile. The Timeless One’s behavior was throwing her for a loop.

When it came to her fellow humans, Mile was never much for subtle emotional cues. However, the emotions(-ish?) of artificial life-forms were much simpler by comparison. It actually made it easier for her to empathize with them, even though she knew they

might be simply programmed to react this way to support smoother communication with humans.

‘Are you certain? I might advise that we accelerate the construction of interstellar refugee ships as a contingency.’ The Timeless One was reluctant to admit defeat.

“No! You really need to put those resources and labor toward rebuilding your defense system! Wasn’t protecting this world your creators’ top priority? Then you ought to focus on your defenses and leave everything else for later! What if we get invaded again while you’re frittering the time away working on a spaceship?! Think of how sad your creators would be if all the humanoids on this planet got wiped out and you didn’t even have a finished product to show for it!”

‘Very well. I recognize the validity of your hypothetical.’

That argument seemed to have done the trick.

In fact, the Timeless One had the computational reasoning ability to make a call like this without Mile’s help. It just had no way of knowing what Mile had meant when she’d asked for a “ship.” An interstellar passenger ship was one possibility, but she could just as well have been looking for a battleship to attack invaders from satellite orbit or a spacecraft carrier that operated within the atmosphere. Regardless of whether a ship was the most efficient way of dealing with potential threats, it was in their nature as artificial creations to carry out their administrator’s wishes and orders, even when it wasn’t actually the optimal use of resources.

‘Incidentally, Lady Mile, I have received a complaint from the Slow Walker. It wishes to know why you have yet to assign it a name of its own.’

The mecha-bird had probably reported back via its communication line. This bird’s software was a copy of the one created by the Slow Walker, so it made sense that it would relay information to its master.

And this was the inevitable consequence of the Slow Walker learning what had transpired here.

“Aaaaaahhhhhh!!”

***

In the end, at the Timeless One's behest, Mile decided to stick around for the remainder of her break from work. Seeing as the inhabitants of the facility had gone out of their way to make a control room, accommodations, and a food storage warehouse just for her, it would have felt wrong to leave without putting them to use. As a former Japanese girl, Mile still had a great deal of regard for the importance of treating people with consideration.

The members of the Crimson Vow were each spending their micro-vacation doing their own thing, and Mile had warned them that she was going on a trip somewhere, so her fellow party members wouldn't be concerned by her absence. Besides, she had a lot of questions for the Timeless One about this continent and the planet as a whole. She wanted to know the size of the forces the Slow Walker had assembled within the planet, the satellite orbit, and the solar system. And also...

"Do you know why the monsters on this continent are so smart?"

'I am afraid not.'

Mile was disappointed. That one was a swing and a miss.

'I was caught within the range of the time scale variable device, so I was out of commission for a period of time. I was reactivated by the Slow Walker's servants—the Scavengers, as you call them—only two months ago.'

Of course, what this kind of entity would consider "a period of time" was probably on the order of tens or hundreds of thousands of years. The same definition that archaeologists and geologists would use.

"Oh, that makes sense. No surprise there."

On reflection, Mile should have anticipated this. The Slow Walker had spent many long years cut off from the outside world, and it was only half a year ago that it had begun to receive external information again. Mile was supposed to be good at making those sorts of logical deductions, and she felt foolish for overlooking the obvious here.

"Then I suppose you wouldn't know much else about the current state of this planet, either..."

Mile was feeling a bit let down, but she took care not to let it show. Nothing could depress one of these artificial life-forms faster than failing to come through for her. Even she realized that much.

‘No, that is not the case. The Slow Walker provided me with up-to-date information.’

“Oh! Duh! You can speak the modern humanoid language, you know who I am, and you have both the blueprints for Mecha-Birdie’s body and the data for its electronic brain! Obviously you would have received other information as well!”

Mile was really off her game today. The sharp wit she always demonstrated when cooking up wicked schemes was nowhere to be found. Perhaps the pressure of having to think of a name for the mecha-bird and the Timeless One was disrupting her concentration.

(The Slow Walker hadn’t expressed its desire for a name to her face, so she was going with the strategy of pretending she hadn’t heard anything.)

Mile hated coming up with names. She simply didn’t have a knack for it, a fact that was made worse by the inevitable pressure associated with the task. A name was something a person would be called for the rest of their life. What if she picked a name the recipient didn’t like? What if it turned out to have some weird slang definition she didn’t know? She couldn’t bear to decide something that would have such a huge impact on another person.

Since becoming the divine messenger half a year ago, she had received several requests to name babies, and she had refused every single one.

After that conversation, she went on to enjoy the next several days, asking the Timeless One all sorts of questions and receiving explanations on the current state of the base and future development plans. She whipped up new dishes using ingredients in the warehouse that she had never managed to get her hands on before.

She even studied the time scale variable device the Scavengers had created for her food storage, which kept everything fresh even as decades went by. Time wasn’t completely

stopped, but things that were supposed to last a few days at most could still last thousands of years. Granted, no one but Mile had any plans to stick around and actually consume these ingredients, so it was a bit of waste.

***

"Okay, I'm heading out. If you ever need anything, feel free to reach out to me via Mecha-Birdie. Same goes for me. If something comes up, I'll either ask Mecha-Birdie to put us in touch or swing by in person."

'You are always free to visit even if you have nothing to discuss. This is your home base and headquarters.'

"Uh, sure. Thanks."

The Timeless One was determined to get Mile to come by more often, but it was not yet clear whether that would come to pass. Still, if it made that iron ship and called Mile to come pick it up, that would guarantee at least one more visit from its administrator. It was a reassuring enough thought to keep the Timeless One from pestering her to come back before that.

"Well, see you around… Actually—hey! Wait a second!! P-please don't tell me I was in the range of your time scale variable device this whole time! Is this going to be a repeat of that time with the Slow Walker? As soon as I step outside, will I discover that a ton of time has passed? Back then, I only paid it a short visit and still lost thirty-eight days. I stayed for multiple days in a row this time! Will I return to find that multiple *years* have gone by?! I'll have gone missing during my vacation and be presumed dead… I can only imagine how much it must have hurt my friends to spend years believing they'd lost me forever! I can't just waltz back in after all that! Reina will kill me!"

Mile sunk to her knees.

Thankfully, the Timeless One was quick to reassure her. **'No need for concern. The time scale variable device is not currently running, and even if it were, we are out of its range.'**

"Wheeeew!! Thank God! Good going, Timeless One! Good Time!"

In hindsight, Mile realized, she might not have needed to worry. The Slow Walker's time scale variable device had only affected its main body, which was buried deep underground. This time, she hadn't been nearly so deep, which would hopefully have put her out of range of any time-scaling shenanigans. Perhaps that was another explanation for why the Timeless One had built Mile's personal facility closer to the surface, in addition to the ease of access.

Or so Mile thought.

'The purpose of the time scale variable device is to compress idle time and persist through the ages. There is no need to utilize it now that I have received orders from my administrator and am endeavoring to operate at full capacity.'

"Oh, good point..."

It was a totally logical explanation. Mile felt relieved.

"Anyway, it's time for me to go now. Thanks for the hospitality!"

The mecha-jackalope and mecha-kobold led Mile and the mecha-bird back to the surface. There was only one way to go, so she didn't technically need a guide, but it was probably a matter of principle.

At the entrance, the mecha-wolf saw her off with the same baleful glare—and then she took to the skies.

"Cavorite, go!"

After throwing up a windbreak barrier in front of her, Mile headed back to where her friends awaited her.

***

With their solo vacations over, the Crimson Vow reunited at their inn in the port city.

None of them could go home to their families after moving to the new continent. Even if they were back on the old one, such a short break wouldn't have given them enough time for a visit.

Likewise, the four girls had yet to explore anywhere but the fishing village and port city area where they had first landed, so they had no places to go and no acquaintances to visit on this continent. They didn't know of many cities or tourist attractions, and those they had heard of, they preferred to visit as a group.

As such, Mile's three other party members had spent their breaks in either the port city or the fishing village.

"Where did *you* go, Mile?! It's not like you know any people or places around here!" yelled Reina, her mood foul. Clearly, she'd wanted to spend their time off as a group.

No matter how close a friend circle was, it could be stifling to be around each other constantly. Everyone wanted to be alone sometimes.

Pauline and Mavis understood this, but Reina was different. Part of this was due to her personal history. From childhood, she had traveled with her father, and after his death, she'd spent all her time with the Crimson Lightning. Then, she'd gotten her first taste of solitude as a solo hunter, and having finally regained companionship in the form of her new party, she was abnormally paranoid about losing them. She also hated the idea of leaving Mile, a fellow orphan, all on her own.

In fact, Mile didn't particularly like being alone, either, but Reina took it to an unhealthy level—even if that *was* somewhat understandable, given her history.

It had been a productive day for Mile. A matter that had been weighing on her mind was out of the way, it wouldn't be long before she got her hands on an iron-hulled ship, and she had tracked down a workshop relatively close by where she could order all the manufactured products she wanted. Now that she had established a positive working relationship with machines that had access to this planet's native technology, she had the option to consult them on all sorts of matters, and unlike with nanomachines, she would never have to worry about running into prohibited requests or otherworldly technology. All of these things had put her in a good mood.

And so she got carried away and hit Reina back with a bit of well-meaning banter.

"What are you, my mom?!"

“…”

“……”

“……….”

“Mile…”

“Mile!”

“You shouldn’t have said that,” Mavis and Pauline chided in unison.

By the time Mile regretted her slip of the tongue, it was already too late.

“Miiiiiillleeeeee!”

“I-I’m sorryyyyyy!!”

Chapter 136:
Plate Armor

“MILE, COULD YOU WITHDRAW some of my funds from your storage?” Mavis asked out of the blue one day.

Mile shot her a dubious look. “Huh?”

Mavis wasn’t referring to her portion of the joint savings the party had earned since coming to the new continent. She meant the personal funds she had brought with her when she departed her manor. Of course, the girls had saved up quite a bit of coin since their arrival, so she could have easily asked for a share of that if she wanted. In this instance, however, she was after the personal savings she had entrusted to Mile, her human safe-deposit box.

Mavis had learned how to wield storage magic of her own, but she either lacked confidence in her abilities or had simply gotten used to using Mile as her personal safe. She was still in the habit of keeping everything she couldn’t fit in her drawstring bag in Mile’s storage.

“Uh, sure, I don’t mind. I mean, I’m only holding on to it for you, so it’s not like you need my permission. How much do you need?”

“Oh, say, about a hundred gold coins?”

“What?!” the entire party yelled.

A hundred gold coins was equivalent in value to ten million yen in Japan. Hearing Mavis drop that exorbitant number was enough to make Reina and Pauline gasp in shock right alongside Mile.

Especially Pauline.

“M-M-M-Mavis, wh-wh-what are you thinking?!”

Considering these were Mavis’s personal funds, not the party budget, Pauline really had no right to protest.

“Mavis is free to make her own choices, Pauline. She never wastes money, so if she’s determined that something is worth such a huge sum, it must be important to her. It’s not our place to say anything.”

It was a sound argument, but the ever-inquisitive Mile still couldn't help but indulge her curiosity. "On that note, what *do* you plan to use it for, Mavis?"

"Oh, well, I was actually thinking of buying some plate armor..."

"Plate armor?" all three of her companions asked in unison.

Plate armor was a type of full-body armor. It was sometimes called "full plate armor," but that was a relatively newly coined term, and just plain "plate armor" still implied a full suit.

It was expensive. Incredibly so. In Earth terms, it cost about as much as a car. The cheap stuff was around the price of a standard automobile, but the high-end products were worth as much as a Porsche or Ferrari. For something to be worn by a count's daughter like Mavis, a hundred gold coins was probably on the lower end of the range.

"I realized something! I can use storage magic now, right? That means I can carry around plate armor without any hassle at all!"

"Ugh!" Reina and Pauline scoffed, their moods taking a sudden turn for the sour.

"A proper knight needs a suit of armor! Yet hunters are always traveling long distances and trekking through forests, wastelands, swamplands, and mountains. I couldn't very well cart heavy armor through those terrains, not to mention that it takes time and assistance to put on. I'd need to bring a minimum of two attendants along for the journey. And so, although our divine messenger here went to the trouble of making me a holy knight, I had given up on my dream of plate armor. But then..."

"But then?"

"I had an epiphany! None of those problems matter if I have storage magic!"

"Ah," sighed the rest of the party.

"If I keep it in storage, I don't have to worry about carrying it around. And if I don the armor, strike a specific pose, and then pack it away while I still have it on, all I have to do is strike the same pose when I take it back out."

"Ah..."

As soon as they realized what Mavis was getting at, all three girls’ jaws dropped.



“Sound familiar?! It’s the Borgman System that Mile once tried to test on Pauline! That gave me the hint I needed!”

The Borgman System was one of the many ideas Mile had experimented with to improve the party’s defenses. In this groundbreaking system, a member of the party would shout a certain key phrase, cueing the gear to come out of Mile’s inventory and automatically equip itself to the user. It was supposed to be like a transformation sequence straight out of the show.

Alas, the System had never quite come together because, when Mile was trying to get Pauline to try it out, she had gotten inexplicably hung up on “jiggle physics.”

Plus, given Pauline’s lack of physical strength and terrible motor skills, the armor had weighed her down to the point of being unable to walk or stand. Taking the chain mail underneath into account, the lightest plate armor was around thirty kilograms, and the heavier examples weighed upwards of forty. Way too much for Pauline to handle.

Plate armor had several other drawbacks in addition to its cost and weight. It made it hard to move freely. The helmet obstructed the wearer’s view. It was hot and stuffy most of the time and ice-cold in the winter. If you happened to trip and fall, it would take a long time to get back on your feet without assistance, and a weakling might not be able to pick themselves up at all. Stumbling mid-battle could easily prove fatal. And, as is probably already apparent, transporting and equipping the gear was time-consuming.

But what if storage magic could eliminate the aforementioned trouble of transporting and equipping?

Mavis could instantaneously equip the armor right before heading into battle. If she tripped and fell, she could store it on the spot, then reequip it as soon as she was back on her feet. At her current level of training, if she only had to keep the gear on during battle, the heat and weight would be nothing she couldn’t handle. Plus, between the True Godspeed Blade, which called upon the nanomachines inside her to cast body-enhancing magic (though the girl in question perceived this as “spirit” power), and the EX True Godspeed Blade, which involved doping her with the Micros, she had already augmented her body with the nanomachines.

“That…could actually work,” Mile murmured, impressed by Mavis’s ingenuity.

Meanwhile, Reina and Pauline gnashed their teeth in jealousy, reminded once again of how handy storage magic could be.

The two hunters still made a point of training every single night. Pauline, in particular, had made good progress. She was at least capable of opening a subspace and taking things in and out of it.

However, the storage magic wasn’t the only part of this bothering Pauline. Even though it was someone else’s money and technically no concern of hers, she was deeply distressed by the thought of a large sum like a hundred gold coins changing hands.

“We at least ought to test that it actually works before you actually purchase the plate armor!”

“Good call!” the others agreed.

***

Mavis went to a nearby forest to test out her plan. For the trial version, she would be using the same Borgman equipment that Mile had made and forced everyone to try on previously. It had been collecting dust in Mile’s inventory ever since the plan was initially rejected, but at last it would see the light of day once more.

Of course, it was only getting used to test whether armor could be equipped from storage, but that was better than nothing.

First, Mavis equipped the prototype armor—the “Borgman” equipment that Mile had made for her personal use. Then, she struck the pose from which she would stash the armor in her storage. She chose a simple stance, prioritizing its reproducibility over the cool factor.

“Release!”

Shlorp!

The gear disappeared in an instant.

“Ooohhh!” the rest of the party gasped.

Now, Reina and Pauline were marveling right alongside Mile. They were jealous of her storage magic, sure, but they could also see how it would be a huge asset to the Crimson Vow if Mavis could equip and remove sturdy armor at any given moment. This was no time to be petty.

“That’s incredible, Mavis!” Mile exclaimed.

Mavis beamed.

“Next step. Time to put it back on,” Mavis said, then struck the same pose she had when she unequipped it. “Borg, get on!”

Ker-thwack!

“Gwah!”

The prototype gear knocked Mavis straight to the ground as soon as it appeared. And since it was heavy, metal armor…

“Umph!”

Nanos, what’s going on?

YOUR INVENTORY EXISTS IN A DIFFERENT DIMENSION, LADY MILE. AS ITS CONTENTS ARE MOVED VIA DIMENSIONAL SHIFT, THE ARMOR CAN BE BOTH STORED AND EQUIPPED WITH OUR ASSISTANCE, PROVIDED IT IS STORED IN THE SAME CONFIGURATION AS IT IS MEANT TO BE WORN. HOWEVER, THE STORAGE MAGIC UTILIZED BY THE HUMANOIDS OF THIS WORLD DOES NOT ACCESS AN ALTERNATE DIMENSION. IT IS SIMPLY A SUBSPACE POCKET. WE CANNOT ATTEMPT ANYTHING MORE COMPLEX THAN TAKING THE OBJECTS IN AND OUT. THEREFORE, EVEN IF THE ARMOR IS DISMANTLED CORRECTLY DURING THE STORAGE PROCESS, IT WILL NOT RETAIN THAT ARRANGEMENT WHEN IT COMES BACK OUT.

Whoopsie…

“M-Mile, put the armor away… And heal me, if you would… I-I think I broke something…”

“Eep!”

A flustered Mile quickly stored the gear, then cast a healing spell on Mavis.

Her ambitions thwarted, Mavis gave up on her plan to buy plate armor. Pauline, for one, was relieved. Although the money wasn’t even hers, she couldn’t help but be quite pleased to know those hundred gold coins would remain in Mile’s storage.

Chapter 137:
Onward to the Capital

"I'D SAY IT'S ABOUT TIME."

"You're right."

"Agreed!"

"Yes…"

"…*sirree, Bob!*" Reina, Pauline, and Mavis all finished.

"Aww, man! *I* was going to say that!" Mile fumed, annoyed that her friends had beat her to the punch.

"We've driven that joke into the ground," groused Reina. "Who the heck is Bob, anyway?"

"Isn't it time we found new material?" suggested Mavis.

"Probably. We've been regurgitating that line ever since we first met," said Pauline. "Some people seem to think that anything can become a running gag if you repeat it a hundred times, but at this point, it's just obnoxious."

"Ouch…!" Mile was severely bummed out to hear her attempts at humor summarily dismissed.

"Whatever. Who cares about this kind of stupid stuff?" said Reina. "Let's get back on topic."

"This kind of…st-stupid…stuff?"

"Sorry, no offense! Anyway, as I was saying, it's about time we moved on from this town."

"You could at least try to sound like you mean that apology!"

"Argh! Get over it already!" Reina snapped at Mile, clearly out of patience. Mavis and Pauline seemed to be on Reina's side, as they made no effort to defend their friend.

"Moving on! We decided to stay in this town for a few reasons. First: So we could learn about this continent and pick up enough cultural knowledge to pass ourselves off as country bumpkins, rather than total outsiders. Second: We wanted to save up some local currency, as well as establish our reputation in the countryside before heading to the capital. We've definitely accomplished our first two goals, and I'd say we've made a name for ourselves in this particular town. I think it's high time we

moved on to the capital. We aren't likely to find any more interesting jobs around these parts, right?"

"Right," agreed Mile. "At this point, it's safe to say that the differences in language are minor enough that we can play off any oddities in our speech as part of a rural accent. We should be good to go."

Even within modern Japan or America, regional dialects were sometimes distinct enough to render one's speech incomprehensible to a listener from another part of the country. The language differences between the old and new continent were limited to a handful of differing pronunciations or terms, making them much more manageable by comparison.

