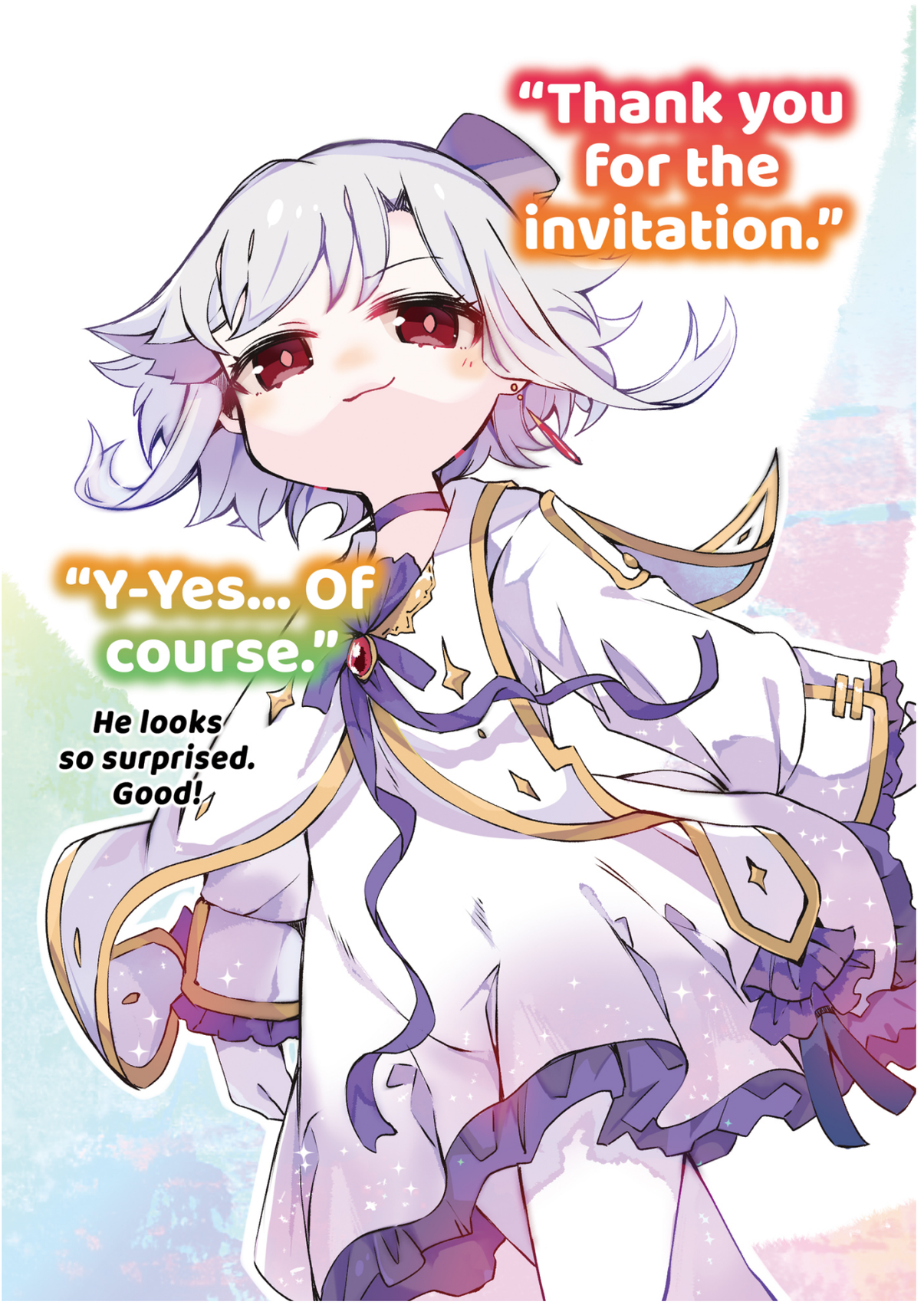

10
Author
FUNA
Illust.
SUKIMA
I SHALL SURVIVE USING POTIONS!


10
Author
FUNA
Illust.
SUKIMA
I SHALL SURVIVE USING POTIONS!


"Thank you for the invitation."
"Y-Yes... Of course."
He looks so surprised. Good!


?!
"Uh... Did I screw up again?"
"Ah..."
I messed up.
I know, I'll use "that line"!
"This is..."
"A glass ornament."
?!
HMM...
"..."
Huh?
AHH...

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I SHALL SURVIVE USING POTIONS!





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Chapter 76: The Town

I said my goodbyes to the others at the Hunter's Guild branch and set off on my own. First things first, I had to secure lodging; I definitely wanted to avoid resorting to sleeping on the floor with a bunch of low-ranking hunters because I was too late to get myself a nice room. The others had told me about an inn where a woman could stay without worries, so I just had to make sure to book a room there before it got full. I made sure to confirm with a few merchants afterward, because I couldn't trust the standards of hunters when it came to lodging that was safe for women, and there were no issues there.

Of course, I was supposed to be a poor saint or stray priestess or whatever you wanted to call it, living in honorable poverty, so my lodging couldn't be so fancy that it came with a bath. I could deposit my sweat and other waste into the Item Box, anyway, so I didn't actually need one. I'd learned this method from Reiko; how the heck had that newbie come up with it when I was the one who'd been using the Item Box for so long?! Though, being Japanese, I still preferred to take baths whenever I could, even if my body and clothes were technically clean.