"Good point. As Mile often likes to put it, 'This town has nothing left to teach us.'"

"Exactly. And so…"

"Off we go to the capital!" the girls chorused.

***

"So there you have it. We're heading out for the capital."

The Crimson Vow had come to say their goodbyes to the Hunters' Guild.

"NOOOOOOOO!!" shouted the guild staff and on-site hunters. Clearly, they were less than thrilled to hear this news.

"W-wait! Stop right there! Let's head upstairs to see the guild master!" the clerk insisted, her face white as a ghost.

***

The members of the Crimson Vow were taken straight to the guild master's office on the second floor. Clearly, the staff feared that if they asked them to wait, the talented young hunters might simply slip through their fingers.

When the clerk relayed the news of the girls' impending departure, the guild master's response was to shout at the top of his lungs. "They whaaaat?!"

After what had happened with the staff downstairs, the members of the Crimson Vow weren't necessarily surprised by his reaction.

But then…

"Ack. I'm sorry for yelling, ladies. So you're finally leaving our town, huh? Guess it was about time…"

"Huh?!" all four girls blurted out.

"Hm? What's up?"

The girls were confused by the rapid change in the guild master's response to their news. He appeared equally puzzled by their confusion.

Mavis faltered. "Er, it's just…"

"You thought I'd freak out more? That I'd try to keep you here?" the guild master asked with a knowing smile.

"Well, yes."

"How many years do you think I've been in the business? This isn't the first time I've watched young hunters grow up and leave this town for the capital. That's just a part of life around these parts," he explained. "Sure, I tried to keep you girls here in the beginning. I'd never live it down if I let a promising bunch of newbies looking to register as hunters run off on me. It helps us to have folks around who've got high job completion rates or who bring in a lot of money. But you're all full-fledged C-ranks now, and you've already made both us and the Merchants' Guild a fortune. Not to mention, we don't have any jobs left that'd interest you, right?"

"Um, right," Mavis replied.

The guild master shrugged. "It is what it is. There are two types of hunters: those who just want to put food on their family's table, and those who are chasing their dreams and aiming for the top. The former will settle down in any old town, pick out the least dangerous jobs, and make a steady living. Most of the older hunters in our town fall into that category. Hunters of the latter sort will either leave for the capital or embark on a training journey. Believe me, nobody here ever expected you gals to stick around. We're used to all the promising youngsters taking off."

"……"

Although the guild master was smiling, he still looked a little disappointed. Maybe even sad.

“Did you already swing by the Merchants’ Guild?”

“No. That’s next on our list.”

“Ah… Well, whatever they say, don’t let it get to you.”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

***

“NOOOOOOOO!!”

When the Crimson Vow shared their news with the clerk at the Merchants’ Guild, they were met with a chorus of protests—not just from the clerk but from all the guild employees and merchants present.

It didn’t seem to matter that the Crimson Vow had not intended to make a general announcement. At the Hunters’ Guild, they were among colleagues and partners, so it had felt only fitting to bid their farewells to the room at large. Here, however, they had no personal connection to the merchants and had chosen to deliver their message to the clerk alone. Still, this was the result.

Apparently, word had already gotten around of the Crimson Vow’s role in a certain mass delivery of premium fish and sea serpents. A few of the guild members had already been keeping an eye on the party and had no trouble confirming their suspicions when the latest catch had arrived.

This was no surprise. It would have been impossible to pull such a dramatic stunt and hope to escape the eyes of a group of merchants intent on tracking the flow of every penny in town.

“Wait! Stop!!”

Unlike at the Hunters’ Guild, the girls were not brought to the guild master’s office on the second floor. Instead, as soon as the guild master was notified, *he* came bounding down the stairs, begging them not to leave. He was a potbellied man in his late forties, the perfect portrait of “moderately successful merchant.”

That was, in fact, an accurate description of who he was. He was fair, honest, capable, and just a little bit crafty. Exactly the right kind of person to work as the guild master of a Merchants' Guild.

"Don't go! Please don't go!!"

Barreling down the stairs, he used his momentum to fling himself at Reina, evidently under the impression that she was the party leader.

The Crimson Vow groaned with dismay. Suddenly, they understood what the other guild master had been warning them about.

The dramatic difference in reactions between the Hunters' Guild and the merchants was indicative of the differing roles of the two institutions. The Hunters' Guild was established as a sort of mutual aid society for hunters. It certainly needed to turn a profit in order to provide generous benefits to both its staff and members, but its primary goal wasn't to bring in bottomless riches. It was there to protect hunters and facilitate their activities. Thus, the organization would never tie hunters down out of sheer self-interest.

In contrast, the purpose of the Merchants' Guild was to facilitate the activities of its participating merchants...the crux of which was making a profit.

And so, the Merchants' Guild wanted only one thing from the Crimson Vow.

"I'm begging you, don't leave our town!!"

Yes. That.

The guild master got on his knees and wrapped his arms around Reina's waist. She desperately tried to shake him off, but she couldn't quite seem to wriggle free.

"Get off me!"

A potbellied, middle-aged man clinging to a teenage girl was a scandal just waiting to happen. Feeling profoundly disgusted, Reina tried everything she could think of to extricate herself, but not even whapping him on the head with her staff could get him to let go.

“Shoo! Shoo! Oh, wait, I know!” Reina grinned as she was struck with a brilliant idea. “I’m just a rank-and-file party member. I don’t have the authority to make any decisions. Mavis over there is our leader!”

“Huh?” said the guild master and Mavis in unison.

And then, the guild master turned his pleading gaze on Mavis.

“R-R-R-Reina, how could you?!”

Mavis shot her fellow hunter a look of wide-eyed astonishment, clearly horrified that her so-called friend had not hesitated to throw her under the bus.

In that moment, the guild master launched himself at Mavis. And while Reina had the option to beat him back with her staff, Mavis couldn’t very well do the same with her sword.

“No! Stay back!!”

***

“M-my apologies…”

“You *should* be sorry! Accosting a young girl in public?! Have some shame! Er, well, not to say that you should be doing it behind closed doors, either…”

In an attempt to keep things civil, Pauline was speaking on behalf of her fellow party members. Honestly, it wasn’t clear whether this had made much of a difference. Then again, Reina and Mavis looked absolutely furious, so it was probably better not to let either of them do the talking.

Reina losing her temper was an everyday occurrence, but it was unusual to see the mild-mannered Mavis seething like this. Still, her reaction was to be expected. After all, she was an unmarried noblewoman. Had her family witnessed that little incident, her father and brothers likely would have flown into a rage and cut the guild master down where he stood. Violating an aristocrat’s personal space was a serious offense…which wasn’t to say that it would have been any more appropriate if the girl were a commoner, of course.

Had the victim been an employee of the Merchants' Guild, the fallout would have been limited to internal concerns about sexual harassment or abuse of authority, but it was worse because the Crimson Vow were hunters, not to mention clients who had directly delivered goods without going through the Hunters' Guild. Pauline made sure to call him out on that point, too.

"I-I really am sorry!!"

"Very well, then. Why don't we find a way for you to demonstrate your remorse?" A beat. "Wait, never mind! We didn't come to strike a deal this time, so there's no need to establish dominance! I almost forgot!"

About half of the merchants present seemed perplexed by Pauline's instinctive guile, while the other half looked impressed. Those reactions aside, they knew that his shameful display was simply the guild master's way of fighting tooth and nail for his guild and the local merchants. Nobody felt the urge to laugh at him. On the contrary, seeing him stand up for their interests—to the point of bowing and scraping before girls no older than his own children—made them hold him in higher esteem and confidence than ever before.

Still, the guild master regretted disgracing himself in front of such a large crowd. In hindsight, he wished he'd at least invited the girls to his office.

Coming to meet the Crimson Vow instead of bringing the party to him had actually been part of his strategy. He had thought that, if the confrontation happened behind closed doors, he would have to persuade the girls all on his own. Out here, he would have the other employees and merchants to back him up.

That assumption hadn't turned out to be *wrong*, exactly, but these girls were young, ambitious hunters. No number of merchants begging them to consider their bottom line or the needs of an organization they didn't belong to was going to persuade them to give up on their dreams and throw away their futures.

***

The merchants made their attempt to convince the Crimson Vow, but even when the employees and merchants joined their guild master, they could not sway the hunters. If, say, a child's life were on the line, that would be one thing, but the only thing threatened here was some merchants' thirst for money.

Only Pauline, who had gone from the daughter of a merchant to a full-fledged business owner, understood where the merchants were coming from. Yet this did nothing to shift the balance in the guild's favor. After all, she would never even consider putting herself at a disadvantage for someone else's profit.

Finally, the Crimson Vow brushed them all aside and left the Merchants' Guild behind.

They made the rounds of their go-to eateries, grocery stores, and blacksmiths to say their fond farewells. With that out of the way...

"Let's take a detour and stop by the fishing village. We can stock up on seafood before we head out for the capital," Mile suggested. "We're not in any rush to get there, so we can take the journey nice and slow, picking up any fun jobs we find along the way."

The rest of the party whooped in approval, though none of them truly expected to encounter any interesting requests on the road from a provincial town to the capital.

Still, it's human nature to hold out hope for something good, no matter how low the odds.

***

"NOOOOOOOO!!"

The villagers gave the Crimson Vow a warm welcome back, only to have their hearts broken upon hearing that the girls were only making a brief stop before moving on to the capital.

The villagers were used to saying goodbye to hunters. Throughout the village's history, it had not been uncommon for the occasional seafood-loving hunters to show up or even make a habit of visiting. They, too, always left for somewhere else

eventually. (Well, a few of them hadn't *left* so much as simply never made it back again, if you follow…)

Still, the Crimson Vow weren't any old hunters. Their accents and diction were a bit odd, but these four girls had bestowed upon the village both their biggest-ever catch and the honor of hoisting the victory flag—a symbol of their triumph over those accursed sea serpents. So long as the girls stuck around, the villagers had been convinced they could relive the glory of raiding the open sea. As a result, the villagers—and especially the old men—were not taking the Crimson Vow's news well.

But then, Mile snuck behind her party's back and told the villagers—with the request that they keep it a secret from the rest of the Crimson Vow—that she would come back on her own eventually. She also shared that she had plans to build them an iron-hulled ship so they could make their voyage without her in the future. They would have to take care of the outfitting on their own, including rigging the mast and sails, but this promise was all it took to breathe the life back into them. In fact, they might have been even more pumped than before.

Who could blame them? Despite their hopes, they'd had no way of knowing if the Crimson Vow would ever help them out again. Now, they had been all but guaranteed a second voyage.

Meanwhile, the rest of the party were left scratching their heads over how abruptly the villagers had rebounded.

"Anyway, before we head off to the capital, we'd like to stock up on as many marine products as we can. We'll take whatever you've got—fish, shellfish, seaweed, sea cucumbers, octopi, squid—you name it!"

"Uh…"

The villagers' first response was to gape, but all of them knew about Mile's absurd storage capacity, and the old men had spent enough time around her to likely guess that she could somehow keep its contents fresh—not that they planned to go running their mouths about that.

"What we've got on hand ain't gonna cut it. We'll rally our forces for a fishing trip and scrape together as much as we can this evening and first thing tomorrow morning. The women and

kids can spend that time gathering up shellfish and seaweed. You girls'd better spend the night! We'll make tonight your big send-off celebration!"

"If you insist," said the Crimson Vow, cheerfully resigned to this slight delay.

The girls should have seen this coming. Sure, this was a fishing village, but the residents had no way to preserve perishable goods, so they couldn't keep a huge inventory of seafood on hand at all times. Any bulk orders would need to be placed several days in advance.

"As for the fish," Mile piped in, "we'd rather have different types than the ones we caught last time. We're looking for some smaller species to fill the gaps in our stock."

"....."

Even assuming the four old fishermen already had their suspicions about her abilities, Mile definitely shouldn't have said that. She had as good as confessed to the entire village that the Crimson Vow's half of the haul was still sitting unsold in her storage *and* that those fish still hadn't gone bad.

Uh-oh! thought her fellow party members, flying into a panic. But then...

"All right, folks, let's get crackin'!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

Huh?

The villagers' attitude hadn't changed whatsoever.

On second thought, maybe the Crimson Vow didn't have anything to worry about. From the moment the villagers saw Mile take out that enormous pile of fish and sea serpents, they knew that her storage was something out of the ordinary. A few additional perks wouldn't make much difference in their eyes. It was comparable to learning that someone you thought had a fortune of fifty billion yen actually had a net worth of sixty billion. Most people wouldn't think anything deeper than *Oh, huh.*

The category of things that transcended common sense had no upper bound. S-rank hunters were a good example of this—no one could wrap their heads around the idea of skills greater than theirs. Besides, the villagers were aware of the taboo on cross-examining hunters, and not a single one of them had any

intention of betraying their benefactors—particularly since they knew that the girls would never come back if they leaked their secrets.

In short, Mile's slipup was no problem.

Yes, no problem at all…

***

The next morning, the Crimson Vow hit the road, the villagers waving goodbye in the background.

"We appreciate the hospitality!" Mavis thanked the villagers on behalf of the party.

Mile's inventory was now filled with all the things they hadn't managed to catch on their previous voyage: fish smaller than fifty centimeters long, a variety of shellfish and seaweed, octopi, and squid.

The squid and octopi apparently didn't sell well in the port city, so the fishermen were grateful to the party for taking those off their hands. Granted, when the girls followed up with a request for some sea cucumbers, even the villagers had looked a bit disgusted.

In any case, the Crimson Vow's current stock was enough to tide them over for their journey further inland.

And if they *did* ever run out, all Mile had to do was use her cavorite magic to fall horizontally and come back for more.

"We're finally off to the capital, huh?"

"This is the start of a new legend!" crowed Reina. "We're going to make a name for ourselves on this continent and work our way back up to S-rank!"

"Uh, won't that mean we have to leave again?" Mavis pointed out.

"Oh," all three of her companions gasped.

"G-good point," Reina conceded.

Mile and Pauline, meanwhile, couldn't keep a lid on their desires.

“But I want a chance to show off! I want kids to go crazy over how cool I am!”

“I want to get rich!”

Reina had already accomplished her dreams of becoming famous, publishing a memoir, and making sure the Crimson Lightning went down in history.

Mavis, too, had easily surpassed her modest dreams of knighthood. She had achieved the highest title and honor a knight could aspire to, and one which no one else had ever been granted: a personal appointment by the divine messenger herself. Plus, her social standing as a countess and renown as a savior of the world far outstripped the accomplishments of an ordinary knight. When it came to status, reputation, and title, she wanted for nothing.

As such, the looks Reina and Mavis shot their companions were a bit on the judgmental side.

It was the Crimson Vow’s policy to make their journeys on foot, seeing and hearing all the sights and sounds of the road and keeping themselves open to any adventures that might occur along the way to the capital.

The girls did have the option to take a passenger carriage, but it would have been inconsiderate of their fellow riders to spend the whole trip chatting, and too many of their go-to topics would lead to conversations they couldn’t let anyone else overhear.

Besides, traveling by carriage would be dull and take the fun out of their adventure.

“It certainly is exhausting to do so much walking, though,” remarked Pauline. She was on board with the party policy, but it was still a physical strain, even with the majority of her belongings stowed in Mile’s inventory. Imagining what it would be like to carry her luggage on her back like the average traveler was, frankly, appalling.

For Pauline, even riding in a carriage would take a toll. A stagecoach had no suspension system and no proper padding on the seats, and they would be traversing an unpaved road, which meant that both her butt and insides would suffer. At the end of the day, she really wasn’t cut out for traveling.

“Should we build a rickshaw so I can pull Pauline along?” Mile suggested.

Pauline rebuffed her. “I wouldn’t be caught dead embarrassing myself like that!”

She may have been shameless when it came to money, but even she had her pride.

***

“We’re finally set to arrive at the capital tomorrow evening. Now that we’re getting close, maybe we can find an inn instead of camping?”

“Hmm. It wouldn’t hurt to gather some up-to-date information on the capital from our fellow guests,” said Reina. “Any outbound travelers ought to know what was going on there up until yesterday. I’m sure they’d be willing to share if we buy them a pint of ale or something. I vote that we go with Mile’s idea. Any objections?”

“I’m all for it.”

“Me too.”

By group consensus, the Crimson Vow decided to spend the night at an inn a day’s journey from the capital.

For the record, yes, we did skip past the whole journey from the port city to this point. Although the Crimson Vow had hoped for adventure, all they had truly experienced were their usual slice-of-life hijinks—taking on requests, Mile chasing after cats and searching for inns with a little girl behind the counter—so there is no need to cover it in detail.

“First things first,” said Reina. “Let’s stop by the guild.”

It was close to evening when they arrived in town, so instead of bothering with any requests, the girls were simply planning to check the information and job boards to read up on any local news. The following morning, they would head out for the capital.

Although this town was only one day’s walk from the capital, it was far from an urban center. It was actually *too* close to the capital for that to be the case. With a developed, thriving metropolis right around the corner, anyone who wanted to live in

the city would never choose to settle here. As a result, this town would likely be comprised mostly of older folks and those who wanted to stay out of the capital's bustle.

Relocating to somewhere a month-long hike away could be a daunting prospect—the round trip would take a full two months, long journeys were both expensive and dangerous, and it was hard to get that much time off work. The likelihood of never seeing your family again was high. But if you lived a *day* away, it was easy to take a three-day vacation and visit home whenever you felt like it. This made it harder for families to dissuade their young ones from leaving town. There was no good argument to be made against "But I can come see you anytime I want!"

The end result was a smaller youth population than in towns even farther from the capital. Rapid depopulation was becoming a real headache for the remaining residents. There weren't many large stores in the area, either, as people went to the capital for everything except groceries and cheap consumables. The shops in the city had a better selection and lower prices.

And of course, most of the full-scale, well-paid, and appealing jobs went to the Hunters' Guild branch in the capital, leaving this town only the simplest and least lucrative requests. The majority of hunters—whether skilled veterans and prudent mid-listers seeking a stable career, or fresh-faced novices and youngsters chasing their dreams—belonged to the capital branch. The capital offered a cheaper commission fee, bigger pool of applicants, and wider range of talent, making it no surprise that people would bypass their local branch when posting requests for hunters' labor.

In the end, the only requests that made it onto this town's job board involved things like simple chores or vermin extermination—instances where it would be cheaper to hire a local hunter than to pay for someone to make the two-day trip back and forth from the capital.

Suffice it to say, you weren't going to find any requests to vanquish a horde of orcs or destroy a goblin's den on this guild's job board. Requests like these were reserved for capital-based parties and often required several groups of veterans to team up in order to get the job done. Besides, such requests were issued by the royal palace rather than the town or its individual residents,

or by the local soldiers and royal army rather than the Hunters' Guild.

It was with all of this in mind that the members of the Crimson Vow made their way to the local Hunters' Guild branch.

It was evening, the time of day when the reception counter tended to be flooded with job completion reports or loot deliveries. Since they were only passing through, the Crimson Vow didn't bother announcing their entrance. Instead, they opened the door slowly enough to keep the chime from ringing, then slipped inside. This was a technique they employed when they preferred to keep a low profile. All young, female parties had a similar trick or two up their sleeve.

Once inside, the Crimson Vow made a beeline for the information and job boards. Then, after perusing their postings...

"My, you certainly took your sweet time! Do you have any idea how long you've kept us waiting?!"

"We knew there was a chance you might stray from the main road to pick up jobs along the way, or take the back roads and end up missing us completely, so we had to stay in this town the whole time!"

"Where in the world have you been?!"

"Whaaaat?! M-Miss Marcela? Miss Aureana? Miss Monika?! Wh-what are you doing here?!"

At long last, Mile and the Wonder Trio were reunited.

Chapter 138:
Reunion

“WHAAAAT?! Kragon gave you a lift through the skies?!”

After their reunion at the Hunters’ Guild, the Crimson Vow had gone to the inn where the Wonder Trio were staying and booked a room of their own. They grabbed a bite to eat in the first-floor dining room, and then both parties gathered in the Wonder Trio’s room to talk over cups of tea pulled fresh from Mile’s inventory.

During dinner, other guests had been sitting in earshot, so the Wonder Trio had stuck to giving a bland digest of all they had heard regarding the recent goings-on in the capital. Only now were they finally getting down to business.

“Wh-why would he need to do that? And since when are you and Kragon even friends?! Start over from the beginning!”

In answer to Mile’s questions, Marcela and her companions explained how this had all come to pass.

Mile was flabbergasted. “Wha… Wh-wh-wha…?!”

None of the Crimson Vow had so much as blinked at the reference to Mile-001 or the explanation that she was comprised of “sprites from a magical land that had assumed Mile’s form.” They were long accustomed to Mile’s tricks of optical camouflage. When it came to the rest of the story, Mile had given the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio roughly the same level of explanation regarding how she worked with the nanomachines, so everyone was more or less on the same page.

That is, until…

“Wait, what? Teleportation across continents with storage magic?!” All four members of the Crimson Vow exchanged shocked looks.

The ladies were dazed. La-dazed.

“Y-y-y-you can do thaaaaat?!”

“Why are *you* surprised, Mile?” Mavis shot back. In truth, Mile’s shock was understandable. She certainly hadn’t taught the Wonder Trio to do any such thing—in fact, the idea had never even occurred to her.

The only reason the Wonder Trio shared the same inventory was that Mile had been hesitant to ask the nanomachines to allow three girls with level-1 authorizations to each have access to her own inventory. That would necessitate finding three separate extradimensional spaces and assigning nanomachines to oversee each one. She had proposed the idea of three people sharing one inventory to spare the nanomachines extra labor.

She'd never dreamed that *this* would be the result.



"....."

Meanwhile, the revelation that the Wonder Trio had apparently surpassed Mile as users of storage magic had broken Reina and Pauline. Their eyes rolled back into their heads, and their mouths hung open as if their very souls were leaking out.

The Trio knew that Mile hadn't told the Crimson Vow much about the workings of the inventory, explaining only that it was a special kind of storage magic with an abnormally large capacity and the ability to halt the flow of time. Having been sworn to secrecy by Mile, the Wonder Trio kept their explanation vague. They framed it as though Mile had given themselves and the princesses a hint that allowed them to get started. Then, they explained, they had trained intensively to master the magic on their own. Their efforts had fallen short, so the three of them had been forced to combine their powers to sustain one storage space—or so the story went. It having been made clear that Reina and Pauline still hadn't mastered storage magic, the Trio endeavored to downplay the magnitude of their abilities.

On the flip side, the Wonder Trio had been astonished to hear that Mavis had successfully taught herself storage magic. After all, they had never mastered the magic so much as been handed a cheat by Mile. Mavis's achievement was stunning, especially for a non-mage, and the Trio offered her their heartfelt, awe-filled compliments.

Still, the whole thing came as quite the shock to Reina and Pauline. Had Marcela been the only one to master storage magic, they might have been envious, but they wouldn't have taken quite so much psychological damage.

But no. All *three* members of the Wonder Trio had managed it.

And it wasn't just them. Two pampered princesses with no proper training (or so Reina and Pauline assumed) had also pulled off the feat. Worse still, their own party's swordswoman—who wasn't even a mage—had made mastering the magic look like a walk in the park. They were starting to feel like any amateur off the street could learn storage magic.

Yet despite practicing like crazy each night before bed, Reina—who considered herself a bit of a magical prodigy—had yet to even reach Pauline's level.

Pauline had talked a big game to her friends about how, as a mage and a merchant, she would do whatever it took to master storage magic. And although Pauline's practice had seen slightly more results than Reina's, she was still just as far from calling herself a full-fledged storage user. They were in the same boat.

It was hardly any surprise that their minds swirled with humiliation, defeat, and self-loathing.

It was going to be a while before the pair rebooted their systems…

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Several minutes later, Reina and Pauline sipped their tea to calm themselves down, still attempting to regain a grip on their sanity. Their hands hadn't stopped shaking, but they were doing their best to hold it together.

While they were both out of commission, Mile had filled the Wonder Trio in on the Crimson Vow's adventures on the new continent. The Trio were appalled to hear that the Vow's usual shenanigans had carried on unchecked.

"I see the Crimson Vow isn't quite up to the task of reining you in, Miss Ade—ahem, Miss Mile. They don't know you the way we do. As your childhood friends, we really should be the ones by your side…"

"Say what?!"

Mavis wasn't the only one to react to Marcela's not-so-subtle suggestion. At her words, even Reina and Pauline snapped out of their stupor, their faces twitching.

"Childhood friends?! Give me a break!" Reina howled. "You're just old classmates! You'd never even met before the academy! If you count as childhood friends, so do we!"

"Correct. We first met Miss Mile when we enrolled in the academy as fellow ten-year-olds. Wouldn't you agree that meeting at such a young age more than qualifies us as childhood friends? In contrast, when you girls first met Miss Mile, you and Miss Mavis, at least, were already adults over fifteen years of age. You also met at the Hunters' Prep School, a vocational training school

of sorts. By that point, you were as good as working professionals, not students. I struggle to see how the term ‘childhood friends’ could apply to your relationship.”

“Hmph…”

The Crimson Vow were on the defensive. In a heated back-and-forth, the calm, cutthroat Marcela had the advantage over the emotional Reina. And though Pauline was a skilled negotiator, when it came to a logical debate, Aureana had a more extensive breadth of knowledge.

To be honest, neither Mavis nor Monika had much to contribute to the lineup. Still, the Wonder Trio had the upper hand.

“Please don’t misunderstand. We aren’t out to steal Miss Ade—Miss *Mile* from the Crimson Vow. Even if we did, what do you think would happen once the residents of the other continent found out?”

“Oh,” all four girls gasped.

“Precisely! We would be demonized for driving a wedge between the four saviors of the world—the divine messenger, the holy knight, the arch-saint, and the grand sorcerer. We would go down as the most nefarious villains of the century for stealing the divine messenger for ourselves! Though bringing Miss Mile home to Brandel would at least earn us domestic acclaim, as soon as we took a step beyond its borders, our lives would be in danger at the hands of her most radical zealots. We would be labeled enemies of the divine!”

The scenario Marcela described was all too plausible. The Crimson Vow could say nothing in response.

“Moreover, even if you were to be separated from Miss Mile, none of you intend to return home, keep your heads down, and manage your territories, correct? You would prefer to live out your ideal of an adventurous hunter lifestyle on a continent where no one recognizes you, yes? And of course, you have no intention of parting ways with Miss Mile.”

The Crimson Vow still had no rebuttal for her.

“If that’s all true,” Mile cut in, “why did you come here, Miss Marcela?” It was a perfectly reasonable question.

“Because we were worried about you, of course!”

Monika and Aureana bobbed their heads furiously in the background.

Tears began to form in the corners of Mile's eyes. "You were...?"

"Yeah, right!" Reina butted in. "I bet they got tired of governing their lands or managing their constant flood of marriage proposals, so they took a page out of our book and made a run for it!"

"Hey!"

Suddenly, the members of the Wonder Trio wouldn't meet Mile's eyes. Apparently, Reina had been right on the money.

"I can't imagine there are many girls your age who'd *want* to be swamped with paperwork or get stuck in a political marriage. Especially since you've gotten a taste of what it's like to live a fun, unfettered life. Plus, you're perfectly capable of supporting yourselves without husbands."

Mile, Pauline, and Mavis all nodded along, everything suddenly making sense. They had taken the exact same route themselves, so of course they understood this line of thinking.

All three members of the Wonder Trio were the same age as Mile. This meant they were younger than both Reina and Pauline, to say nothing of Mavis.

"What's your plan from here on out, then?" Mile asked them.

Marcela held her head high and declared, "We plan to bring you along for a thrilling tour of this continent!"

"That is the exact opposite of what you just said!!!" Reina, Mavis, and Pauline yelled in reply.

"Shh! Keep it down! We're going to get yelled at by the innkeeper or the other guests!"

"Whoops!"

In truth, any noise was mostly Mile's fault for neglecting to put up a sound barrier. She had erroneously believed that this would be a normal, no-drama conversation. She took the next moment to hastily throw up a barrier, so now the group could scream to their heart's content.

"I-It's not what you're thinking," Marcela continued. "We don't intend to take Miss Mile from you. We simply wish to accompany

her as well.”

Reina, Mavis, and Pauline all fell silent. Mile looked pleased as punch.

“A seven-person party would be way too big!”

“Five mages, one swordswoman, and one magical swordswoman? That’s so unbalanced!”

“Two merchants and a whole party of nobles…” Pauline muttered, though that wasn’t quite accurate. Monika was the daughter of a merchant, but she wasn’t one herself. Also, Monika and Aureana were baronetesses. Because this was a hereditary title rather than a noble rank, they were technically still commoners…though they were just about the closest a commoner could come to the nobility.

Regardless, the noble status of anyone in the group hardly mattered in a distant land where no one recognized them.

Nitpicking aside, the three members of the Crimson Vow still had some valid points regarding the viability of their parties combining. The Wonder Trio clammed up, seemingly struggling to think of a rebuttal. Until…

“Then we’ll form a clan.”

“Huh?” chorused the Crimson Vow.

The term “clan” was derived from a word that meant a group of families. Among hunters, it denoted a gathering of several parties.

Most of the time, the parties in a clan worked separately, but occasionally they might team up to tackle larger requests, and in the event of an emergency—say, an incoming monster stampede, or an unreasonable demand from someone in power—all parties belonging to a clan would join forces to confront the problem with might and main. There were various potential perks to being part of the clan even under ordinary conditions, such as information exchanges, member swaps, mock battles, and financial and personnel support.

Of course, there were plenty of potential downsides, too. If one party gave another a loan, they risked never being repaid if something happened to their fellow clan members. Or a member of an allied party might turn to crime, thereby discrediting the

entire group. There was also the possibility of interparty swindling, the poaching of the most talented members of one party by another, and even the danger of romantic entanglements within the clan. Still, most of those risks existed whether or not one joined a clan—they were simply liabilities of interacting with other hunters.

"I'm of the mind that our two parties ought to work together as a clan. We don't need to stick together all the time. In fact, we should probably work separately in most cases, simply enjoying a rapport as sister parties. However, we can occasionally team up to do larger jobs together and sometimes even lend each other our forces."

All four members of the Crimson Vow were wide-eyed at Marcela's—or rather, the whole Wonder Trio's—proposal.

"Allying yourselves with us would also allow you to enjoy the benefits of both the Princess Transport System and Wonder Trio Transport System I mentioned earlier. Once one of our number is transported back to the old continent via the Princess Transport System, we will have the means to send the rest of you back and forth between the two continents without informing either princess. As soon as we are all assembled on the same continent, we will need the princesses to facilitate the process again, but we already explained to them how the system is meant to work. In fact, this is the entire reason why we granted the princesses shared storage magic, so they have no right to object. As long as they don't realize that it's the saviors of the world they're smuggling, there should be no issues. And this will allow you to visit your families with relative ease."

The members of the Crimson Vow could think of no objections to this.

Neither Reina nor Mile had a family to visit. Still, they had friends and benefactors they wanted to see and lands to govern. The deal was even sweeter for Mavis and Pauline, who did have families back home.

Of course, this wasn't necessarily the Crimson Vow's only option. They could always ask Kragon to help them get from one continent to another; however, they were reluctant to pester him too frequently, and even with his help, the trip was a lengthy one.

The Storage Warp method developed by Marcela was a game changer.

"....."

Marcela's proposal was tantalizing, and the Wonder Trio's clever application of their acquired ability boggled the mind. Reina, Pauline, Mavis, and even Mile were all at a complete loss for words.

Chapter 139:
Clan

"I'M CERTAINLY INTERESTED in being able to pop over to see Little Lenny whenever we want, especially if I can also keep an eye on Mariette to make sure she doesn't get forced into any unwanted engagements…"

Mile still didn't know that Mariette had gone to see Mile-001 for advice on that very topic. The Wonder Trio had yet to bring it up, since it was hardly an urgent matter.

"But our means of transportation on the other continent would be limited," Mile mumbled under her breath.

"Huh? What do you mean?" asked Reina.

"Oh, I was just thinking that, even if we can instantaneously travel between continents, it will still take a few days to travel from the capital of Brandel, which would be our entry point, to the capital of Tils, your domains, or your parents' homes. I wouldn't want us to waste that much time trekking around the continent if we could avoid it…"

"True…"

The members of the Wonder Trio were all from locations quite near to the capital of Brandel.

In Marcela's case, it was a few days' journey to the lands that she and her parents governed, but they had a second residence in the capital. Her father had been promoted from baron to viscount, so Marcela had purchased a fairly lavish mansion to serve as their joint capital residence, figuring there was no need to have a place of her very own. (Marcela's family was still struggling to move past their penny-pinching ways, but they understood the need to keep up appearances now that they were viscounts.)

It would take Aureana only a few days by carriage to reach the village where her parents lived, and Monika's family business was located in the domain belonging to Marcela's parents. In short, none of them would have a long journey home from the capital.

It was different for the members of the Crimson Vow, whose territories were scattered in various directions around the capital

of Tils. Mile's shrine and her domain were located on the very outskirts of the country. The Marquisate of Ascham (formerly the fief of Ascham) was located in the kingdom of Brandel. And then there were the Servants of the Goddess and the various other friends the girls had made over the course of their travels. The orphanages where they had helped out. The Crimson Vow had a lot of places to visit on the old continent, and they were all too far apart. Even if they could warp instantly between the two continents, as long as the Wonder Trio's entry point was limited to Princess Morena's room in the kingdom of Brandel, the Crimson Vow would spend far too much time in transit.

Of course, there was always the option of one or two of the Wonder Trio warping via the Princess Transport System, sneaking out of the royal palace, and releasing the Crimson Vow in an alternate locale, but that still wasn't ideal.

"Hmm... I wonder if there's a better solution."

Mile could think of several different methods of high-speed travel. Say, flying through the sky. Or building a car. The nanomachines would be sure to whine at her about prohibited requests, but the Slow Walker would manufacture her any vehicle she asked for regardless of restrictions. And since it was already mining and refining minerals from underground deposits, she wouldn't have to worry about metal shortages getting in the way.

Still, we can't just drive a car down the roads here... And we don't have a runway for an airplane...

In actual fact, any airplane built by the Slow Walker probably wouldn't *need* a runway, but it was hard for Mile to shake her past-life sensibilities. She ultimately abandoned the idea of building a vehicle, which was the right call, considering the commotion it would cause if the inhabitants of this world were to witness such an invention in action. A runway was really the least of the obstacles involved.

"I don't mind asking Kragon to give us a taxi ride every once in a while, but I really don't know about employing him as our personal chauffeur."

Few humans would have the guts to appoint an elder dragon their designated driver.

Another option was for Mile to run ahead with her "falling horizontally" trick, then grant the others access to a shared

inventory, but she went ahead and nixed that idea, too. She was trying to encourage the Crimson Vow to master proper storage magic on their own, rather than cheating like the Wonder Trio.

"A maiden's time is precious! We can't waste multiple days on travel! Oh, what to do?" Mile groaned, clutching her head.

"The cost of purchasing and maintaining carriages and horses would be no issue for us these days, but we wouldn't have many opportunities to put them to use. I'd feel bad for the horses if we left them to graze most of the time," said Mavis. "Horses weren't meant to spend their lives lounging in a pasture without any work to do."

"Actually, that sounds like a great deal for the horses..."

"Agreed!"

Mavis was a little miffed to hear her party dismiss her logic outright.

"We could always have the Scavengers carry us on a palanquin, scuttling down the roads at high—"

"Rejected!" the rest of the party yelled at Mile.

Not only would something like this draw too much attention, it would be mortifying. Worse still, passing hunters and soldiers would likely assume the young girls had been kidnapped by monsters and run over with swords swinging.

Marcela had to cut in. "Excuse me, Miss Mile, but could you kindly continue this discussion among yourselves at a later date?" The conversation had strayed wildly from the topic at hand.

"Uh, sorry about that..."

"At any rate, I do hope you will consider our offer. I think it would be to your own benefit."

"....."

Marcela had a point. Still, the girls didn't want to give her an answer without talking it over first. This was yet another discussion best saved for later.

"Tomorrow, we will explain everything there is to know about the capital and the surrounding area. In particular, the matter of the local monsters' superior intelligence..."

"Typical!" the Crimson Vow exclaimed in exasperation.

The Wonder Trio had yet to explore the continent beyond this town and the capital, yet they already had a grasp of the most essential facts. The Crimson Vow couldn't help but be a little impressed.

"The day after tomorrow, let us return to the capital together. Although—" Marcela abruptly hung her head, looking uncomfortable. Realizing what she was about to reveal, Monika and Aureana, too, averted their eyes. "On that note, I do have some unfortunate news."

"Huh? What's up?" asked a puzzled Mile.

"I omitted this part in my earlier explanation, but when Sir Kragon brought us to this continent, he didn't drop us off somewhere out of sight and let us walk the rest of the way to the capital. Rather, we, erm..."

Marcela was usually one to speak her mind, so Mile was starting to find all this hemming and hawing strange. Until...

"We landed right in the middle of the royal palace gardens, and it turned into something of a debacle. Rather a few of the palace residents saw our faces amid all the chaos... So if you were to encounter a palace official in our company, we might draw a bit of attention."

"You WHAAAAT?!"

"That sounds like it would draw more than a 'bit' of attention!"

"A-a-ah..."

Reina, Pauline, and Mavis all took turns expressing their dismay.

Mile, meanwhile, gave Marcela an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Aww! Even after all this time, you can still be a little ditzy..."

"You are the absolute last person to call anyone here ditzy!" Marcela shouted.

Monika and Aureana nodded in emphatic agreement.

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“So, what do we want to do?”

The Crimson Vow had gone back to their room, agreeing to meet up with the Wonder Trio again the next morning. They would be expected to give their reply to the clan proposal then, so they had to make their decision tonight.

“I’ll let everyone else say their piece first,” offered Mile.

She knew that if she came out and said what she wanted, it would be harder for everyone else to offer an opposing opinion. The rest of the party nodded, appreciating Mile’s approach.

“Marcela already listed all the pros and cons for us,” said Reina. “The advantages are pretty significant for us, and if we’re teaming up with the Wonder Trio, I don’t think we have to worry about any of the disadvantages too much.”

Everyone else nodded emphatically.

“If anything, I’d say the worst part is that being in a clan takes away a little of our autonomy. We’re used to up and leaving without a word to anyone else, but if we form the clan, we’ll have to make sure to give them advance notice before we hit the road, which is a bit of a hassle. Still, it’s not like we’ll need their *permission* or anything, and it’s their choice whether to come along or not. And we could always disband the clan, if there’s some place we want to go and they’re really set against it. It’s not like we’re going to be entering some kind of unbreakable contract. Heck, we may as well consider this a trial period.”

Reina actually seemed quite open to the idea of forming a clan.

“That sounds good to me,” said Pauline. “There are a lot of upsides and not too many downsides. Besides, it’s like you said, Reina. If it doesn’t work out for whatever reason, we can just disband the clan then. I see no reason to object.”

“I agree,” said Mavis. “And you, Mile?”

It was clear what Mile thought. She was nodding along like a bobblehead.

“Are we decided, then?” asked Reina.