This wasn’t my first time stopping by the town, but it was my first time doing so as a priestess. I mainly did my work as a priestess in small villages, rest areas by the road, and orphanages on the outskirts of town, and then I acted like an ordinary person whenever I was in big towns. I usually changed into normal clothes before entering, but I wasn’t able to this time because I was with a group of merchants and the hunters guarding us, and I didn’t intend to change anyway because of what I planned to do here.

Previously, I had stopped by towns to do some sightseeing, try the local cuisine, buy souvenirs for the others, sleep in a proper bed, and various other reasons that had nothing to do with my activities as a priestess. If I did any work in a big town, I’d end up having to stay longer, and there was a higher chance that nobles, someone from the Temple, or hunters looking to get their wounds cured for free would come looking for me. I mean, I was trying to get my name out there, sure, but my plan was to have my reputation gradually work its way up to the royal capital, not to get surrounded and taken advantage of in some provincial town.

That was why I’d been dealing with people I’d met in passing in small villages or on the road, or during short stays at orphanages on the outskirts of town. It was a sort of hit-and-run tactic, in which I wouldn’t stay in one place for too long. I never visited the Hunter’s Guild or facilities with connections to the Temple as a priestess, so unless I happened to run into people who’d interacted with me somewhere else, there was practically no way for my identity to be exposed. Plus, even if someone had seen me as the priestess before, it was unlikely that they’d make the connection if I was wearing regular clothes the second time. I gave a very different impression when I wasn’t wearing the priestess getup, and it’d be even harder to tell if I kept my face down.

Of course, I could change my face completely, but there was no need for me to go to such lengths to hide my identity. There was nothing strange about Edith going to town; in fact, it would be more unnatural if she never went there at all. Getting spotted in town once in a while wasn’t an issue as long as I left before any weirdos came looking for me.

I was in my usual priestess outfit today, so I stood straight and walked with my head held high, as I did whenever I was in

this mode. Anyone who'd met me as the priestess before would be able to recognize me right away. Even if no one here knew Edith, anyone who saw an unfamiliar priestess staying away from the Temple and not doing priestess work would easily be able to connect the dots with the rumors of Edith, the stray priestess who visited small villages and orphanages.

There was a reason I'd entered town still wearing this outfit: to launch a counterattack against whoever had hired those soldiers, since they were sure to send more forces. I still had a lot of preparing to do.

"An invitation for me?" I asked.

"Yes. He strongly insists you go."

There it was. The local lord who governed the villages in this area had sent a messenger for me. The merchants and escorts I'd met had probably been talking about me, and I'd been gaining fame as the mysterious stray priestess lately. There had been rumors going around that I usually did charity work, like running soup kitchens at orphanages and in poor villages, but also that I healed the wounded and sick with the Goddess's mercy. It was only a matter of time before a local noble or the head of a major business came looking for me.

I'd been saying I healed people by relaying the people's wishes to the Goddess, that I didn't have any powers of my own, as well as making sure my healing was no better than what a skilled doctor or apothecary could do. Those measures were intended to ensure that I wouldn't be so valuable that someone would go to any lengths to acquire me. Still, even if there were other options that were just as effective as far as healing went, the cachet that came with the Goddess's power was surely hard to resist.



Say, for example, some noble girl had an illness cured by the Goddess's blessing. If she'd been treated by a doctor or an apothecary, she'd be known as the girl who somehow managed to have her illness cured. If she was healed by me, she would instead become the girl who was loved and protected by the Goddess and had therefore received her blessing. It wasn't hard to see why everyone would prefer to be healed by the Goddess instead of by other means. Plus, many people would likely have ulterior motives, like hoping to ask the Goddess for other favors.

I hadn't done anything to ensure secrecy from the merchants or escorts, so they'd probably been telling others about me, thinking it was for my benefit. Word about the work I'd done in the past and how they'd saved me from nearly getting kidnapped had surely spread by now. After all, doing so would keep me safe, and it was an opportunity for them to tell everyone about how they'd protected a servant of the Goddess, so there was no reason for them to think it'd be an issue, and, in fact, they were right.

They may have even figured that getting the local aristocrats involved would further protect me from the group that planned to kidnap me. The aristocrats here would see value in getting to know me, and it would reflect poorly on them if I ended up getting attacked or kidnapped in their territory. Also, having your name out there made everything easier when it came to freelance philanthropy work, because people were more likely to welcome you with open arms, offer donations, and perform volunteer work. It was especially nice for people like me who wanted to make friends in high places. Such people were usually a lot more blatant about self-promotion, but we'd been avoiding that sort of thing as much as possible.

We just needed connections with a small handful of influential people at the top, which was why we'd been trying to get our name out there in the first place. We weren't in it to be followed around by the masses. Sure, I still intended to keep my activities going even after making contact with the higher-ups in order to get in the good graces of the general public, but it would be whenever I had free time. Yes, I wanted to help the people of this world, but those closest to me came first, and then I'd gradually expand that help to others. I couldn't just give out unlimited miracles haphazardly. Having people rely on some transient thing like someone else's superpower wouldn't be to their

benefit in the long run. What would happen if they became dependent on it and then lost access to that power?

Anyway, I'd decided to accept the local lord's invitation. It was for this afternoon, so it was a dinner invitation. Maybe he assumed a traveling priestess didn't get any good food and wanted to win my heart through my stomach?

In the afternoon, I arrived at the local lord's manor on the carriage that had been sent over. An old man who seemed to be the family courtier or butler guided me through the building to meet the lord himself. It'd been a dinner invitation, but I was shown to a reception room of sorts instead of being taken directly to the dining hall.