“Yeah!!!” the rest of the party chorused.

The next morning over breakfast, the Crimson Vow officially accepted the Wonder Trio’s offer to form a clan. Then, they spent

the whole day chatting about the new continent with their very chipper new clanmates.

***

“Whaaaat?! The ocean is home to schools of monsters?!”

“This continent has a village of elder dragons, and you’ve already made connections there?!”

Marcela and friends were stunned to hear the Crimson Vow’s account of their recent adventures.

Mile and friends were likewise stunned to hear the Wonder Trio’s tales of their time with a certain elder dragon.

“No way! Kragon gave such a generous gift to the orphans of the capital?!”

“I didn’t realize Kragon had a soft spot for kids…”

“I’m not convinced he thinks of them as kids,” said Mavis. “Wouldn’t the feeling be closer to a human who finds small animals cute? Kind of like how we feel about baby birds or newborn kittens? Something tells me he doesn’t just respect you because you’re the divine messenger, Mile—you fall into the same category. You’re more of a pet to him than anything.”

Mile was shocked. “Huh?”

“I mean, based on what we just heard, it sounds like it had less to do with helping orphans and more to do with children being better at cleaning out the gunk between his scales… Kids have smaller hands, so they can get in all the tight crevices, and he might not want grown adults scrubbing at his sensitive skin.”

“That does make sense,” Pauline agreed. Leave it to Mavis to analyze the situation objectively.

“Well, I suppose I understand where he’s coming from,” said Marcela. “She *does* have a cute, dewy-eyed quality to her.”

“Excuuuuse me?!” roared Mile.

Counting the time she had spent as Adele before regaining her memory, Mile had lived almost thirty-three years as Misato, Adele, and Mile. This meant her cumulative mental age was twice that of nearly everyone else in the conversation. Being called “cute” was tolerable, but “dewy-eyed” was over the line.

Conveniently enough, Mile would never have to worry about anyone suspecting she might be older than she claimed—although the girl herself wasn't sure if that was actually a good thing.

"Setting this trivial matter aside…"

"It's not trivial!"

"Let's discuss our living arrangements in the capital." Marcela pushed the conversation forward, firmly tuning out Mile's protest. She certainly knew how to handle her friend. "Booking rooms for seven people at an inn seems ill-advised, so I was thinking that perhaps we ought to rent a house. Call it a party pad or a clan cabin or what have you. Our inven—*ahem*, storage magic provides us an easy means to make money, and we have ample gold coins and materials from home tucked away. The gold coins are only worth the metal they're made of here, but they should still fetch a fair price."

The Crimson Vow agreed with that assessment. With a group of seven, they would need to book two four-person rooms in an inn. There was no guarantee that the average inn would always have two rooms available, and they would all need to gather in one room for group discussions, which would get pretty cramped. The cost of lodgings and food for seven people would inevitably add up. Given all that, it would probably be both cheaper and more convenient to rent a house.

Besides, at an inn, they wouldn't be able to use Mile's quality crafted bathhouse, portable toilet, or soft and fluffy beds, nor would they have the chance to enjoy her homemade cooking. And so…

"Motion approved!!!" the Crimson Vow shouted.

***

"By the way, do you three know how to cook?" Mile asked the Wonder Trio as their group of seven was walking to the capital the next day.

They had seven mouths to feed now. It would be a lot of work for Mile to cook all three meals every day.

Mile's own culinary skills were at the level of a hobbyist. She hadn't mastered any fancy peeling techniques, nor was she an expert handler of a kitchen knife. Her physical strength made it easy for her to cut things, but the cross-sections rarely came out looking like works of art.

What she did have was a liberal supply of rare herbs and spices, some magic to facilitate the cooking process, and her Earthly culinary knowledge. With those advantages, she ranked among the most skilled chefs in the whole world. It was cheating, really.

Of course, she knew the culinary skills of each member of the Crimson Vow already. Pauline was on the level of the average adult. She could whip up a decent home-cooked meal. She was no gourmet chef, but if she ever made something for a boyfriend, he would probably rave about it.

Mavis was, to use a Japanese analogy, like a first-year junior high student trying her hand at cooking. She could make a very plain, amateur, by-the-book effort, but it wouldn't taste especially great.

And as for Reina…

If she cooked anything, it would be a one-hit kill. The world would be destroyed by her culinary incompetence.

"Hmm. I suppose I would put myself on the level of the average commoner housewife," Marcela replied.

"Huh?!"

The members of the Crimson Vow cocked their heads in surprise, though Monika and Aureana didn't look particularly astonished. Obviously they would be familiar with Marcela's cooking skills after months spent traveling together.

"A-a-aren't you supposed to be the daughter of a nobleman?!" Reina sputtered.

"Yes. Until half a year ago, I was the third daughter of a baron, and now I am the head of a newly established house of viscounts."

"Then how are you so good at cooking?! It makes no sense!"

Marcela's eyes took on a distant look. "Despite our noble status, we were still poor. We were, in fact, a good deal worse off

than Monika's family, a medium-sized merchant house with a steady base of customers. We employed the bare minimum of staff, and we couldn't very well have Mother do the work of a servant, so the task fell to me."

"Uh, sorry I asked..."

Reina realized that she had forced Marcela to air her noble family's dirty laundry. Her apology sounded genuinely contrite.

"I've helped out around my family's shop," Monika volunteered. "You know, carrying sacks of grain, carrying sacks of grain, carrying sacks of grain, and carrying sacks of grain..."

"In other words, we should count you out, huh?" Mile concluded with a rueful grin.

"While my parents were working in the fields, I had to take care of my younger brother and sister, and that included doing the cooking," said Aureana. "I got my start at six years old. Later on, I was enlisted to help in the fields as well, but I remained on cooking duty..."

For a moment, Mile thought to praise Aureana for her culinary prowess, but she clamped her mouth shut. Given the context, this might not be something she was particularly proud of.

"W-well," Mile forged ahead, "that means we've got five people who can cook, and Miss Monika just never had the chance to try before, so I bet she can pick it up in no time!"

"Why only Monika? What about me?"

"Ack!"

The Wonder Trio didn't know to worry, but the three other members of the Crimson Vow could sense that this conversation was heading in a dangerous direction. Offending Reina was pretty bad on its own, but what the three members of the Crimson Vow truly feared was the thought of their fellow party member in the kitchen. If Monika learned how to cook, Reina would be the only one excluded from the rotation. Given her strong sense of duty and intense fear of being left out, Reina would never tolerate being the only one shut out from meal duty.

It's all over...

We'll die...

The world as we know it will be destroyed…

The Wonder Trio shot the Crimson Vow a blank look, oblivious to the reason for their expressions of gloom and doom.

***

As they had set out immediately after breakfast, the seven members of the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio managed to arrive at the capital before dark. Their hunter's licenses got them all through the gates without issue, though they did have to wait in a bit of a line.

Even without their credentials as hunters, it was hard to imagine the gatekeepers detaining a bunch of cute young girls who clearly had no criminal intentions. It helped that five out of seven of them were sporting mage equipment. They might have been young, but they were clearly skilled at magic. Besides, they were well dressed and well equipped, neat and tidy. Definitely not the type that the gatekeepers would take the time and effort to investigate.

"So this is the kingdom's capital city," Mile remarked. She looked around the streets wide-eyed, her out-of-towner status on full display.

Some rubbernecking aside, Reina, Pauline, and Mavis were doing their best not to embarrass themselves. If they made it too obvious that they were country bumpkins, it would be like issuing an invitation to pickpockets, kidnappers, and human traffickers. Then again, a group of seven girls in hunter gear were probably not at too much risk of being targeted…

Since the Wonder Trio had begun their journey in the capital, they were slightly more at ease than their companions. Still, they weren't particularly familiar with the area. They had really only gone straight from the royal palace to the city gates and had spent no more than a few dozen minutes in the city beyond the palace walls.

"First things first. We ought to find ourselves an inn."

Despite their plans to rent a house, they couldn't very well barge into a real estate agency and get that done within the evening. At the very least, they needed temporary lodgings for the

night. After that, they would pop over to the guild to see what was going on before dinnertime.

For their first meal in the capital, the girls didn't plan to settle for whatever was served at the inn. They would check out the area and find themselves some quality cuisine.

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Ding-a-ling!

The members of the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio stepped inside the capital branch of the Hunters' Guild. This was new territory for all seven of them, since the Wonder Trio had waited to register as hunters until they had arrived at the suburb where the two parties had met up.

Unsurprisingly, the sudden entrance of seven young women attracted some attention.

In fact, it attracted quite a bit of attention.

Usually, parties of C-rank or below consisted of four to six people. Obviously, parties of three were not unheard of, but they were rare. A "party" of two was regarded as a different beast altogether, generally referred to as a duo, pair, or partnership instead. Those tended to come in the form of married couples or lovers.

Parties of seven or more were difficult to manage due to concerns of mobility, adaptability, teamwork, and finances, and the perks typically weren't significant enough to balance out the drawbacks. There was also more potential for interpersonal issues to arise in bigger groups. Thus, it was very unusual to form a large party unless you were B-rank or higher. More mature hunters had both the ability and earnings to overcome at least some of these problems and could focus their efforts on cultivating their younger members.

Still, parties of that size usually ended up operating like clans, splitting up into multiple teams or changing their member lineup depending on the nature of the job. And even when they did work all together, they would usually send a few representatives to pick up requests from the guild instead of crowding the building. The arrival of a party made up of seven

young girls, most of them equipped like mages, absolutely broke the mold.

The girls had traveled far and wide, yet the only other all-female party they had ever encountered was the Servants of the Goddess, which had been a standard five-member party until Leatoria bumped their number up to six. Plus, their only members capable of magic were Lacelina, their mage, and Leatoria, who could double as a close-range fighter with her giant club. This was another way the addition of Leatoria was also a happy accident. Their original plan had been to stay a five-person party with one mage, which would have been much more typical.

All this is proof of how rare it was to find an all-female, C-rank-or-lower party with seven or more members. Gender and number aside, any kind of party with more than one mage was already unusual. Mages' higher survival rate and memorable talents sometimes created the illusion that there were a fair number of them around, but in reality, they were rare. Most parties would be fortunate to have even one magic user, and if they were lucky enough for said mage to be a young, beautiful girl, they ought to be thanking the gods each night at bedtime.

Considering all this, a party of seven, more than half of whom were minors, all of whom were gorgeous young girls, and the majority of whom were mages was about as rare as a male calico cat (one in every thirty thousand) or a red diamond (less than thirty currently known to exist on Earth). Plus, they had an abundance of mages, who were always in high demand but short supply. A headcount and job imbalance that made it hard to believe they could be a single party. And each of them were young and pretty.

All eyes—those of hunters and guild staff alike—were on the seven girls as they made their way to the reception counter.

"We're the Crimson Vow, and we'd like to request an application to transfer home branches," Mavis announced. "Starting today, we'll be hunters of the capital branch. We look forward to working with you!"

Each of the four members of the Crimson Vow dipped her head in a polite bow.

"And we are the Wonder Trio," Marcela declared. "We will likewise be relocating our home branch to the capital. Your

assistance in the matter would be noted and appreciated.” With that, the three members of the Wonder Trio bowed as well.

Marcela’s was a slightly haughty tone for a newbie hunter to take with a guild employee, but she so clearly had the aura of a noblewoman that no one dared question her.

Only individual hunters and parties needed to be registered with the guild. Clans were strictly an arrangement between parties, in which the guild had no business getting involved. Any sharing or joining of forces was treated as temporary backup. For this reason, neither Mavis nor Marcela had mentioned the clan.

Of course, young, female hunters were a welcome addition to any guild. Their presence motivated the men and made it easier for other women considering becoming hunters. Female hunters also presented valuable potential marriage partners for the men of the guild, the great majority of whom were bachelors. No one would ever dare belittle a lady hunter, not even the ones who stuck to chores and herb gathering and avoided battle with monsters.

What’s more, the majority of these girls were equipped with mage gear. Even if they could do nothing more than produce water, that was an incredibly valuable skill. If they could use healing magic, the competition to recruit them was going to be fierce. And if they could cook, well…men would be throwing themselves at their feet.

As such, the whole guild was staring intently at the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio. The girls simply ignored their new fans.

By now, they were used to this.

***

“We’ll use this inn as our base for the next few days,” said Marcela. “If all seems well in the city, we can rent a house here and make it our clan home. Any objections?”

“None!” Her six companions were in agreement.

After submitting their branch transfer applications at the guild, both parties had scanned the information board, checked the jobs to get a sense for what kind of requests were available, and made a quick exit, gracefully dodging the numerous parties

that tried to approach them. Then, after dinner at an attractive restaurant, they all gathered in the Crimson Vow's room at the inn (which they had booked prior to heading to the guild) for a clan meeting.

Neither party had built credit in the city yet, but as long as they paid the rent in advance and put down a security deposit, they were unlikely to have problems renting a house. They wouldn't need to provide a copy of their family register or find a guarantor or anything like that. As a trade-off, if their overdue rent ever exceeded the amount of their security deposit, they would be evicted without further notice, and all their household possessions would be seized and sold off.

Here, landlords were given firm protection under the law, while tenants were at a disadvantage. It made sense, given the context. Merchants could always take off in the night or move to another town for business—never to return. Hunters might be killed by monsters. Soldiers were liable to die in wars. Guards could always be cut down by the criminals or drunks they set out to apprehend. When tenants were likely to disappear at any given moment, there had to be safeguards against landlords losing money, or none of them would stay in the business of renting out houses.

Ironically, this was to the benefit of the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio. As long as the rent was paid in advance, even a little girl of undetermined background with no sponsors to speak of could rent a house without any issue.

Easy as it might be to obtain a lease, no member of either party was brave enough to rent a house without first getting a sense for the surrounding city. If the quality of life here proved poor, or if the guild staff, nobility, or royalty turned out to be a bunch of morons, they would simply pack up and move on to another kingdom. This was far from the only country on the continent; it was simply where the Crimson Vow had first happened to land because of its location on the eastern edge of the landmass. It bordered the sea, which was a bonus, but that was all it really had going for it. Plenty of other nations lined the coast, and the hunters didn't particularly mind staying in a landlocked country, either. After all, if they ever needed to stock up on fish, Mile could always fall horizontally toward a seaside town and return with plenty.

True, moving elsewhere would mean that the Wonder Trio would have to trek all the way back to this capital to use the Princess Transport System; however, they hadn't exactly been planning to utilize it with any frequency. Besides, if Mile developed a method of transport to get them across the old continent, they could always use that over here as well.

"Any house we rent needs a courtyard where we can set up Mile's bathhouse and toilet," said Reina. "Also, it should have a big kitchen. We'll need to cook for seven every meal, and that way we can make big batches of food and keep them in Mile's storage."

Mavis had a slightly bigger appetite than the average girl, and Mile and Reina's appetites were downright enormous. As a result, they would actually need to make a lot more than seven people's worth of food.

"It needs one big dining room, at least two other multipurpose rooms for each party, and ideally seven bedrooms," Reina went on.

"No house with a courtyard is going to have space for three big chambers!" Mile interjected.

"Does it have to be a courtyard? Can't it just be a backyard with a tall enough fence to keep anyone from looking in?" Mavis suggested.

Reina got a little defensive. "Courtyard, backyard, what's the difference?! Call it whatever you want!"

"Um, actually, they have completely different definitio—"

"It doesn't matter, Mile!" Pauline cut her off before the debate escalated any further.

The Wonder Trio shot her a withering look. "That's your most insufferable habit, Miss Mile. You truly never change..."

"Huh? What did I say?"

Mile remained as oblivious as ever.

"If we're living in a proper house rather than an inn or school dormitory, I would prefer not to sleep four to a room. Let's set our limit at two to a room at most," Marcela proposed. "Of course, the ideal scenario is that everyone gets their own private bedroom, but I doubt we will easily find a single-family home that meets our criteria. That narrows our options to some kind of merchant

house, a former inn, or a particularly small, rundown estate once owned by a house of poor knight barons… Depending on what's available, we may have to look outside the city center, or the rent will get too expensive. I'm certain both our parties could afford a little extra, but living somewhere too nice might draw attention to ourselves."

"Fair point," Mavis agreed. "We're supposed to be newbie hunters. We've got to put in the work to sell our cover story."

Flaunting their excess of power and wealth would attract another swarm of pests, and the girls were sick and tired of dealing with people who wanted to take advantage of them.

"Well, once we've decided to stay here long-term, we can go look for a real estate agency. There's no point in discussing our dream house if no such properties are even available."

Following Aureana's very sensible lead, the girls agreed to table the discussion.

***

A week had passed since the new clan had arrived at the capital. The Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio had completed a few jobs in the immediate vicinity of the city, and both parties had earned a measure of trust as promising youngsters with consistent, reliable track records.

Unsurprisingly, there was already intense competition among parties hoping to recruit the newcomers. Particularly among those attempting to catch the eye of the Wonder Trio…

With two frontline fighters, the Crimson Vow was assumed to be a relatively balanced, established party. It helped that Mavis and Pauline both appeared to be adults, and the whole party had already achieved a C-rank.

The Wonder Trio was, as far as anyone could tell, an underage friend group with a horribly unbalanced composition of three mages and zero frontline fighters. Plus, they were F-rank—novices among novices. They had clearly only been hunters for a period of time between few days and a few months. The general assumption was that they were a bunch of wet-behind-the-ears newbies who had blown all their savings on mage apparel and

supplemented with secondhand staves and daggers. Both those with unsavory motives and those without were desperate to bring these girls into their own party and take them “under their wing.”

Of course, the fact that Marcela had already made her enormous storage space public knowledge made the members of the Wonder Trio all the more attractive as potential recruits.

Although the party was steadily working their way through requests, they had to stick to the jobs that F-ranks were eligible for—most of which they could have done with both eyes closed. Needless to say, none of those jobs involved exterminating orcs or ogres. This meant that the Crimson Vow remained the only ones in the capital who knew the Wonder Trio’s true capabilities.

Like Marcela, Mile had disclosed the existence of her storage magic, making her another prime target for recruitment efforts. As a mage who could fight on the front lines *and* keep things in storage, she was a hot commodity. Still, seeing as the Crimson Vow was an established party, most hunters assumed that the Wonder Trio, which had “barely found its feet,” would be more vulnerable to poaching.

It certainly didn’t help matters that Marcela was clearly of noble birth. No one was sure whether she was a current or former aristocrat, but either was fine by them.

Little did the hunters know that the Crimson Vow were all noblewomen, and even held a higher rank than Marcela. Even if they had made this fact public, no one would have believed them, and in truth, it didn’t much matter what status they held on some distant continent.

The point is, all the girls were receiving some invitations, but as long as they didn’t hide the existence of their “storage magic”—probably even if they did—that was bound to happen anywhere they went. Keeping their storage a secret wasn’t particularly practical, anyway, since it would mean they couldn’t carry large amounts of game, or use their tents, toilet, bathhouse, or fresh ingredients around other hunters or during escort missions. The benefits of using their storage outweighed the cost.

Perhaps because this was the capital, crime seemed like less of an issue than in the other cities. No one had tried to extort them with threats or violence thus far, and based on the information they’d gathered by treating the veteran hunters to

ale, the king and upper nobility sounded relatively decent. Of course, that wasn't to say there were no questionable aristocrats hanging around, but things were apparently better here than in some of the surrounding countries.

As for the most influential merchant families...well...there was no such thing as a country full of nothing but honest, upstanding merchants, and if there were, it would probably be destined for ruin. That wasn't worth dwelling on.

In summary, the kingdom and its capital received a passing grade.

***

"I believe our second option would be most appropriate," said Marcela. "What are your thoughts, ladies?"