There was no need for bodyguards for a girl who was obviously no fighter. Still, both the lord himself and the servant, who was pretty up there in years, probably knew some level of martial arts, and bodyguards could've been hiding in the walls, under the floor, in the ceiling, or inside the chest of drawers. They would surely have hidden weapons on hand too.

"Thank you for the invitation," I said.

"Y-Yes... Of course."

He looks so surprised. Good!

I mean, he was expecting some shabby plebeian priestess and was greeted instead by a young lady adorned in a simple yet sophisticated priestess robe made of luxurious fabric. It was no wonder he looked so shocked. This outfit wouldn't look out of place alongside a noblewoman's dress. I couldn't imagine how much this elegant, lustrous fabric would cost in this world. Of course, this wasn't the same outfit I wore on a regular basis. People wouldn't know how to react if a priestess did volunteer work wearing *this.* Besides, it'd be a pain to clean if it got dirty.

Oh, and this wasn't a potion container but something that had been made in the automated factory inside Kyoko's mothership. Kyoko and Reiko had come up with the design, since I had absolutely zero talent in that department. That was why I'd decided against making the outfit as a potion container. If I wanted to make something scientific, the mysterious potion container-making system did all of the work and produced something with my desired features, even if I didn't understand the details. But when it came to clothes, the designs turned out exactly how I pictured them, even if the shape and patterns were

terrible. Apparently, when it came to design elements, the system determined that any imperfections were my deliberate stylistic choices.

Why does it have to work that way, damn it?!

Anyway, that was why the only decent clothes I could make were simple garments that I knew by heart, like plain shirts and jeans with a small potion container attached to a pocket. There was no way I could conjure up something with a complicated design. Well, I could, but it'd end up uneven, asymmetrical, and ultimately looking like something patched together for a clown to wear. My powers had seemingly determined that was what I actually wanted.

Kyoko's mothership had data about clothes with futuristic designs, but nothing for a world like this one...though, really, I should've expected as much. Anyway, that was why Kyoko and Reiko had designed this outfit for me. They had then given the computer some instructions, and the machine had handled the rest automatically. The materials it used were some kind of synthetic fibers made with science or chemistry or something. The appearance and texture were superior even to those of silk, and the outfit was both durable and stain-resistant. Not only that, but it was breathable, fireproof, and even effective at stopping blades.

I was also wearing some religious-looking accessories that we'd made. They were simple and reserved in design, but they'd be worth a pretty penny if sold. Some of them were even usable as self-defense weapons, like the one that created a beam of energy like a lightsaber when activated by my voice. Oh, and I didn't just have this special priestess outfit and the one I usually wore, but also a completely normal priestess outfit, a cheap priestess outfit, a tattered priestess outfit, a child-sized priestess outfit for when I picked up orphans, a priestess outfit for battle, and various other sets of clothing stored in my Item Box, so I could use whichever one was most appropriate for the situation.

Ready to go!

There were two ways I could've approached this visit: showing up in cheap, shabby clothes to emphasize that I was a struggling commoner priestess, or making my appearance in this attire, which made me seem as if I were of noble birth. This way, the lord was likely to be reluctant to use high-pressure tactics on me

until he could be sure of my status and who I had backing me. Plus, it was taboo to ask about the background of a priestess who'd distanced herself from the secular world. It would be a grave breach of etiquette, even for the local lord.

"Ah, sorry!" said the lord. "Welcome! Please, take a seat!"

Yeah, he didn't know what my social standing was, so he had no idea how to interact with me in terms of formality and demeanor. He'd probably expected the stray priestess to be a commoner who'd been called a saint on the streets with no proof of authenticity; a self-proclaimed priestess with no official status or connection to the Temple. He must've been planning to act all high and mighty like, "Someone seems to be after you, so I'll protect you. In exchange, show me the so-called power of the Goddess." Then he could see if I was the real deal and put me under his control if I was. But how would he react now that he saw I appeared to be wealthy and potentially even of a higher social standing than him? Normally, it would be bad form for an aristocrat to act too humble before a commoner. However, in this case, he was dealing with a priestess—self-proclaimed or not. Unlike on Earth, independent priestesses were treated like ordained clergy, so it shouldn't have been an issue for an aristocrat to speak respectfully to one.

However, after urging me to sit, the lord fell completely silent. He seemed to be at a loss now that he wasn't able to use the speech he'd prepared for the commoner stray priestess.

I decided to take the diplomatic approach and said in a friendly tone, "So, may I ask why you've invited me here today?"

"R-Right. I've heard about your inspiring activities and how some treacherous scum were looking to harm you. As lord, I couldn't permit such insolence against a servant of the Goddess in my territory. So I wanted to suggest you stay at my manor for a while until they give up on going after you."

He seemed to have decided to leave the prying questions for later and treat me with respect for now. An aristocrat who'd joined the priesthood typically came from a complicated background and wouldn't want others poking their noses into their business. It would've been inappropriate enough to pry into a commoner's background, but it was even worse with an aristocrat. There was no way he could directly ask me about my social status. It was a reasonable call on his part.

Really, this man clearly wasn't stupid, and he'd acted decently

enough. According to the merchants and hunters I'd spoken to, he didn't treat commoners with disrespect and was one of "the good ones" as far as aristocrats and lords went. That was why I'd accepted his invitation in the first place. Now, those four soldiers and whoever had sent them couldn't try anything on me in the middle of town… Actually, come to think of it, it would've been a huge problem if soldiers or private guards from another territory tried to kidnap any girl out in the open. Besides, the local lord welcoming me like this might well prevent anyone from trying anything in public, but it wouldn't stop them from snatching me away where no one could see.

After our initial meeting, we moved to the dining hall for our dinner party. On the lord's side was the lord himself, his wife, and their children: two boys and a girl, each either five to six or twelve to thirteen years old. There were servants there too, of course, but they didn't count.

I'd been asked to show them the Goddess's power during dinner, but I'd said things like "The Goddess offers her grace only when she listens to the people's sincere wishes" and "How impious of you to try to test the Goddess!" Then I'd made them pray in penance, and that was that. The conversation went on for a while afterward, and I deflected any questions about me by saying, "What happened before I became a priestess has nothing to do with me now." They'd given me all sorts of invitations under the guise of them being "for my protection," but I'd shut them down by saying, "It's my duty as a priestess to be out there helping the people, not hiding somewhere safe." I'd deftly evaded the attempts to engage me thrown out by the wife and kids too.

It wasn't hard to maneuver around people who thought I was just some twelve- or thirteen-year-old kid, to be honest. Especially when they knew nothing about me and had to be careful not to upset me.

After I'd eaten my fill of the delicious meal, I told the family I might be able to help if something ever happened to them, then quickly left.

All right, I cleared my first objective!

Next, I had to go to the Hunter's Guild and hire bodyguards, then go to the Commerce Guild for some financial support and allies. I just needed the guards until I could settle the score with

the four soldiers and whoever had hired them; that is, I planned to wait for them in this town, so my new guards would have to work for me only during my stay here. I wouldn't have required them if I hadn't needed to hold anything back, but since I was pretending to be a normal commoner with a bit of a connection to the Goddess, and because I wanted to prevent problems from happening rather than solving them after the fact, the bodyguards should be helpful.

As for the Commerce Guild, I planned to raise a large sum of money there. I'd have a lot of expenses like hiring bodyguards, after all, so I wanted to put my name out there and prepare for my counterattack in this town by gathering more allies. It was the local lord and me (who had the favor of the Goddess) against an aristocrat of some other territory, or possibly a business owner. It was pretty obvious which side the Commerce Guild would take. Besides, I was Edith the mysterious stray priestess now, not Kaoru, the owner of Little Silver. I was supposed to be decently well off, so I could exchange something valuable for a sum of money without issues. If I could get some merchants on my side in the process, it would be a big win for me. I might end up drawing some unwanted attention, but I'd considered that in my decision to hire bodyguards.

All right, no problems here!

The next morning, after the rush of hunters accepting orders had ended, things were finally starting to quiet down at the reception window on the first floor of the Hunter's Guild branch.

"You'd like to hire bodyguards?" asked the receptionist.

"Yes. Not to escort me to another town, but to guard me while I stay locally," Edith said.

The receptionist looked at her with a dubious expression.

Requesting a bodyguard wasn't unusual in itself, but they were typically hired by merchants traveling to other towns. It was quite rare to ask for guards when one wasn't leaving town at all. There were aristocrats and rich people who did so, but there were usually retainers, knights, or soldiers hired as regular employees to act as personal guards. Designating specific people to hire would've been one thing, but putting out a general request to hire any hunter without a specific background was pretty much unheard of. Not to mention, the request had come from a child without her parents or an adult accompanying

her, and the priestess outfit raised even more questions. Normally, priestesses who were minors belonged to the Temple. It was unthinkable for one to go out on her own and hire a bodyguard for herself.

Unlike yesterday, Edith was wearing her normal clothes—the design was slightly different from that of the outfits worn by priestesses at the Temple, but it was still obviously a priestess outfit. Religious attire differed depending on the country and sect, so that wasn't an issue. Everyone should've assumed Edith was just a normal priestess. Perhaps that was why the receptionist was so taken aback; it would've been one thing for Edith to hire bodyguards to escort her to another town, but she'd never heard of such a young commoner priestess—likely still an apprentice, at that—hiring bodyguards while she stayed *in* town.

There was a dull thud.

"Ack!" yelped the receptionist. "M-My apologies. Let me look into your request…"

The senior receptionist at the next window had kicked her in the shin. Receptionists of the Hunter's Guild were expected to carry out any and all requests calmly and with smiles on their faces. Guild receptionist was an elite profession admired by women everywhere. They were expected to earn the trust of hunters and clients alike with their composure, knowledge, and superior decision-making skills. Edith's receptionist had been sharply disciplined for unsightly behavior that undermined that trust.

"Yes, I'm looking to hire three to five people," Edith said. "I need them to be strong enough to take on four or five average soldiers. My condition is to include one woman if there will be a total of three or four bodyguards, or two or more women if there will be five. As for the duration, let's say ten days for now. If both sides agree at the end of the term, we can talk about an extension. If we don't agree, the contract ends there. I'd come back here to look for someone else to hire in that case."

"Hmm…" the receptionist said, deep in thought.

Kaoru (as Edith) had thought the conditions weren't bad, so she was confused by her reaction. "Is there a problem?" she asked.

"Oh, no, there's no problem with the request itself. However, if we are to include women, there's only a limited number of individuals who meet the criteria… But I understand, of course.

As a girl, it would be intimidating to have a group full of burly men, and having female bodyguards will be convenient for bathing, going to the restroom, or sleeping in the same room.”