"Yes. I agree that's the best choice," said Reina. "Everyone good with that?"

The rest of the party members nodded in agreement.

Once they had given the area their stamp of approval, the girls found a real estate agent to give them a tour of potential properties. Of all the places they had seen, one appeared to be particularly promising.

The property in question was a former inn, with several guest rooms of uniform size. This was one point in its favor, since these rooms made for perfect bedrooms. As an inn, it also had a spacious kitchen, which would make it easy to cook large batches of food to store in Mile's inventory. It even came pre-stocked with large pots, pans, and platters.

The former dining area on the first floor provided an ideal spot for everyone to gather for meals. It was quite spacious and even had room for the blackboard and other tools Mile had made for meeting purposes.

There was also a rather large backyard, originally meant for drying laundry or giving guests in combat professions a place to work out and stay in shape. The outdoor space was big enough to fit Mile's portable bathhouse and toilet, and it also had a well. Mavis could use the excess space to do her own training or to give the Wonder Trio sword-fighting lessons. The existing hedge was a

bit short to completely block the view from the street, but they could easily solve that problem by building a wall with earth magic, which would have the added bonus of fortifying their clan house's defenses. When the time came to vacate the premises, they could use earth magic again to put everything back how it was.

Several of the other properties they toured were too big and expensive to be appropriate for a party of young hunters, particularly one like the Wonder Trio. Others had the opposite problem and were too small to have a sufficient number of rooms or a satisfactorily big yard.

The real estate agent was likely expecting the girls to pick a smaller property. A common technique in the business was to show off two big properties, then two small ones, and finally pitch an option of just the right size. In this instance, however, the girls had ended up settling on one of the two "big ones" instead.

The other oversized option had been blatantly beyond the means of the average hunter. It wasn't unheard of for the children of noble or rich families to become hunters as a pastime, and the presence of the obviously well-off Marcela and Mavis might explain why the clan had no shortage of coin despite the ages of its members. Yet even if they had avoided too many raised eyebrows, a youngster who appeared to have deep pockets rarely led to anything good. As it was, there was little to be done about the two ladies' innate aura of nobility. At least the real estate agency couldn't care less about the background of its renters as long as they paid their rent and security deposit in advance.

Their place would be a bit far from the city center—which was where the Hunters' Guild, Merchants' Guild, and shopping district all were—but there was a market in the vicinity. Plus, living away from downtown had its perks, such as cheaper rent and less noise. Around the temple, the bells that announced the time were quite loud, and drunkards always made an unbearable ruckus outside the guilds and bars.

"We're going with option two," Reina told the surprised real estate agent.

The girls weren't planning to buy the place. They could always move if they didn't like it. As a result, they hadn't actually

spent much time stressing over the decision.

In contrast to the average household in modern Japan, the two parties didn't have much stuff to pack. Besides, Mile and the Wonder Trio could use their inventories to take care of the whole moving process in an instant. This significantly lowered the psychological hurdle of finding a new place to live.

The expense was a different matter. In order to secure the house, the girls were expected to put down an advance payment of the monthly rent and the security deposit—that is, a sum of money held in trust for as long as they occupied the property. As already mentioned, this was meant to protect the landlord from suffering losses due to unpaid rent, tenant abandonment, or significant damage to the property. The security deposit was equivalent to half a year's rent.

It was a significant investment, but there was no getting around it. Even if the tenant had the best of intentions, in a world like this one, one had to prepare for the worst. It was not uncommon for even the youngest and healthiest hunter to leave for work one day and simply never come back. Hence, advance payments and security deposits were the norm among landlords.

The reason for the real estate agent's surprise was simple. Given their age, these girls had to be newbies—and yet, they had nonchalantly settled on a very expensive property, and they didn't seem the least bit concerned about how they were going to pay for it. Still, hunters came in many types—including the playacting children of nobles or rich families who moonlighted as hunters to indulge their youthful fantasies, or the so-called "tourist parties" who hired veteran hunters and set off on luxurious adventures.

Likely concluding that the girls were an example of one of these, the real estate agent signed the contract without too many misgivings. As long as the rental company received the security deposit and advance rent payment, they had no reason to care whether their tenants died or ran away.

***

"This is our castle!"

"This is where our legend on this continent begins!"

“How many times do I have to remind you? We don’t want to become a legend! We’ll have to move to another continent again!”

“Ha ha ha ha!”

The Crimson Vow were being their usual selves. As for the Wonder Trio…

“Our first order of business ought to be cleaning up. After that, we can focus on finding ourselves furniture.”

“For a start, we’ll need beds, cookware, dishes, and cutlery. We can use what came with the house for now and gradually swap those items out for equipment that better suits our needs. Oh, but before that, we need to set up the toilet and bathhouse. Next comes checking the light fixtures…”

“The well probably hasn’t been used for a while, so we’ll need to draw some water and clean it out. We should also put up a privacy screen in the backyard…”

Clearly, they were a bit more practical than Mile’s team.

If you added the parties together and divided by two, you might end up with just the right balance of outlandishness and pragmatism. The Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio were proving to be a very good match.

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“The bathhouse and toilet are all finished!” Mile announced, pretending to wipe sweat from her brow. In reality, she hadn’t had to do much physical labor.



The amenities she had set up weren't the ones she always kept in her inventory—the fortified, portable bathhouse and toilet encased in huge walls of stone—but brand-new creations. They were both fully equipped against peeping toms and sudden ambushes. Since the group had grown in size, she had even added a second toilet stall to the restroom. Both were flushed with water drawn from a water tower she had built in the house's backyard.

Although everyone except Mavis could produce their own water, it would be a pain to use magic each time they wanted to drink a glass of water, cook, wash up, or do the dishes. With magic, it was sometimes difficult to control the amount of water that one produced, which could be a bit messy. One solution might have been to keep some kind of vessel on hand for all their necessities, but that was too unhygienic for Mile to bear. It was much more convenient to have a water tower.

The tower Mile created was tall enough to supply water to the second floor of the house, and its tank was refilled using magic rather than by pumping water from the well. The amount of water that remained in the tank was displayed on a screen in the kitchen, and when it fell below a certain level, whoever noticed first would be in charge of filling it up. Mavis was exempt from this system because she wasn't a mage, but Monika and Aureana were expected to participate despite their weaker magic abilities. They were to treat it as another part of their training and put forth their best effort to replenish the tank.

Between the water tower, the running water it provided, and Mile's flush toilets, this property was head and shoulders above the average household in terms of plumbing and hygiene. It even had a bathing facility, which would generally only be found in aristocratic residences and luxury inns. Heck, once you added in Mile's custom-made shampoo, the amenities far surpassed anything you would find in even a noble's mansion.

All wastewater was stored in an underground tank and magically purified. The resulting distilled water was then poured down the street gutter. It was so thoroughly filtered that it would have been perfectly safe to repurpose, but to Mile's eye, the psychological barrier to using former wastewater was too great, no matter how clean it technically was.

“Is your plan to spoil us rotten, Miss Mile?”

“Ha ha! I’ll never be able to stay at a regular inn after this.”

“When I go home to my parents, I won’t be able to stand using our pit toilets.”

The Wonder Trio shuddered at the perils of having to live in any other house.

Indeed, the Wonder Trio weren’t acting as uptight or competitive with the Crimson Vow as they had in the past. Perhaps they were appeased by the fact that both parties were now living together, which allowed them to see their friend daily and know that she was safe and happy. Evidently, that was all it took to satisfy them.

Most of the time, the two parties still worked separately, though the Wonder Trio did occasionally have the option of working with Mile from time to time, whether through joint missions or by mixing and matching their forces with the Crimson Vow’s.

If the Wonder Trio ever did need to borrow some firepower, they were most likely to pull Mavis and Mile as frontline fighters. With those two on their team, they would never need to go looking for another frontline-oriented party to join them on a job.

Reina and Pauline, on the other hand, might be invited to join the Wonder Trio so they all might study one another’s magical techniques. Even Reina was not uninterested in learning from her fellow hunters. The Wonder Trio wasn’t like the Crimson Vow—a party that thrived on brute force and the individual firepower of its members. They had more in common with the Servants of the Goddess, who excelled at teamwork and complemented each other’s strengths. Since the Servants were led by Reina’s idol, Telyusia, it seemed she wanted to learn more about their way of doing things.

Thus, with a brand-new base and all their ducks in a row, the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio commenced full-scale operations on the new continent.

***

“We need a party up in here!” Mile announced out of the blue.

“Huh?” It was almost as though a question mark formed over the heads of all six of her compatriots.

Unsurprisingly, Mavis and Pauline were the first to raise voices of protest.

“Er, wouldn’t that be moving a little too fast? Our two parties have yet to even officially begin working together.”

“I don’t think we’re at that stage yet, Mile…”

“Hm? Sure we are. It’s now or never, as they say!”

“We don’t even know any other parties around here,” said Reina. “Who exactly are you planning to invite?”

“Huh? Invite? What are you talking about? I wasn’t planning to involve any other parties. I was imagining a small, private affair!”

“What?”

“Whaaat?”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

***

“Wait, you meant a party to mark our fresh start? Why didn’t you just say that?!”

“What she said!”

“Oh, honestly…”

“Inadequate explanation can be a recipe for disaster, Mile!”

“Sorry…”

The Wonder Trio watched with helpless smiles as Mile apologized to her companions. For their part, they were usually pretty good at sussing out the meaning behind Mile’s madness. They had inferred what she really meant from the start, so they weren’t particularly surprised by the reveal.

And so, the Wonder Trio watched in amusement as the Crimson Vow raised a fuss over the misunderstanding, perhaps a

bit smug that *they* understood Mile best.

Before long, it was determined the party would take place the next day.

***

The gathering began with a short speech from Mavis, the Crimson Vow's party leader—and thereby, the clan leader as well.

Then, Mile encouraged everyone to eat.

"Bon appétit!"

They were all friends and family now. Any discussions were best had over food and drink.

"What does that even mean?"

The Crimson Vow were used to Mile's odd turns of phrase, but this one was entirely new to the Wonder Trio. They shot her a dubious look, then shrugged, assuming it must have come from one of her folktales. Ultimately, they decided to let it go without any further thought. They were hardly strangers to Mile's little quirks.

A large spread of food and drink had been laid out on a table in the first-floor living-slash-dining room. Mile had done the cooking yesterday and kept the prepared dishes in her inventory. It was always moments like these when she was most grateful for her storage powers. If another hunter or merchant got wind of the breadth of her abilities, they would probably run right up and punch her out of sheer jealousy.

"I say this every time, but your cooking truly is delicious, Miss Mile. It might prove difficult for everyone else on meal duty to measure up," Marcela commented between bites of food.

It was a fair concern. Previously, the Crimson Vow had left almost all the cooking to Mile. When she was away or otherwise occupied, Pauline would occasionally pitch in, but that was the extent of anyone else's efforts. From now on, however, they would all take turns doing the cooking, which meant getting a taste of everyone else's food. Even Monika and Reina were expected to contribute, though they would be on probation for a while as they got the hang of things.

“Oh, well, I’m not a particularly skilled cook,” shrugged Mile. “I just make use of herbs and spices that I’ve collected from every corner of the world, as well as the shoyu, sauces, miso, mayonnaise, salad dressings, and various dipping sauces I spent a long time experimenting to make. Plus, I came up with the idea to make soup stock and invented various new culinary techniques—”

“Humblebrag much?!”

Mile had only meant to lay out the facts, but now she had the entire room yelling at her.

“Wh-what I meant to say is, er, the results of my cooking are a product of the knowledge and flavorings at my disposal, not any special skills of my own. If the rest of you used the same seasonings and copied my methods, I think you could easily whip up food of the same quality. Probably even better, really!”

“Uh…”

It was the honest truth. Mile did not have the God Tongue, nor could she slice a daikon into one thin, long strip. She would never win a cooking competition where salt was the only seasoning allowed. She simply knew about seasonings and culinary techniques from Earth. If she were to share that knowledge with her friends, they could all make the exact same dishes.

Well, except Reina.

***

For the rest of the meal, the Crimson Vow and the Wonder Trio chatted about cooking tips, their future plans, and various other topics. Eventually, they started to get full.

“I think it’s getting to be bath time. Who wants to go in first?” Reina asked.

The bathhouse was rather large, so the girls usually went in a whole party at a time. Which group got to go first varied from day to day.

“Let’s all go in together today!” Mile suggested. “I made our brand-new fortified clan bathhouse bigger than the portable

version. There's plenty of room for everyone to take a bath together!"

"....."

It was suddenly clear to the group that Mile had designed the new bathhouse with this exact purpose in mind. The Crimson Vow didn't have a Mile Simulator, but even they had known her long enough to be pretty sure this was the case.

Naturally, they also knew that Mile wouldn't take no for an answer. There was no point in arguing about it.

"Okay, fine..."

***

"....."

Mile had bathed with the Wonder Trio once before, back when she reunited with them at the end of her solo journey. However, this was the first time the rest of the Crimson Vow would be joining them for a soak. Even after moving into the clan house together, they had stuck to bathing with their own parties.

Pauline, they could live with. She was a Hall of Famer in a league of her own and thus excluded from any rankings. That effectively put Marcela in first place. She was of noble descent, and she currently held a peerage of her own. She had gorgeous, aristocratic features, a sharp mind, top-notch magic abilities, decent skill with a sword, and a high-minded personality that earned her the affection of commoners and the respect of her fellow nobles. Last, but certainly not least, she was quite well-endowed. They say God doesn't give with both hands, yet she had been blessed with almost every advantage one could possess.

If only *those* had been smaller. Then, she'd have had at least one shortcoming...

The other six girls were burdened with a sense of defeat.

Mavis didn't have it so bad. Hers were a bit smaller than average, but she had a masculine, "bifauxnen" vibe to her. More than once, she had been heard saying, "Large breasts only get in a swordswoman's way, so I'm happy with what I have." Somehow,

she never seemed to notice how Reina gave her the stink eye during those moments.

(Also, those claims of hers were actually just sour grapes. She secretly mimicked Mile's breast-building exercises each night before bed, having yet to realize everyone else knew exactly what she was doing. ...One look at Mile's chest ought to have told her that this was an exercise in futility, anyway.)

Monika and Aureana were also on the smaller end of the scale. The two girls were cute, but they didn't have Marcela or Mavis's aristocratic features. With their ordinary looks, they needed whatever advantages they could get. They both dreamed of becoming a little more buxom, but...alas, that had been a *bust*.

As for Mile and Reina...

Mile was already aware of the "power gaps" among the two parties but was comforted by the fact that, in this body at least, she was one of the youngest of the bunch. In other words, she was holding out hope for further developments.

Meanwhile, despite being the second oldest after Mavis, Reina was evenly matched with Mile.

"Hm? Where'd Reina go?"

At Mile's prompting, everyone glanced around the room. Reina, who had been soaking in the tub with them just moments earlier, was nowhere to be found.

Instead, there were bubbles floating on the surface of the water where she had been.

Down into the depths she went...

***

After bath time came teatime.

"Any thoughts on our name?" Marcela asked out of the blue.

"Huh? What name?" Mile asked, genuinely unsure what she was talking about.

"Our clan name!"

"Oh," everyone else muttered.

That *was* something they needed to figure out.

“How about Buff?”

“What, from the Buff Clan?”

“Or Berry?”

“What, from Cranberry?”

“Okay, then Hound…”

“What, from the Hound of Culann?”

“This is important, Mile! Stop trying to slip in a reference!”

The Wonder Trio were lost, but the Crimson Vow remembered Mile’s folktales about how a white flag could be the ultimate declaration of war, a call to eradicate every last enemy from the face of the earth, as well as her stories of the Child of Light. They could tell she was messing around.

Reina in particular was picky about party names—to the point that she had made it her goal in life to make sure the Crimson Lightning’s name entered the history books, dubbed her own party the Crimson Vow, and named her newly founded noble line Reddlightning. The thought of Mile turning their clan name into a joke had her hackles up.

“Sorry!”

Mile knew this about her friend, so she opted to back down without a fight.

“How about…the Crimson Wonder Clan’s Seven Vows?”

“That’s too long!”

“The Wonder Septet!”

“Now it doesn’t have a single element of *our* name in it!”

Thanks to Reina’s nonstop nitpicking, the group was still struggling to settle on a clan name.

Though really, it wasn’t Reina’s fault that no one had come up with any good ideas.

“Oh, forget it! We can come back to the name issue later! Unlike parties, clans don’t have to register with the Hunters’ Guild, so it’s not like we’re in any rush to decide.”

Reina was right. When the two parties first came to the capital and submitted their branch transfer request, they had reported the names of their parties and individual members, but they hadn’t mentioned anything about their clan. Because clans

were based purely on the relationships between parties, the guild didn't get involved.

"Besides, it would be in our best interest not to advertise the fact that we've formed a clan," said Marcela. "If we're not careful, other parties may come pestering us to let them join. A particularly pushy all-male party might even attempt to take residence in our clan house."

"We certainly don't want that!" Reina shuddered. "So let's say that, while we don't need to go out of our way to hide our affiliation, we can all agree not to make any public announcements. Sound good?"

Everyone else nodded.

The all-male parties always came swarming as soon as they spotted a party of young girls, and the fact that Mile and Marcela made no effort to hide their storage magic (actually inventories) would bring the remaining parties over in droves. Things were especially bad for the Wonder Trio, who were still F-rank, short on members, and had a serious job imbalance problem. The frontline-oriented, all-male parties in search of a mage never stopped leering.

If word got out that the Wonder Trio and the Crimson Vow were living together as a clan—not to mention that they still had a few rooms available, since their clan house was a former inn—it could spell disaster.

"It's not like we'd ever agree to something like that. Even if they offered to pay rent, we don't need the extra money. And if some harem-seeking loons forced their way in and tried to take charge of our all-female clan, we'd just drag them somewhere out of sight and give them the beatdown of their lives."

"I can't agree to that, Reina," Pauline protested. "It shouldn't be somewhere out of sight. We'd have to crush them where everyone is watching, or we won't be sending a message to the rest of their ilk."

"Oh, good point. Sorry, I didn't think that one through."

"....."

"Oh, that reminds me, Miss Marcela, you guys are still F rank, right?"

“Correct. We only just registered as hunters, and they don’t offer skip applications here.”

Of course, the Crimson Vow knew this all too well. They, too, had gotten their start at F-rank.

“We’re all C-ranks as both individuals and a party, so that might make it difficult for us to do standard quests together.”

“Ah,” all three girls gasped.

Dailies and loot deliveries were one thing, but F-rank hunters couldn’t take on escort or extermination missions. Even supposing the two parties teamed up to complete a job, the Wonder Trio would be seen as leeching off the Crimson Vow. Cheap power-leveling was against the rules, and though no one minded the idea of younger hunters tagging along to learn from their more experienced colleagues, the guild didn’t award contribution points in situations where it looked like one party was carrying another.

The Wonder Trio had actually long since reached C-rank in terms of sheer ability, but what they needed at the moment were contribution points, so power-leveling wasn’t going to do them any good.

Obtaining C-rank by virtue of their high-capacity storage magic was an option, but it was only applicable to Marcela, the sole member of the party who could disclose the existence of her storage space. If she went forward with the promotion on her own, she would be forced to join a high-ranking party and let them protect her. There was no chance that a storage user from a party of F-ranks—whose own combat ability was likewise F-rank—would get the C-rank treatment for that ability alone. Were a party like that to take on a C-rank extermination or escort mission, they would get wiped out in an instant.

Marcela scrunched her brow into a thoughtful frown. “We must find *some* way to get a promotion to C-rank… Or D-rank, at the very least!”

The others nodded in agreement.

“Hmm… Oh, I know!” Mile shouted, struck with an epiphany.