The issue with a single woman hiring all male bodyguards was the risk of getting violated by the bodyguards themselves. Everyone knew it was better to mitigate this risk by choosing a party with women in it, but a guild staff member wasn’t going to say that outright, of course. However, these requests were typically made when going out of town, and one was expecting to fight monsters and bandits. Three or four hunters could fight off a stray orc, a few goblins, or a kobold. Bandits were just scum who had failed at being soldiers or hunters and often didn’t even bother training, so they could be easily defeated, even if they outnumbered hunters two-to-one. But if they were expecting to fight soldiers, that was a different story.

Few parties could defeat a group of soldiers that matched their own numbers while protecting their client and without suffering casualties themselves, and most of them didn’t have women on their teams. Plus, such skilled parties wouldn’t accept a request to guard some girl in town unless she was the queen of some country, and Kaoru certainly didn’t look like one—she looked more like a villainess. Not to mention the mere fact that she was looking to hire guards under these conditions suggested that she was certain she would be getting attacked. Otherwise, a commoner wouldn’t spend so much money on protection in such a safe town. It was especially unusual considering even bandits and thugs rarely attacked priestesses or priests.

“There are very few parties that meet your criteria, and even fewer would be willing—”

“I’m thinking of offering fifty gold coins as payment,” Kaoru said.

“Huh?”

The receptionist froze.

Fifty gold coins was equivalent to around five million yen in Japan. Five million yen, just for guarding someone for ten days in town. If split between three people, that would be around one million, six hundred and seventy thousand yen each for a mere ten days or less of work. If they were to stay in town, they could rush to a doctor, apothecary, or the Temple in case of an injury, and if they could hold off attackers for a while, the town guards

or other hunters could come to help. Besides, it was unlikely that someone would attack a commoner girl—a priestess, at that—in the middle of town. Even if someone that unhinged actually existed, they probably wouldn't be part of a bigger organization. That would be the logical assumption, anyway, making this a very tempting offer.

"We shall take on that job!"

"Huh?" Kaoru and the receptionist said at once.

There was another loud thud, and the receptionist squealed as her superior kicked her in the shin once again.

"We, the Blazing Valkyries, accept your request," said the stranger.

Claiming the job before it had been put up on the request board, or even before it had been officially approved by the guild, was a clear violation of the rules. However, for better or for worse, there were no other hunter parties there that fit the requirements Kaoru had listed, especially the part about including women in their ranks. There could have been a quarrel at that moment if any other party had been eligible to take on this job. If all went well, it was potentially fifty coins without doing anything for ten days. Even if an attacker went after the girl, they just had to fight and drive them away. It was a huge payout simply for going on walks around town or to an orphanage. The terms were so good that any eligible party would jump at the chance to take it as long as they didn't question why a common priestess would offer so much money for such a simple request.

"B-But your party doesn't have much experience in combat against humans…"

"There's a first time for everything," said the woman speaking on behalf of the Blazing Valkyries. "No one starts off as an experienced veteran, do they? Besides, we've fought monsters more than enough times to at least be on par with parties that have taken on a few soldiers."

It was true; the Blazing Valkyries had not only defeated orcs, but a few ogres and graybears too. They certainly were qualified when it came to sheer combat prowess.

"Ah, y-yes, well…the thing is…!" the receptionist muttered, followed by some kicks to her shin. "Gah!" she cried out in pain. "V-Very well…but I'll approve it only after you've passed the interview with the client." Her expression was refined, but I could

see tears in her eyes from the damage she'd sustained to her shin.

"Good. Please process the request from the client, then process our order application," the newcomer said.

Kaoru watched the exchange blankly.

The Blazing Valkyries were, as the name suggested, a party of five women.

Chapter 77: Counterattack

The receptionist had been present in the Hunter's Guild interview room at first, but she left after Kaoru had told her she was interested in the all-female party and wanted to start discussing the details of their contract. There were often things clients and contractors wanted to keep purely between themselves, so guild staff didn't participate in the part of the meeting where the hunter side explained how they had the ability to carry out the tasks requested by the client.

"Thank you for your time today," Kaoru said.

"Thank you!" the hunters said in unison.

The two sides began discussing the details of the job. The hunters had made a favorable first impression, but they hadn't officially agreed to anything yet. They would now discuss the terms of the contract, and if their conditions didn't align, the deal would be off completely.

The women were earnest, respectful, and sincere, but that didn't mean they could take on any job. They had broken the rules a bit when they first tried to take the request, but they simply seemed to have jumped the gun because they didn't want to miss out on a good job. It was a good thing there hadn't been any other eligible parties around, because it was very likely that an argument would have broken out then and there. The two main factors that made Kaoru consider this group were the receptionist telling her there weren't many parties that fit her criteria, and the fact that they were all women. There were various things she wouldn't have to worry about if there were no men around, which made things a lot more convenient for her. Not to mention, since it was an all-female party, it was likely that each of their members was there on merit and not because male party members wanted them there. Kaoru had no intention of dealing with that kind of favoritism or inter-gender drama.

I think they're just what I'm looking for.

As I could plainly see, the party was a group of five women. Supposedly, they'd decided on a slightly larger group of five instead of a three-to-four-person group since women

intrinsically had less strength than men. When a member temporarily left the group due to injury or other reasons, an additional backup member was brought in, and they became a six-person party during the training period.

Their leader was Ishris, a thirty-two-year-old swordswoman who wielded a short sword. She said her husband was a chef and not a hunter, so her kids would be fine even if something happened to her...