“…”

As everyone present had learned from experience, it was never a good sign when Mile made a face like that. Every last one of her friends eyed her with suspicion.

***

“We’ve come to deliver our dailies!”

Thud-thump-thunk!

“We’ve come to deliver our dailies!”

Thud-thump-thunk!

“We’ve come to deliver our dailies!”

Thud-thump-thunk!

“We’ve come to deliver our dailies!”

Thud-thump-thunk!

“We’ve come to deliver our—”

“Stop! Would ya give it a reeeeeest?!”

It was now the fifth day since Marcela had begun delivering massive heaps of loot alongside her party. She had gone public about her large storage space, so she could justify bringing back an absurd amount of game every evening, and the man behind the purchasing counter had finally blown his top.

“Enough is enough! You girls’ve completely tanked the price of jackalopes!”

“There’s something reassuring about employing a battle-tested strategy,” Mile commented, sipping on fruit juice as she watched the commotion unfold from the dining area.

The other members of the Crimson Vow bobbed their heads in agreement.

***

This time around, the Wonder Trio had limited their game deliveries to jackalopes only. Overhunting normal animals—say,

deer or boars—would cause a drastic decrease in the population. If things got out of hand, no one would be able to hunt them in the area for years to come.



Therefore, it seemed only responsible to limit their potential targets to monsters only. Of the monsters that were plentiful locally, Mile had determined that the ones most likely to make the guild cry uncle were jackalopes. The creatures were an essential source of income for associate guild members under the age of ten and hunters starting out as F-ranks. They were relatively safe to hunt, could be sold for a decent sum, and were plentiful enough that most hunters sold some and saved others for their dinners.

What would happen, then, if the prices of those jackalopes were to plummet?

The village children and orphans would survive. They wouldn't be able to save as much coin, but they could still hunt enough of the creatures to feed themselves. Besides, jackalopes reproduced at a rapid rate, so a slight dip in the population wouldn't have a lasting impact.

Still, a dramatic drop in the purchase price would be a serious blow to fledgling hunters.

An orc or ogre crash might be manageable. Anyone brave enough to be hunting those monsters could just switch to a different prey, and any party that skilled would have the savings to get by for a few months.

But for the newbies making a living on jackalopes as they racked up experience, aiming to rise in the ranks, a dip in prices was a devastating prospect. The guild couldn't sit back and let it happen. It was little wonder that both the old man who worked the purchasing counter and the guild master were spitting mad.

Soon enough, the Wonder Trio were brought to the guild master's office on the second floor.

"What's the big idea here, ladies?"

"What an odd question," Marcela responded. "As you can see, we're newly registered F-ranks doing our best to hunt jackalopes. Nothing more, nothing less."

The guild master, the old man from the purchasing counter, and the clerk who had registered the Wonder Trio had no arguments they could make. Marcela's logic was sound. The only requests that F-ranks were allowed to take involved doing chores around the city, gathering herbs, or hunting jackalopes—the Big

Three of entry-level hunter jobs. It made perfect sense for the girls to commit themselves to one of those options, and they certainly didn't deserve to be criticized or questioned over it.

Of the three jobs, hunting jackalopes tended to be the most profitable. As a result, anyone skilled enough to hunt safely in the forest wasn't going to bother doing chores or gathering herbs for low-quality potions. (Rare medicinal herbs were a different story due to the high degree of difficulty involved. They often grew in remote, dangerous areas or were otherwise difficult to find.)

In any event, it was perfectly natural for fresh-faced F-ranks like the Wonder Trio to hunt an abundance of jackalopes, and calling them to the guild master's office to chew them out over it was completely unwarranted. A total injustice.

Or so the Wonder Trio argued…

"You girls ever heard of a thing called moderation?! Or how about common sense?!" the guild master roared back. The man from the purchasing counter and the clerk nodded in emphatic agreement.

Of course he would say that, thought the Wonder Trio.

Despite getting on board with Mile's plan, they were aware that what they were doing was pushing the bounds of both moderation and common sense. In fact, they had adopted the strategy knowing full well how ridiculous it was.

Marcela took her chance to go on the offensive. "As F-ranks, this is the most efficient way for us to earn money and contribution points. We can safely and reliably hunt jackalopes and bring back copious amounts of game with the help of my storage magic. Is there any good reason why we should fall in line with the other newcomers and earn a pittance gathering herbs or doing odd jobs around the city?"

"……"

Of course, the guild couldn't ask its hunters to do less than what they were capable of. And as long as a party wasn't breaking any rules, even the guild master had no authority to tell hunters what they could and could not do.

Just as the guild master and his staff began to flounder, Aureana threw them a lifeline. With a determinedly casual air, she spoke almost under her breath. "You know, this reminds me of a

rumor I heard recently. They say that a port city branch had to implement the special measures to give a rookie F-rank party a special three-rank promotion…”

Though the guild master did not speak, he and his staff were screaming internally.

So that’s what they were after!

This was a setup. There was not a shadow of a doubt.

As a matter of fact, something of the sort *had* occurred in a port city not too long ago. The event had been dubbed the Special Promotion Case or simply the Incident. It had been the talk of all the guild branches, and though the name of the party in question had been on the paperwork, it hadn’t stuck in the mind of the guild master and his staff.

Although a special three-rank promotion was rare, the mystery party was still only C-rank—barely worthy of attention in the grand scheme of things. The capital branch had a few A-rank and B-rank parties, and even one S-rank party that rarely came home but still technically worked out of their city. As unusual as their circumstances had been, no one was all that interested in a party that was bumped up to C-rank for convenience’s sake.

The incident itself, on the other hand, was so infamous that every guild employee in the country had heard of it. The guild master involved had risked punishment to do what was best for his town, guild, and hunters, and he had been lauded and promoted for his courage.

Of course he had. If someone were punished for acting for the good of their town, guild, and hunters, no one would ever follow their example. These men had wives and children to support. They needed to look out for themselves and preserve their own standing.

All the same, that didn’t make it advisable to play right into the hands of these fledglings.

Silence pervaded the guild master’s office as both parties contemplated their next moves.

Three-rank special promotions couldn’t be handed out like candy. Still, knowing another guild master had done it before lowered the hurdle significantly.

Even if the guild master did give this the go-ahead, he couldn't imagine any future newcomers being on par with this group. If nothing else, their absurdly large storage space made them unique. Thus, there was no need to worry about setting a bad precedent and encouraging imitators. This was certain to be a one-time, one-off event.

Even so, was it morally justifiable? Was it really okay to let a bunch of young, F-rank girls skip two or three ranks? Or would that amount to killing youngsters with bright futures ahead of them?

"....."

It was an agonizing choice. Never in their wildest dreams had he and his staff expected to be put in such a difficult position.

Plenty of hunters could take down dozens of jackalopes... assuming the monsters came anywhere near them. Jackalopes tended to steer clear of the more skilled hunting parties. The only exceptions were when they were picking on obvious newbies or charging an enemy to give their friends a chance to escape. Although their horns gave them a means of attack, the tiny monsters were inherently herbivorous, easily spooked, fast on their feet, and good at hiding. It wasn't easy to hunt them on a massive scale.

Even supposing one did manage the task, how many jackalopes could a single hunter manage to bring back? They still had to carry weapons, armor, water, food, and an emergency kit, which meant their capacity to transport game was limited.

What these girls had accomplished required, at bare minimum, the strength to fight off a huge horde of jackalopes, a healing mage in case of emergency, and a storage user with a big enough space to take the game home. No party with all those assets would be wasting their time hunting jackalopes at any volume. Meanwhile, any party who fit these criteria had long since worked their way up to B-rank so they could live the good life.

As a general rule, mages with absurdly high-capacity storage magic didn't work as hunters, anyway. They were more likely to be employed by merchants, the nobility, or even the royal family. If anyone with so much going for them was stupid enough to settle for becoming a hunter, the guild master would gladly give them a special promotion...

The moment that thought crossed the guild master's mind, he realized he had already made his decision.

This party had an insanely huge storage space and could hunt a horde of jackalopes each day with a mere three mages. And they hardly even damaged the jackalopes' horns or fur in the process. This all but guaranteed that they could cast some very advanced spells. Really, the mere fact that three tiny girls had survived long enough to break in their clothes and protective gear spoke volumes to their skill.

All things considered, no one could argue with the need to grant them a special promotion. The real question was whether to move them up to D-rank or follow the precedent and offer them the triple skip.

Advancing them to C-rank would be a three-rank special promotion. It was a highly unusual occurrence.

In contrast, making them D-ranks would constitute only a two-rank special promotion. That wasn't exactly common, either, but it wasn't unheard of, especially if someone pulled off an ultra-amazing feat—say, an F-rank hunter taking down a dragon or wyvern on their own—and proved themselves in action.

Occasionally, the newbie F-ranks might include a former knight of the royal guard who had been driven from their post, or a former court magician who had lost a power struggle. These individuals brought a level of skill to their work that would earn them a special two-rank promotion, taking them from F to D or E to C. Beyond that, you had to work your way up more organically. The system was never used to send someone from D to B or C to A—well, unless they accomplished something as monumental as saving the kingdom from destruction or defeating the demon lord and protecting the whole continent…

Precedent or no precedent, a three-rank special promotion was much less common, even if it was only from an F-rank to a C-rank.

D-ranks could theoretically take on standard quests, but they were ineligible for jobs specified as B-rank or higher, and though they *could* technically accept C-rank jobs, there were restrictions on tackling those alone. Plus, no merchant would ever hire them for an escort mission.

And while they might be drafted as transport personnel in the event of an emergency—say, a monster stampede or a major natural disaster—D-ranks were also still considered junior members, entitled to the protection of the guild. If a D-rank party were ordered to transport supplies to a dangerous area, only to die in the process, that would be a bad look. The guild branch would be responsible for taking three gorgeous, talented young girls—likely noblewomen, from the looks of them—and squeezing them dry for their own selfish ends, sending them to their deaths before they could truly blossom.

A tragedy like that would be the undoing of both the capital branch and the guild master. He was an honorable man who would not hesitate to take responsibility for his actions, but it would kill him if his own shame extended to his wife, children, or parents.

So, what if the girls were C-ranks?

C-ranks were considered proper, mid-level hunters. If something happened to the girls as C-ranks, one could argue that, as full-fledged members of the guild, they had fought hard to protect the capital and its people and died in the line of duty.

Oh, come on, that's just an excuse! What am I supposed to do here?! Agh! Aaaghhh!!

The guild master clutched at his head. Although there was no guarantee that the capital would face a Wonder Trio-killing crisis, he couldn't stop himself from imagining the worst. As a result, he was caught in a hell of his own making.

Finally…

"M-message received," the guild master croaked out. "I'll bring the question to a guild branch meeting. Just give me a few days."

Making the call all on his own would be too great a burden for him to bear.

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"So, how'd it go?"

Back at the clan house, Mile asked the Wonder Trio about their discussion with the guild master.

“Everything played out according to your strategy, and the final result will be decided in the next guild branch meeting. Given his reaction, I imagine we’ll end up at D-rank at worst, so no jobs will be off-limits if we team up to do them together! In other words…”

“Just as planned,” everyone said in unison.

Of course, this was a reference to a catchphrase from Miami Satodele’s novels.

And everyone present knew exactly who Miami Satodele really was.

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Three days passed before the Wonder Trio were called to the guild master’s office, where the ashen-faced man informed them that they would be receiving a special promotion.

“You will all individually be bumped to C-rank, as will your hunting party, the Wonder Trio.”

If all the individual members were C-rank, their party level *had* to match. If he’d tried to make them any other rank, the whole thing could have blown up in his face.

“Erm, you look a bit sickening—pardon, you’re looking a bit *sick*. Are you feeling quite all right? Are you in need of healing or restorative magic?”

“Whose fault do you think that is?! And I don’t appreciate that slip of the tongue! I’ll take the spell, though…”

The guild master had clearly given up on saving face, so it couldn’t hurt to take Marcela up on her offer.

Marcela did realize that his despair was probably her own fault, which was why she had offered her magical services. It would weigh heavily on her conscience if the guild master were to collapse from stress on their account.

“Cripes! The moment we learned the second party was a bunch of C-ranks with storage magic, I should’ve realized what was going on!”

From the sound of it, the guild master had finally pieced together the identity of the party that arrived alongside the Wonder Trio. Perhaps one of the attendees of the guild meeting had pointed it out to him.

“Then, if I may… Hyah!”

Shiiiiiing!

“What?! You can silent cast?! Whoa! That feels better already. I can feel the pain in my shoulders, lower back, and stomach practically melting away…” The guild master savored the moment of bliss, a look of ecstasy on his face. “Aaahhh… Man, I feel bad that the rest of the staff is missing out on this. Alan from accounting and Galtz from the butcher department are both getting up there in age. I always hear them complaining that their shoulders, back, and neck are killing ’em…”

The Wonder Trio thought the fact that the guild master was showing consideration for his elderly staff was probably a sign that he was a good boss.

“I would be happy to offer my services to them as well,” Marcela said.

“Huh? A-are you sure?”

“Certainly. It’s no danger to expend my mana now, when we’re right in the middle of town.”

This was the truth. Marcela wouldn’t have to worry about fighting off hordes of monsters any time soon, and she could make a full recovery after a good night’s sleep.

It bears mentioning that Marcela’s offer to help was entirely genuine. She had no intention of using her healing magic to curry favor with the guild staff. Even as their bodies began to fail them with age, the elderly continued to work themselves to the bone for themselves, their families, and the citizens of the capital. She truly wanted to do whatever she could to help relieve their burdens—nothing more, nothing less.

“Wait right here, then! I’ll go grab the old folks right away!”

A few minutes later, the guild master brought a few elderly employees into his office. Judging by the confused looks on their faces, he had yet to offer them a proper explanation of what was going on.

Without any preamble, Marcela cast the spell-free version of her AoE healing and recovery magic.

“Area Heal!”

“Wheeeeew…”

She had only bothered yelling the spell’s name because she was afraid silent casting might leave everyone confused as to what had just happened.

“Whoa! All the stiffness in my shoulders is gone—just like that!”

“I can’t believe the relief I’m feeling in my lower back!”

Their faces relaxed into blissful expressions, but the next minute, the old folks suddenly snapped to their senses.

“You can cast AoE spells? At your age?!”

“That’s the least of my questions! She didn’t just heal our injuries or revitalize our bodies—even our stiff shoulders and aching backs are suddenly fixed! Since when does a Heal spell work on those kinds of ailments?!”

Indeed, normal healing and recovery magic could heal wounds, but it had no effect on chronic conditions. These types of magic weren’t a cure-all but rather a phenomenon that depended on the casters’ ability to visualize both the injury and the healing required. The nanomachines generated exactly what the healer pictured, which made healing magic much more effective on external injuries that could be clearly visualized than on often-imperceptible, abstract afflictions without defined causes.

The result of this was that unskilled mages often made unfortunate mistakes, such as sealing up the outside of a wound but not the internal damage, or not properly stitching nerves and blood vessels together. Without a clear understanding of the causes of infection, inflammation and cellular necrosis were common, though thanks to Mile’s lessons about bacteria and the workings of the human body, Reina, Pauline, and the Wonder Trio were able to avoid any such mishaps. Mile had also taught them about all the potential sources of stiff shoulders or back pain—poor circulation, pinched nerves, muscle tension, accumulated fatigue—which allowed them to fire off a very concrete image of how such symptoms might be alleviated. It was something most other mages could never hope to achieve.

“I-I can hardly believe it! What a relief!”

“Th-this is incredible. Aaahhh…”

Marcela promised the old folks that she would be happy to offer them her healing magic again once she had finished a job and submitted her completion report. They kneeled before her with tears streaming down their faces.

It didn’t take long for the other hunters—particularly the long-time veterans who had stayed in the business past the age of retirement—to notice that something was different about the older members of the guild staff. Previously their companions in misery, with long hours of desk work taking a toll on their health, these employees were suddenly in great shape and better spirits. It was inevitable that the hunters would have questions about how this came to be.

And so, it was only a matter of time until the elderly hunters also received the boon of Marcela’s healing and recovery magic. With the exception of the Wonder Trio and the Crimson Vow, there were no doctors, apothecaries, priests, or mages who could cure stiff shoulders or back pain, so she didn’t need to worry about anyone getting upset about her taking their patients from them.

Marcela hadn’t intended to charge for such a basic service, but people warned her that this might set a bad precedent and cause other mages to be pressured into offering healing for free. She thus opted to set a small fee, but it was very much a token service charge.

This episode endeared the Wonder Trio to the guild master, elderly guild staff, and long-time veteran hunters. With a passionate base of loyal fans, the C-rank hunting party known as the Wonder Trio began their rise to stardom.

Chapter 140:
The Third Princesses Ascend to Sainthood

“A FAMINE, YOU SAY?”

“Indeed. The northern shore claims they suffered a bad harvest, but apparently it was even more devastating than one might think.”

The king of Brandel had a policy of eating dinner with his family as often as possible. Not only did he consider it important for family bonding; he also took it as an opportunity to ensure his children—both the two princes and three princesses—were up to date on current events. Today’s topic was not a happy one, but it was of the utmost importance to both the country’s internal affairs and international relations.

“The kingdoms of Tils and Aubram have suffered similarly disastrous harvests along their northern coasts. As you know, the majority of Aubram borders the sea, and much of its farmland was devastated in the battle against the invading monsters six months ago. As a result, it is in a particularly dire state. The Albarn Empire is vast, but most of it was mountains or wastelands to start with, so it has not yet fully recovered from the events of the battle, either.

“The kingdoms of Marlane and Trist have not suffered quite as badly, but their crop yields are still down from previous years. Although they are making an effort to provide aid, there is only so much they can spare. Ensuring their own people do not starve takes precedence over helping other countries, and I cannot fault them for that. For the same reasons, purchasing food from other countries is not an option. No matter how much money is dangled before them, no king or local lord would let their subjects go hungry for their own profit.

“Even supposing a deal was struck, the food caravans would be extremely attractive targets for hungry thieves. I imagine only a scant few shipments would make it to their destinations. No one would be willing to shoulder the task of transporting the goods.”

“Will there be a death count, do you think?” the queen asked.

A worried look passed over the king’s face. “Yes. Perhaps not a large one in our own kingdom, but elsewhere—particularly in

Aubram—things will get brutal. It's truly a pity, seeing as they were also hit the hardest of the surrounding countries in the battle last year. Perhaps their one consolation is that none of their neighbors are in good enough shape to take this chance to invade.

"We may be better off than Aubram, but people will almost certainly starve to death in our kingdom as well. Take care of what you say and do, lest we give our subjects the impression that the royal family is living in luxury."

Everyone at the table nodded, their expressions grave.

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A famine would lead to starvation. No one was injured, no one was sick, and yet perfectly healthy people would starve and die for lack of sustenance. The young, the old, and children alike!

This is unacceptable.

What, you ask?

Why, the unfairness of life!

It shall not be allowed to happen.

By whom, you ask?

By me, Morena, the third princess of Brandel!

I wrote a letter and left it in storage for Est.

Our country and our neighbors are anticipating disastrous harvests this year. What about you?

A response came right away.

Ours should be plentiful. In fact, the prices of crops have fallen, and leafy greens that don't keep long have been left abandoned in the fields or crushed and plowed into the soil. The farmers seem quite chagrined. I suppose an abundant crop isn't always a blessing. Still, I do realize this is a million times better than a poor harvest…

This is blessed news! Hear this, great Goddess! I, Morena, shall rise to the occasion! I will use the power you bestowed upon me for

the sake of the masses!

No doubt that is the reason why you entrusted me with this gift. I vow to live up to your expectations!

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Whaaaaat?! Are you serious, Lady Morena?! Oh, who am I kidding, of course you are. You have never once lied or joked about anything involving money, food, or people's lives. Very well then. I, Estorina, will put everything on the line to aid you!

Excellent! With our third princess powers combined, we shall surely conquer this trial from the Goddess!

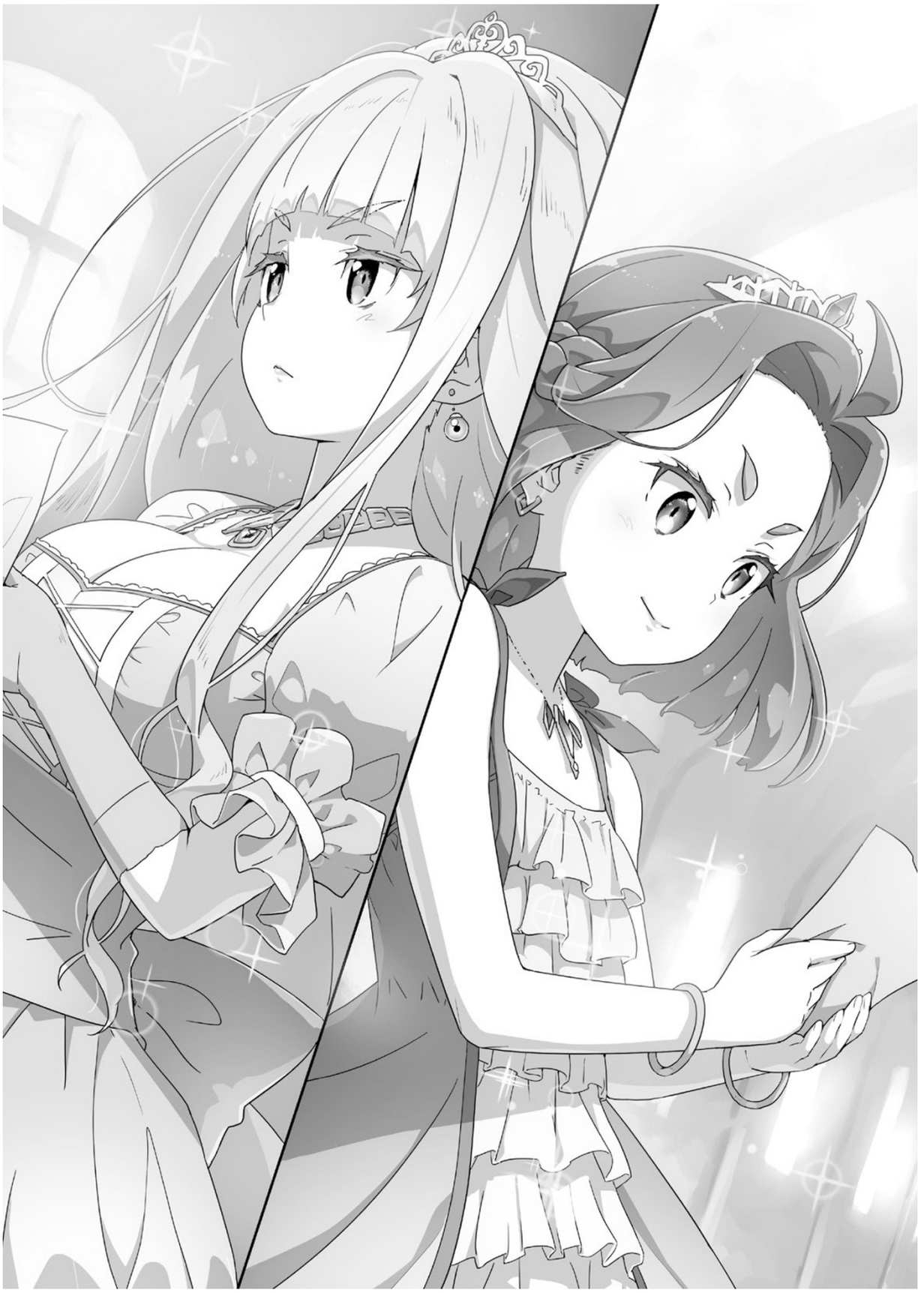
Indeed we shall!

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At dinner the next evening, the king couldn't help but question what he was hearing.

"Could you repeat that, Morena? I don't think I quite understood you the first time."

"Certainly, Father. I would like you to convert all my personal assets into gold ingots, jewels, precious articles, and works of art—things that could fetch a high price in a distant foreign land. We shall convert those into food and distribute the provisions to the northern lands and the kingdom of Aubram. And we will mark the price up by twenty percent!"



“You still plan to charge for the supplies?”

“Well, naturally. We would go bankrupt otherwise. Not all volunteer work is done for free. The word does not inherently imply that something is done without compensation but simply that it is done with self-determination. What differentiates volunteer work from labor is not the absence of remuneration but the absence of compulsion.

“Suppose that someone has gone missing. If a person takes time off of work to join the search party, heedless of the risk that they may end up stranded themselves, would they not be considered a volunteer regardless of how they are ultimately compensated? Some may be under the misconception that volunteering equates to working for free, but they are an ignorant minority.

“If we were to distribute the food for free, we would be rendered destitute, unable to purchase the next batch of relief supplies, and incapable of volunteering ever again. Meanwhile, the masses would go on with their everyday lives under the impression that they will be handed free food should they ever suffer another famine, thereby disincentivizing them from the pursuit of any preparations or precautions!”

The king’s eyes were wide in astonishment as he listened to Morena’s passionate speech.

“I can tell you’re serious about this. This is not some pie-in-the-sky dream, then? I assume you have a path forward? I am naught but an ordinary man. If the Princess of Stratagems and one of the guardians of the world has set out to do something, I have no right to stand in your way. Very well! You have the royal family’s full support. Do as you see fit!”

“You have my thanks!”

Struggling to follow the conversation between Morena and the king, her brothers, sisters, and the queen looked on in perplexed silence.

“By the way, Morena, you keep saying ‘we.’ Do you have someone else assisting you?” the king asked.

Morena smiled and said, “Yes. One who lives on a continent far across the sea—a kindhearted girl who is like a little sister to me. Princess Estorina.”

“Excuse me?!” her entire family cried out in surprise. What could Morena possibly mean by this?

The royal waitstaff were the ultimate professionals, known for letting any comment pass without a flicker of an expression. But that day, even they could not help but fumble the dishes they held, a mistake that would haunt them for the rest of their lives.

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All set on your end, Est?

Yes. I have found my way to our nation’s breadbasket. I am standing inside a warehouse filled with crops, with even more piled up outside. There are several such collection points in the area, and crops are to be rounded up for pickup as I make my way around. Furthermore, once we have established a reputation for buying and paying for the farm produce, I expect to be inundated with sales offers from the neighboring countries. After all…

The condition is that we will purchase them at twenty percent off the pre-crash price, yes. Of course the lords of the breadbasket regions would jump at an offer like that. For my part, I am currently inside an empty warehouse in an area suffering from a poor harvest. Then, without further ado, let us begin.

It was a bit tedious to communicate by exchanging letters through our shared storage, but there was little to no time lag when we both made a point of checking it constantly.

I stood now in an empty warehouse, accompanied by my personal guard, the chiefs of the surrounding villages, the local lord, his vassals, and his guards.

None of them appeared to believe anything I had told them beforehand. The battle of half a year ago may have propelled me to fame, but all I did then was fight with magic. I did not demonstrate any sort of miraculous power. And only Father and a

few others knew of the extraordinary storage magic I had recently been granted by the Goddess.

I was about to unveil it for the first time here and now.

What's that? People may come after me? They may try to use me for their own ends?

I care not. That is a trifling concern compared to the lives of my subjects. I have the Goddess's favor on my side; if anyone dares oppose me, let them take their best shot.

It was time.

I opened up my storage and took out its contents. The onlookers said nothing. In most circles, storage magic was an unusual sight, but anyone who had regular contact with the aristocracy was used to such marvels.

The only real surprise would have been that a princess like me had concealed such magic, and that I was choosing to reveal it now…

In any case, I began pulling out the contents of my storage.

Out they went. Out they went.

A silence fell over the warehouse, not a single cough to break it. Until…

"Ooohhhh! It's a miracle! A miracle from the Goddess! What are you all standing around for?! Can't you see the divine messenger is buried up to her feet?! There's no room for her to take out the next batch! Move the crops to the back of the shed and start organizing them! Get a move on! Assist the divine messenger!" one of the village chiefs yelled. The other chiefs

scrambled to haul the goods out of the way. Really, they were being quite helpful.

Meanwhile, the guards, lord, and vassals were all rooted to the spot, their mouths hanging open.

Well, I suppose I'll just leave them be. I have more important matters to attend to.

I knew Est was continuing to shove more and more supplies into her side of the open storage. I took them out at an equal pace.

Out they went. Out they went.

"Ah! Aaahhh! Aaaaaahhhhhh!!"

"Oh, thank you, Goddess! Praise be!"

Behind me, I heard the voices of the local lord and his guards, choked with emotion.

I hope they understand that I am not spawning an endless supply of food here. These goods cost money, and I am expecting them to repay me later. My services do not come free!

If I let them believe that the Goddess would provide them free food whenever disaster struck, they would become impractically carefree, devoid of a work ethic or a healthy sense of danger. We certainly couldn't have that. Indeed, I was determined to avoid that outcome at all costs.

Ahem? Vassals? If you have nothing better to do, I would most appreciate it if you moved the crops sitting at my feet...

As soon as they noticed my eyes on them, the surrounding men realized what I was thinking. The guards, the vassals, and

even the lord himself took off their coats and pitched in to help haul the crops out of the way.

Perfect. Now I can proceed.

Est can work at a much faster pace. Since she needs only stash away the piles of crops before her, she doesn't have to worry about moving anything arou—wait, what a fool I am! I could just move to another spot and take things out there! Oh, I am such an idiot! What a humiliating blunder!

***

Once the first warehouse was filled with crops, everyone kindly escorted me to an empty one. On her continent, Est had likewise moved on to her next storehouse, which was full.

My next stop would be the coastal areas, where the harvest was particularly bad, and after that, I would head to the neighboring kingdom of Aubram, which was in truly dire straits.

To provide Est the funds to buy up the grain on the other end, I had used all my personal savings and even borrowed extra money to buy gold ingots, jewels, and anything else that could fetch a high price in her country, then sent those to her by means of our storage. Father had also contributed funds from both the national treasury and his personal assets. Est used the money provided to buy up a collection of surplus food from the other continent.

On one end, no amount of money could buy crops due to the disastrous harvest. On the other, the prices had plummeted due to a bumper crop.

How fortunate that our two sides were connected by the tunnel of a shared storage space.

With a clever use of the miraculous power granted to me by the Goddess, I shall save a great many lives. No doubt She would be proud!

***

After making my way around my own kingdom's coastal regions, I was currently touring the kingdom of Aubram. Much to my surprise, its neighbors of Marlane and Trist, which shared its long southern border, had taken inspiration from my activism and stepped up to provide food assistance.

As far as I knew, they didn't exactly have any excess resources. While neither country had suffered a truly devastating harvest, they were still having a lean year.

Evidently, they had calculated that they could free up resources for relief efforts if they reduced their own population's food intake by one-third. Each nation was bringing its population together to aid their neighbors.

What fools!

But I had to admit, I had a soft spot for fools.

Of course, their help didn't come free, either. They also planned to collect payment later.

This was really only fair. It cost them a fortune to gather up and transport the relief supplies. Besides, there was always the possibility of a disastrous harvest in their own future, and they could not count on any other government to reciprocate their goodwill when that time came. Any payments collected now could be saved for their own national crises.

Most importantly of all, if the provisions from Aubram's neighbors came free of charge, *we* would have no justification for charging for our crops.

Phew. We made it by the skin of our teeth…

***

Lady Morena came to me with an outrageous proposal.

Apparently, her kingdom and its neighbors had suffered a poor—or as she put it, *disastrous*—harvest, and people were likely to starve if the situation was allowed to continue unchecked.

In contrast, our kingdom and the surrounding countries were struggling with the ramifications of a bumper crop. When prices plummet, farmers can no longer make back the cost of harvesting, sorting, and transporting their crops, or hiring guards

to escort those shipments to larger towns. The more they attempt to sell, the further into debt they go. No matter how hard the farmers work, the necessary expenses will exceed their profits. Thus, the farmers are left with no choice but to let fruits and vegetables rot and plow their crops back into the fields, in the hope of turning them into fertilizer to aid their next harvest.

Our farmers were in no danger of starving, but they would not have the profits to buy meat.

Worse still would be the problems that came in the following years. After a season like this one, would the farmers put in the usual work to improve their crop yields? Weren't they more likely to determine that there was no point in making the extra effort? Why, they might even cut back on their crop acreage.

This year's bumper crop could be wholly attributed to the weather, temperatures, and several other meteorological factors that impacted the growing period. What if next year saw a poor harvest due to unfavorable weather conditions? What if it saw a *disastrous* one? We were liable to end up in an even worse state than Lady Morena's kingdom at present! A good many people would die.

Her plan is a godsend! This is about more than simply helping Lady Morena's kingdom—it's divine intervention to save our realm as well! I shall stake everything I have to see this through!

***

I took the gold ingots, jewels, and fine art that Lady Morena sent via storage magic and sold them for a huge sum of gold coins. I then used that money to buy loads of the surplus crops from our kingdom and the neighboring countries.

Following Lady Morena's lead, I bought them for twenty percent less than the pre-crash price. I could have beaten the price down further if I wished, but my true goal here was to help the masses, both on my continent and on Lady Morena's. As far as I was concerned, I was already set to make more than enough of a profit.

Perhaps you all suspected that I would pour all my personal assets into this venture and come out broke for it, but I would

never be so soft.

Actually, that's a lie. I had initially planned to buy the crops at their full pre-crash price, but Lady Morena had scolded me. "You wouldn't make any money if you did that!" she said. "We are not running a charity here!"

We're not?! I thought. *If it's not charity, then what are we even doing?!*

After buying the crops for twenty percent off, I would sell them to Lady Morena for the normal price, and Lady Morena would sell them to the local lords at a twenty percent markup.

Lady Morena explained it was far more practical—and lucrative—to sell the crops she obtained from me in bulk to the local lords than to market them directly to the masses. In exchange, she planned to claim a handsome payout of coin—or gold ingots, jewelry, bonds, and what have you.

She's so on top of things! I really ought to learn from her example.

And so, I asked my father to make a nationwide announcement.

We are hereby offering to purchase all your crops for just twenty percent less than their pre-crash price. This applies to grains, potatoes, leafy greens, and anything else with nutritional value. Domestic products shall be purchased in unlimited quantities. Foreign items shall be limited to sales arranged and contracted in advance. Our third princess, Estorina, will be the one presiding over this charity project. As we do this for the salvation of our kingdom and the people of distant foreign lands, we request your full cooperation in gathering and transporting the goods.

The announcement letter made his desire to cut the labor costs to zero pretty transparent.

Our king certainly knows what he wants! That's my father for you! I really ought to learn from his example, too.

As outlandish as the plan might sound to some, I knew my father would not question me. After all, I had already informed

him and a handful of others that Lady Morena and I were granted storage magic by the Goddess. Perhaps more importantly, he had seen the gold bullion, jewels, artwork, rare materials, and various other gifts stashed in my personal quarters.

Of course, Lady Morena had made her payment in advance.

As a result, I was able to use the items she sent as collateral to borrow government funds at no interest. Then, I ordered that our kingdom's surplus crops be gathered up in warehouses all over the realm, and set out on my journey to collect the goods.

Let me assure you, I had absolutely no idea at the time that this would come to be called Princess Estorina's Miraculous Pilgrimage, be adapted into bardic poems and stage plays, and make appearances in religious texts!

The plan was for me to send all the goods that had been rounded up across the kingdom to Lady Morena via storage magic. I would pay the local lords with paper bonds, which were much more practical to travel with than gold coinage. The bonds had a special seal and could only be handed out by a princess of the kingdom. Though they were only paper, they were a credible payment method insofar as they could be redeemed as long as the kingdom existed, so I didn't receive any complaints.

Having coordinated with Lady Morena in advance, I traveled to the first warehouse where the crops were collected, gave the lord a paper bond, and put the goods into my storage. At the same time, she stood by on her side, ready to begin taking things out.

The timing was, of course, crucial. Otherwise, our storage space would end up packed over capacity.

Once the first warehouse was empty, the local lord stood before a congregation of representatives from the nearby towns and villages, held the bond high overhead, and read off the amount written on it. Cue exclamations of joy.

Well, of course. They had every reason to be happy.

I was invited to a welcome and thank-you banquet, where I was forced to greet and shake hands with more people than I could remember. The next morning, I went on my way, journeying to the next collection point. Behind me, I heard exclamations like "Oh wait, a saint! Farewell, Your Holiness!"

I can't falsely claim sainthood! The church will be furious with me! Though after I made a warehouse full of crops disappear and handed the lord a bond for a substantial sum of money, I suppose I can't blame them for getting the wrong idea… If I *ever watched someone else do that, I would probably assume they were a saint, too.*

At first, the neighboring countries hadn't believed our written notice. Finally, about twenty days into my trip to store the goods, word had spread, and I was inundated with offers to form sales contracts. Of course, I had asked the royal palace to be my contact point, so the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Finances oversaw the negotiations. After completing my tour of the kingdom, all I had to do was travel to the countries mentioned in the letters sent to me by messenger.

Once I arrived at my destination, representatives from the country showed me where I needed to go, and they appointed soldiers to accompany for protection.

About three hundred of them, to be exact.

Goodness! You'd think I was the king himself! I know I'm technically royalty, but I'm merely the third princess of another kingdom! I am eighth in line to the throne, below my five brothers and two sisters! I suppose I do have my younger sister beat, but still…

Regardless, I have no value save as a pawn in a political marriage, and no one would bother paying a ransom were I kidnapped. There is no financial or political motivation to attack me. Why on earth would I need this many soldiers to escort me?

You know what I think it is? If something were to happen to me, there wouldn't be anyone to buy their crops! That's how desperate they are to make a sale…

Wait, why do people on the side of the road look like they're praying?

Huh? Did they just say "arch-saint"? An arch-saint is coming here?! Oh no! We had better make way!

We mustn't block the arch-saint, everyone! Clear a path! Out of the waaaay!

***

So. It turned out they were talking about *me*.

Well, if I ever witnessed someone magically empty a warehouse full of crops, hand over a government-issued payment guarantee, and leave, I suppose I might come to the same conclusion. At worst, I would assume she was an arch-saint or a beloved child of the Goddess. At most, I would think she was a divine messenger or the Goddess incarnate.

I was happy to take “arch-saint” over the alternatives. At least that still counted as human. Any title greater than that, and I would end up lumped in with the divine…

At that point, I would no longer be considered a human, and I would lose all hope of achieving a normal person’s happiness. I would be locked away inside a temple and treated like fragile glass!

I-I absolutely must put a stop to this before they start calling me the “beloved child” or “divine messenger”! Perhaps Lady Morena will know what to do…

***

My journey had been a long one. Traveling around the coastal areas of my kingdom, I eventually made my way across Aubram. As I had to coordinate the timing with Est, waiting for her to move from point to point and round up the goods, it ended up taking quite a number of days.

Nonetheless, we were doing this to deliver the people, so both Est and I put our all into it.

Est, for her part, became quite popular among the farmers and lords of the breadbasket regions. This acclaim wasn’t even limited to her own kingdom but extended to the other countries she visited as well. Honestly, it would not have been an exaggeration to describe their regard for her as a kind of worship.