Are you really fine with that?! And where'd you find such an understanding husband, anyway? Was it one of those, "I fell in love with the way you stuff your face with my cooking" type of situations? Damn it!

Although she was the party leader, she mainly decided the direction of the group's activities outside of combat, and someone else took command during battle. It would be pretty much impossible to give orders to the entire group when fighting at the vanguard, so that was understandable.

Emis the swordswoman was twenty-five and used a large claymore in battle. Some claymores could be wielded with one hand, but most were two-handed weapons. According to her, she always held her sword with both hands, which was understandable for a woman.

Sherna, twenty-one years old, was a lightly armored warrior. She dual-wielded weapons with a lightweight rapier in her right hand and a parrying dagger in her offhand, which she used to intercept enemy attacks. The dagger could be used as a weapon, of course, but it was mainly for defensive purposes. Supposedly, it could be used against humans and monsters alike, but it was probably difficult to parry a wider broadsword with such a small dagger, and it looked like it might even break if subjected to enough force.

I still didn't really know the difference between a swordsman and a warrior. If one's main weapon was a rapier, wouldn't they be considered a swordsman? A rapier was a type of sword, wasn't it? Did swordsmen only use swords, while warriors used a variety of weapons? Then did Sherna use other weapons too? That must require a lot of skill.

Wait, maybe she got shunned by the swordsman community because she uses that parrying dagger? How cruel...

Nailey was the seventeen-year-old lancer of the group. She was younger than the rest of the party, so maybe she was being

trained?

Chessie the archer was twenty-eight and the battle commander. She used a bow and arrow, as well as a dagger, and also acted as a scout for the group. In combat, she protected the lancer with her dagger when enemies closed the gap too quickly to be fended off with a spear. It was true that being at the rear of the group with a ranged weapon was probably the best position to oversee the battlefield and give out orders. Still, I had to say one thing…

“That’s way too much of a burden on Chessie!”



I couldn't help but blurt it out. The four other women wordlessly looked down at the ground while Chessie nodded in agreement. Apparently, they'd already known this, and it probably wasn't my place to tell them how to do things. They had a nice balance of classes and seemed more than satisfactory as far as my criteria went in terms of overall strength. In other words, they were skilled enough to take on four to five regular soldiers. The receptionist also confirmed that they'd defeated monsters equivalent to that many soldiers in the past. They hadn't actually fought that many people with their group alone, but not everyone would have had an opportunity to do so, so I didn't count that against them too much. They'd worked as bodyguards on a joint order with another party and killed bandits then, so it was good to know they wouldn't hesitate to kill if it came down to it.

"You have quite a wide range of ages in your group," I noted.

"Yes; that is because when a party is made up of people around the same age, they tend to take time off or retire around the same time, which can be a massive hit to the group's overall strength and make it difficult for them to go on. When the ages are spread out, the members will leave one at a time, which lets us plug any holes as needed without the team falling apart or becoming drastically weaker at once," Ishris explained.

"Ah, I see..."

That made sense. People could suddenly take time off or retire for all sorts of reasons, like marriage or childbirth.

"So, I couldn't help but wonder," I said to Ishris, "do you have an aristocratic background or— Oh, I'm sorry!"

I'd been curious because she carried herself like a noble, but I'd forgotten that asking a hunter about their past was taboo.

What was I thinking?! If she is *an aristocrat, there must be a reason she's a hunter now! I'm so stupid! I hope I didn't upset her...*

"Oh, no, not at all," she replied. "I am, well, playing a role, so to speak."

"What?!"

"A group consisting only of women tends to be looked down on by others. That is why I put on airs as though I am of noble birth, acting as if I think, 'I spend time with other hunters, but I actually think of them as lowly worms. I will strike down anyone who disrespects me' or 'You had better know your place, or you will answer to my guards in hiding.' I have never outright said I

am of noble birth, of course. All I have been doing is speaking and acting a certain way without once mentioning my background. Oh, naturally, it goes without saying that you are bound to confidentiality about this under our contract. I don't usually tell my clients these things, but you don't seem the type to break a promise. Besides, I would not want you to be nervous under false pretenses when we will be spending ten days together. I am as common as commoners can get," she said, then chuckled.

"Whaaa?!" I said, surprised that the Blazing Valkyries were so much more cunning than they seemed.

After the Blazing Valkyries told me more about themselves, it was my turn to explain my own situation. If I hadn't given them the full details, they could have misjudged the risks involved and made bad decisions. Not to mention, signing a contract with them without accurately describing the dangers was a serious violation of the rules and of common decency.

I explained that I was a stray priestess with no relation to the Temple, that I didn't have anyone backing me, and that I was performing philanthropic activities on my own dime. I had the Goddess's blessing for some reason, and when I prayed desperately, I could create a minor healing effect as if a second-rate doctor or apothecary had treated the target. I also told them that I'd been targeted by a group seeking to use the Goddess's blessings for their own gain, and that some hunters and merchants from this town had happened to help me.

"We have heard about that," Ishris said. "Those hunters were triumphantly boasting about how they'd saved a lady saint. But that aside...you call yourself a stray priestess?"

She sounded rather bemused, but I used that term half-jokingly because it was too embarrassing to call myself a priestess or saint. I thought it sounded kind of cool too...

I told them they could still pass on this assignment now that they had the full context, but the members of the Blazing Valkyries laughed it off, saying there would be no point in being bodyguards if they turned down escort missions just because they were likely to be attacked. They were even relieved, since they would've been nervous if the job had paid so well for seemingly no reason. They added that it would be a great honor to protect a saint, but they seemed to be joking about that. They likely didn't believe in the Goddess's miracles—they probably

didn’t think I was a liar but assumed it was more of a placebo thing for religious people.

We then went into negotiations over things like food expenses during the mission, incentives for if they went beyond the expected performance, the right to monster carcasses and loot from bandits defeated during the mission, the shares of proceeds from selling any captured criminal slaves, and other small details. I figured they must have been through a lot of hardships with people trying to take advantage of them just because they were women, so I accepted pretty much all of their terms. As long as they ensured confidentiality, that was all I cared about. The Blazing Valkyries seemed trustworthy in that regard.

The next time those four soldiers tried to mess with me, these ladies weren’t going to let them off the hook. After all, they’d be in for a big payday if they handed those criminals over to the authorities. Those guys wouldn’t get away with messing with me again.

I’d decided to move forward with the Blazing Valkyries, and after hashing out some even finer details, we reported to the receptionist. We filled out some official paperwork, then deposited the commission fee with the guild. Once the job was done, I was to sign a document confirming that the mission had been completed, and the Blazing Valkyries would pick up their payment from the guild. This system ensured I couldn’t back out on payment after the job was completed, nor could the hunters leave with the money without upholding their end of the bargain. The guild got their cut too, of course: twenty percent of the total payment. They weren’t a charity, after all. Besides, the payment to the guild wasn’t just a commission, but was also used to support hunters and for other things that benefited the guild members. Hunters didn’t have any power, money, social status, or influential people backing them, so a twenty percent commission for all of the support the guild provided was a small price to pay…though that didn’t stop them from complaining.

“Okay, we’ll be heading to the Commerce Guild now,” I told them. “After that, we’ll go to the inn. I’ll pay for lodging, as agreed in our contract.”

“Yes, ma’am!” they all replied enthusiastically.

Apparently, I was a good employer; I wasn’t hesitating to

spend money on things like accommodations, after all. There were some expenses you just shouldn't skimp out on, and this was definitely one of them.

"Excuse me, I'd like to trade some items..." I said at the Commerce Guild reception window. I stood out like a sore thumb. And no, it wasn't because I was super cute or anything. I mean, of course a girl in a priestess outfit who looked to be twelve or thirteen bringing in an all-female hunter party would draw some attention. That was fine. After all, I was doing this to draw attention on purpose.

"Oh, yes? What kinds of items are you trading?" the receptionist asked quietly. I may have been a little girl, but I was well put together and had five bodyguards trailing me, so she couldn't afford to disrespect me. It wasn't unheard of for an aristocrat or rich girl to become a priestess...though they'd certainly be affiliated with the Temple and not a stray.

I'd arrived with my crew of guards and a pochette but was otherwise empty-handed, which meant whatever I'd come to sell must have been a luxury item that was small enough to fit in the pochette. That was probably why she'd spoken to me in such a hushed tone. No receptionist was dumb enough to announce to the world that a child was carrying riches. The Commerce Guild wasn't full of ruffians like the Hunter's Guild, but this place attracted cunning money-grubbers, which was even worse. Bad guys in the Hunter's Guild would try to take what I had on me, but the bad guys here would try to find out where I got my valuables and take my distribution channels by legal or illegal means. It was a good thing I had bodyguards to prevent that from happening.

"I wanted to sell some precious gemstones!" I said loudly, ruining the receptionist's attempt at being discreet. I mean, I needed to get my name out there and make the people here think of me as an important source of revenue that had to be protected at all costs.

The receptionist, not expecting me to shout, was completely flustered by my response. I heard a loud thud, followed by a yelp of pain. It was a scene I was familiar with from the Hunter's Guild; it seemed this method of discipline was rather common around these parts. It must've been rough being at the bottom of the totem pole.

"M-My apologies! Please, right this way!" the receptionist said.

Apparently, I was being led to a private room. That made sense, I supposed.

As the receptionist rose from her seat, a woman who was handling paperwork in the back stood up and replaced her. There must have been procedures in place for these situations. From what I could tell, the receptionist who first dealt with a client stuck with them rather than handing them off to someone in another department. There would be less miscommunication and wasted time that way, and clients wouldn't have to deal with a bunch of different staff members, so it did seem rather efficient.

We followed the receptionist as a group, drawing stares from other guild staff and from merchants who happened to be in the building.

Good, good... Just as planned.

"Now, allow me to inspect the items you will be trading in today."

I wasn't sure when he'd been called in, but a middle-aged man was in the room we were taken to. I should've expected that they'd call in a specialist, since such a young receptionist was unlikely to be able to appraise gemstones.

"Here they are," I said as I took a small jewelry case out of my pochette and opened it, revealing three small gems.

The appraiser raised his eyebrows curiously. "Pardon me, then..." He accepted the case with his gloved hands, then began inspecting the jewels with his loupe. Some time passed as he continued working wordlessly, then he said, "Hmm. The total for all three should come to nine gold coins... No, since you're a first-time customer, we'd like to increase this to nine gold coins and six small gold coins."

That would be around three gold coins and two small gold coins each, which was around 320,000 yen. I'd already deposited the payment for the bodyguards to the Hunter's Guild, so if I combined the money I had on hand with this sale, I'd have enough for ten days' worth of food and lodging for my entire group. However...