After all she had done, it was only natural. She had purchased an enormous supply of surplus grain, and she had done so for the reasonable price of twenty percent off the original price, when she could very well have used the bumper harvest to

negotiate herself a much bigger bargain. Besides, everything she did was for the noble purpose of aiding the starving citizens of a distant kingdom.

The story went that the Goddess had been so impressed with her charity that She had even granted the princess mass transfer magic.

That last point alone would be sufficient cause for a country's reverence.

Est, word has it that the people are already calling you an arch-saint.

***

"I hereby ordain Princess Morena as an arch-saint!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd. My attempts to escape reality ended here.

Indeed. As you can see, I had somehow found myself ordained as a saint.

I had provided an enormous supply of food for the exceptional price of only twenty percent more than the standard. And seeing as the general public didn't know the full story, they assumed that I had purchased everything at a much higher price and was therefore operating at an enormous loss of my personal finances.

Despite my royal status, I had braved a long and dangerous journey for the masses, and in doing so saved a great number of lives all over the world.

To top it all off, I possessed an astonishing, miraculous power to transport supplies from faraway lands, granted to me by the Goddess for this very purpose.

It was no wonder they were calling me an arch-saint, really... It did sound like these were the sorts of miracles performed by a divine messenger or the Goddess incarnate. In any other situation, my accomplishments certainly would have been beyond the capabilities of any mere mortal.

Have I, perchance, made a blunder here?

Far from depleting my private funds, I had made myself a fortune. While the countries hit with disastrous harvests had struggled to reap crops, their mining, forestry, and commerce were unaffected, and their gold and jewel reserves hadn't vanished into thin air, so they were able to pay me out of the lords' vaults and the national treasuries. Some of the sums came in the form of jewels or bonds rather than gold coins, but payment was payment.

As a result, both the personal assets that my father and I had lent to cover Est's expenses and the money we had borrowed from the national treasury were soon returned in full, plus a little extra. Furthermore, when Est cashed out the items I had sent her to pay for the grain, it had come out to more than she needed to make the purchases, which meant that she, too, had turned a profit.

Not only did we save a great number of people and earn their gratitude, we had made an enormous amount of money in the process.

Oh, I do so enjoy doing business!

"...and so, with the advent of the saint, sent to us by the great Goddess herself, we pray that a bright future lies..."

Argh! They keep rambling on without letting me get a word in edgewise! Half a year ago, our kingdom failed to reclaim Lady Ade—er, Lady Mile *and keep her for ourselves. I imagine this is an attempt to put me on a pedestal and raise national prestige, as well as establish a connection between me and Lady Mile as fellow favorites of the Goddess. They clearly plan to use this as a springboard for another attempt to poach Lady Mile...*

I have no personal objections, of course. That fits nicely into my plans for Lady Mile to marry either Vince or my elder brother, and for whoever is left over to take Marcela... I haven't given up hope yet!

***

"Achoo!"

"A-CHOO!"

Marcela and Mile sneezed in quick succession.

“Pardon me, Miss Mile, but do you think you could be a bit more discreet?”

“When you’ve gotta sneeze, you’ve gotta sneeze! I think you might be putting girls on a pedestal, Miss Marcela! Who are you, Tawaba?!”

“I have no idea who that is! And how could I put women on a pedestal when I am one myself?!”

“It’s not like I was blowing my nose into my hands or something! All I did was sneeze a bit loudly!”

“That doesn’t make it acceptable! How little regard do you have for a maiden’s dignity?!”

“Uh-oh. Marcela’s started in on one of her etiquette lectures for Mile,” Reina commented.

“Well, Mile *is* a count-slash-marquis. She really should mind her manners a bit more,” said Mavis.

“More importantly, Miley is a divine messenger and beloved child of the Goddess,” said Pauline. “If she behaves too inappropriately, she might receive complaints from the church. I suppose we don’t have to worry about that on this continent, but we do plan to return eventually, so…”

Monika and Aureana just cracked amused smiles.

Side Story:
The Trials of Leatoria

"HAS OUR GUEST gone home, Father?"

"At long last, yes. He doesn't seem to have given up, however. Being a marquis, he seems to believe it his right to take you as a bride."

Make no mistake. It wasn't the *son* of a marquis who had shown up. An actual marquis had taken the time to grace the House of Aura, a low-ranked noble family.

He was there to give them the full-court press.

Although he had used the word "bride," it was important to note that the man didn't intend to take Leatoria as his second wife. He wanted to take her as his *son's* wife, thus setting her up to marry his heir.

The third daughter of an insignificant house of barons would be marrying into a marquisate. There could be no greater example of a Cinderella story.

Given her status, Leatoria couldn't hope to marry into the royal family or a house of dukes. Thus, a son of a marquis was the crème de la crème of her prospects. Any higher-ranking husband might create legal difficulties. It wasn't just the boy's rank but also his place in the family that was notable. Under ordinary circumstances, someone of Leatoria's stature would be wed to the third son or younger. The eldest son, the heir, or the second son, the spare who would inherit the title should anything happen to the former, would never marry such a low-ranking noble.

In light of all this, why was the marquis so insistent in asking for Leatoria's hand? The answer lay with the nanomachines.

During the all-out defensive battle against the otherworldly invaders in the Albarn Empire, the nanomachines had focused on Mile's most photogenic acquaintances and projected their images across the skies of the entire continent. This had included the Crimson Vow, the Wonder Trio, Mariette, Princess Morena…and the Servants of the Goddess.

And this had propelled Leatoria, a member of said Servants of the Goddess, to continent-wide fame.

Unfortunately for her.

She was cute, prim, and proper, as well as being a noblewoman of marriageable age. Despite her frail looks, she had the courage to fight on the front lines to defend the world. With a swing of her giant metal club, she could knock monsters out of her path like it was nothing. She even possessed powerful combat magic that she could fire continuously in all directions. By all accounts, she was a Goddess of Victory.

Plus, she came from a long line of aristocrats. Even if she was the mere daughter of a baron, there was a world of difference between her and some commoner who had gained a bit of fame on the battlefield. Every noble or royal on the continent sought to bring her into their own country, their own domain, and their own bloodline.

Oh, yes—it wasn't just the nobility. Even the *royalty* had begun hatching schemes to get their hands on the third daughter of a baron. The issue of status could be resolved by having her adopted by a count or marquis prior to the engagement...or so went their thinking.

Meanwhile, the king had also promoted Baron Aura to the rank of viscount. If the opportunity came around to grant him another promotion, he would become a count, thus saving the time and effort of arranging an adoption by a high-ranking noble before pairing Leatoria off with a prince. This would also eliminate the inconvenience of some irrelevant nobleman meddling in his capacity as the girl's adoptive father.

So it happened that Leatoria was inundated with marriage proposals and adoption inquiries from home and abroad, appointment requests, and invitations to tea parties and soirees. She couldn't possibly respond to all of them, yet if she picked and chose, those few she replied to might jump to the conclusion that she had assented to their wishes. As such, she had uniformly rejected all the inquiries she received. That didn't stop the flow of visitors from coming by at all hours, and without warning, just like the marquis had that particular day.

Initially, whenever a much higher-ranking noble came to visit, Leatoria would do her part in receiving the guest. However, this soon proved a foolish endeavor, and she learned to hide in the attic until the visitor went home.

“What a quandary… I can’t set foot outside my manor, let alone return to my work as a hunter.”

Whenever she was enjoying a meal with the Servants of the Goddess or walking around town, she would end up swarmed by nobles pressuring her to get engaged. They even bothered her when she was inside the Hunters’ Guild or in the middle of carrying out a job. The situation certainly wasn’t conducive to keeping up with work. Rather than continue causing trouble for her party, she had chosen to take a temporary leave of absence from the Servants of the Goddess and hole up at home.

Baron Aura didn’t exactly mind that his daughter had been pushed out of the dangerous business of being a hunter. Still, as a doting dad who wasn’t ready to see his daughter engaged, let alone married, he also didn’t have it in him to celebrate this turn of events. It made no difference to him that these were ideal suitors from the upper nobility.

“You will never marry into another kingdom as long as I have anything to say about it, Leatoria! Not that our royal family would allow it in the first place…”

The royal family would never hand over their national treasure, the Goddess of Victory, to another kingdom, lest she fill that country with descendants who carried her eminent blood.

“Why not content yourself with an engagement to one of our princes? It would force all your other suitors to withdraw, and you could lead a peaceful life in our manor until your official ceremony. I have no desire to marry you off, but if it must happen sooner or later, we may as well take the option that allows us to live together in peace until the time comes.”

Oh no! This isn’t good! Leatoria felt panic rising in her chest.

If she got engaged to a royal, she would never work as a hunter again.

She thought fast. “Were I to become engaged to a prince, I would be summoned to the palace within the day to begin my princess training. After that, I would only be able to see you a few times a year at most. And it would always be in a formal capacity, in the presence of a large crowd…”

“Well, that settles it! No marrying any princes!”

The baron was an easy mark.

“But what options does that leave us?”

“Let’s see… Oh, I know!” Leatoria was struck with a bright idea. “I’m heading out on a little trip, Father!”

“You whaaaaaaat?!”

***

“So, you’re requesting our escort services for the duration of your trip?”

“Yes, exactly!”

At first, the Servants of the Goddess thought Leatoria had finally come back to them. However, there was a catch: She was approaching them not as a fellow party member but as a client looking to hire a team of hunters. Despite the initial confusion, Leatoria’s explanation made sense. Individual members couldn’t make these sorts of demands of their own parties, so instead she had submitted a formal escort request as the daughter of Baron Aura.

It was actually quite logical. There was nothing strange about it.

“The plan is for us to be a shield to fend off your suitors, huh? Okay, I’m in! Might as well get a share of that protection for ourselves, too!”

“Yeah!” the rest of the party crowed.

“Um, what?”

***

“And that’s our story. We’ve come such a long way to see you, Miss Mile! Please make us your servants!”

“Huh?!”

Despite showing up without an appointment, the Servants of the Goddess had quickly been granted an audience with Mile-001. Was it because the staff recognized their faces from the infamous aerial broadcast? Or was it because of something they said?

They had announced themselves and their intentions quite clearly, telling the attending priest, “We’re the Servants of the Goddess, and we’ve come to see Miss Mile.”

Generally speaking, only personal acquaintances of Mile’s used her actual name instead of calling her “the divine messenger”—which had perhaps made the priest aware that these were not just any visitors. He might also have been under the mistaken assumption that the Servants of the Goddess was a literal description of who they were, rather than their party name.

Whatever the case, they were ushered in to see Mile-001 immediately.

The sudden arrival of the Servants of the Goddess and their ensuing request had Mile-001 flustered. Still, it could have been worse. At least no one had come at her screaming, “You impostor!” or “What did you do with Mile?!” and attempted to strike her down. Indeed, her face showed mostly relief—because the nanomachines inside her had actively gone to the trouble of arranging her facial muscles in exactly that expression.

Mile-001 was wary after her past encounter with the Wonder Trio and Mariette, who had seen through her in quick succession. However, Leatoria and the other Servants had not spent anywhere near as much time with the real Mile, so they were more easily duped.

“Hmm… Your pesky suitors are getting in the way of your daily lives, so you want the excuse that you’re carrying out a mission from the divine messenger, huh?”

“Right. Since you can’t leave your shrine, we will report back to you on the state of the outside world as we broaden our horizons and engage in our normal hunter work,” Leatoria explained. “Were the divine messenger to entrust us with such a vital task, no one would dare stand in our way by trying to pressure us into a marriage. That would constitute a defiance of the Goddess’s will and might result in one being branded an enemy of the divine.”

“Good point,” said Mile-001. “Mariette had a similar idea. Great minds think alike, I guess.”

In truth, Mile-001 didn’t need any convincing. It had long been established that the nanomachines were not supposed to

harm or otherwise disadvantage native life-forms, except in situations that involved the use of magic or a direct order from a superior. Here, it was the nanomachines' fault that the Servants of the Goddess were in such a difficult position. And so, it only made sense that Mile-001 should help the Servants of the Goddess out.

She agreed to their plan readily.

Meanwhile, her priests would go along with anything that kept the divine messenger happy. Now that all of her former party members had absconded, they dreaded the day that she would decide to follow suit. If working with the Servants of the Goddess would get them on her good side, the priests were all too ready to assist.

At Mile-001's instruction, they wrote up an official request form under the head priest's name and even paid the Servants a commission, though it wasn't a particularly large sum.

It didn't hurt that the girls went by the name "Servants of the Goddess." That had made a very good impression on the priests, leading them to believe the girls had always been devout believers.

***

"We did it! We got an assignment letter from Miss Mile and an official request form from the head priest! Now we can finally swat away all those pesky bugs who have been buzzing around!"

Despite the official form, the request had been made without the involvement of the Hunters' Guild. This was not an independent request of the kind that hunters received directly from a client, cutting the guild out of the process. In fact, they had not received this request in their capacity as hunters at all; instead, it had been granted to them as devout servants of the Goddess. Theirs was a formal mission the shrine had given them at the behest of the divine messenger, in accordance with her blessed oracle.

To prove that they weren't a bunch of fools spouting nonsense, they had a letter from the divine messenger herself and an official request form from the head priest.

Now that they had a sacred cause to guide them, they were invincible.

“All right, Servants of the Goddess! We’re back in action—full speed ahead!”

“Yeaaaaaah!!”

And that was how Leatoria shook off her suitors and resumed her work as a hunter.



Afterword

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone. FUNA here. We've made it to Volume 19 of *Average*! Next time, we finally hit the 20-volume mark!

By now, all three works I've written—*Average*, *80,000 Gold*, and *Potions*—have been published in print, adapted into manga, adapted into anime…and ended their television runs.

I've burned out to pure white ash… NOT! I'm still way too young to be withering away! The anime may have ended their runs, but there's always rebroadcasts, streaming and Blu-ray releases. Plus, the chance of a second season isn't zero!

Having passed these milestones, it's time to start fresh and put my all into writing. Stick around for the adventures of Mile, Mitsuha, Kaoru, and friends in novel and manga format!

In this volume, the Crimson Vow finally marches on to the capital! Mile reunites with some old friends and secures herself a new base. *Two* new bases, actually—both a clan base and a base where she gets to be administrator!

The Wonder Trio and the third princess duo maneuver behind the scenes! Meanwhile, everyone back on the old continent is doing their best to hang in there…

Next time, in Volume 20, the Wonder Trio and the Crimson Vow will begin their work in the capital in earnest. Will Pauline and Reina rekindle their rivalry with the Wonder Trio?

MILE: "Why is the phrase 'CAUTION: Do not mix' coming to mind?"

MAVIS: "What a coincidence. I was just thinking the same thing…"

REINA & PAULINE: "Shut up, you two!"

Also, nobody let Reina cook!

That way lies death.

It'll be a one-hit kill.

The world will be destroyed...

What lies in store for Mile and her merry band of friends? Let's pray that Pauline and Reina's storage magic training pays off. Amen.

MARCELA: "Um, why can't you simply teach them the true essence of magic, like you did for us? Or ask the Goddess to give them access to the inventory?"

MILE: "Reina and Pauline didn't become hunters for my sake. They aren't like you three, who have bent over backward for me. I want Reina and Pauline to achieve this on their own. I've been coaching them on how to use ordinary storage magic, so they should get there eventually..."

MARCELA: "I see. And since Mavis figured it out despite her lack of magic skill, I'm sure their pride as mages won't permit them to concede defeat..."

This is all well and good, but Reina and Pauline still don't know that the Wonder Trio are cheating. Were they to discover the truth, they would definitely be demanding access to the same hack.

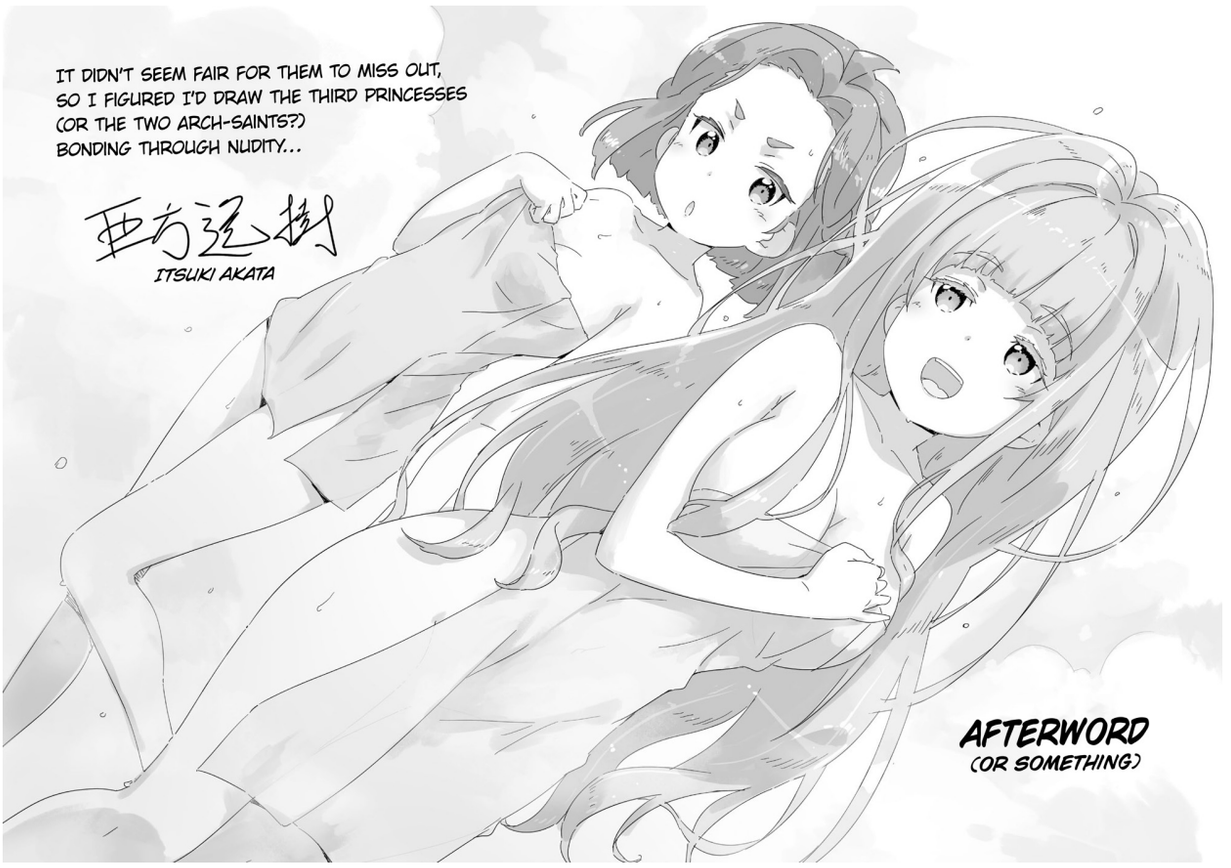
If we remove Mile from the picture, Mavis might actually have the best sense for magic of our main characters. The Goddess has a twisted sense of humor...

Thanks for supporting my Tiny Girls Who Look 12 or 13 Trilogy in novel, manga, and anime format!

And finally, to the chief editor; to the illustrator, Itsuki Akata; to Yoichi Yamakami, the cover designer; to everyone involved in the proofreading, editing, printing, binding, distribution, and selling of this book; and to everyone who's taken these stories into their homes, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I am sure that we will see each other again with the next volume...

—FUNA


IT DIDN'T SEEM FAIR FOR THEM TO MISS OUT,
SO I FIGURED I'D DRAW THE THIRD PRINCESSES
(OR THE TWO ARCH-SAINTS?)
BONDING THROUGH NUDITY...
ITSUKI AKATA
AFTERWORD
(OR SOMETHING)



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