I took my jewelry case back, closed it, then rose from my seat. "Thank you for your time, but it appears we weren't meant to do business. Good day," I said with a smile, putting my right hand to my hip and lightly waving like the noble ladies did.

“Time to go, everyone. We’ll be exchanging the gemstones in the next town,” I said to my party. “We’ll go somewhere proper, not a dishonest guild that deceives clients by offering absurdly low prices. I’ll be sure to mention how surprised I was by the purchase price here.”

“Yes, ma’am!” they replied in unison.

I’d already done some legwork on the market price here, of course. I wasn’t an idiot. These gemstones had been artificially made in the factory on Kyoko’s ship. They were on the smaller side, but they were completely flawless, and the cutting and polishing techniques used were far above the standards seen in this world.

According to Celes’s code of ethics, reproducing things based on a system of trust like money or securities was totally out of the question, but we were allowed to create “simple objects” like gemstones or precious metals. Since I’d instructed the Blazing Valkyries in advance on the various directions this could go based on the guild’s response, they’d moved quickly and without confusion, as if this were all business as usual.

“What? Oh, uh, w-wait…” the appraiser stammered, but I ignored him and left the room. I wasn’t sure when the receptionist had left, but she was already gone.

“Wow, they only offered about ten percent of market price! They must really take us for suckers! Looks like we really shouldn’t sell anything in this town!” I said out loud.

“Certainly not,” Ishris said. “The lord of the neighboring region would never allow something so malicious to happen at his own Commerce Guild, so we should take our business over there.”

The guild staff and merchants who happened to be around looked at us wide-eyed. Our group consisted of a child priestess and an earnest, all-female, middle-of-the-pack party that was relatively renowned and trusted in these parts. Neither of us looked like the type to lie to bring others down for no reason, and we had no reason to do so in the first place.

The staff and merchants began buzzing among themselves. Just as I was about to make my next move…

“Your Holiness, I didn’t expect to see you here! Is something the matter?” a man asked.

“Oh, you’re that merchant,” I said. He was the merchant who’d saved me from the soldiers who’d tried to kill me, and who had then gone out of his way to ensure I made it to town safely.

Okay, change of plans!

"Ah, it's nothing... I was simply hoping to trade some gemstones for funds to continue my charity work, but they only offered me a tenth of the market price for some reason," I said plainly. I'd decided bringing the merchant into this was an even better approach than my original plan.

"What?! They tried to take advantage of a *saint*?! And a selfless saint who was selling off her own personal items to support orphanages, no less. Please, may I take a look at those gemstones?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, here you go," I said, then handed the jewelry case from my pochette.

The merchant took a loupe out of his pocket and appraised the jewels on the spot. "How much did the appraiser offer you for these?" he asked.

"Nine gold coins and six small gold coins," I answered.

"What?" he breathed in disbelief. "Hey, call the guildmaster right now! I demand to know who did the appraisal!"

The buzzing among the guild grew even louder.

"There's no need for that."

Oh, that must be the guildmaster.

"I heard what happened," said the guildmaster. "Come with me, all of you. And summon Deel the appraiser!"

This was going pretty much how I'd expected so far.

Standing behind him was the receptionist from earlier. I'd been wondering where she'd gone, but she'd apparently left to get the guildmaster. I felt bad for assuming she'd fled the scene.

"So, shameless enemy of the Goddess and boss of the heathen organization who tried to cheat a saint of her funds for charity work by offering a measly ten percent of market value for her gemstones, you have a lot of explaining to do," said the merchant.

"Wha..." the guildmaster said, his expression tight with consternation.

That was a pretty brutal way to open a conversation, especially in a world where the Goddess was known to exist.

"Wait! Now hold on just a minute! Where is all of this coming from? What have we done to deserve this treatment?!" the guildmaster demanded.

"You conspired against Her Holiness to cheat her out of her

money for charity work and sabotage her philanthropic efforts to save orphans. A sin worthy of being punished by death," Ishris said.

"Whaaaaaat?!" the guildmaster yelled.

Nice one, Ishris! I knew the Blazing Valkyries were a good hire.

While the guildmaster was reeling from the sudden attacks from the merchant and Ishris, I stepped in to explain the situation. The people in the meeting room consisted of me, the Blazing Valkyries, the merchant, the guildmaster of the Commerce Guild, the vice guildmaster, the appraiser, and the receptionist. The receptionist had briefed the guildmasters when bringing them over, but they only had a small piece of the picture. After all, the receptionist hadn't known the true value of the gemstones, nor had she known what I'd planned to use the money for.

Without knowing all of the details, it could have seemed as if I were complaining just so I could sell poor-quality gemstones at a higher price, so she couldn't have told the guildmaster things based on conjecture, nor did she have enough time.

"So, I didn't want to get ripped off with only ten percent of the market price and therefore I decided against selling my gemstones here. I think anyone else would do the same," I said. "I understand it's a merchant's job to buy low and sell high, so I don't intend to complain. But I must say, this behavior did seem unbecoming of the Commerce Guild, so when I visit the next town, I'll have to warn them about your practices here."

"What?! What's the meaning of this, Deel?!" the guildmaster asked the appraiser with a glare.

"W-Well, I... I didn't mean to..." Deel stuttered.

"After the appraisal, he definitely said nine gold coins and six small coins," the receptionist chimed in. "If that's an unusual price, Deel must have been trying to deceive this client, or he lacks the ability to properly appraise gemstones. Also, it's unclear whether he intended to turn those profits over to the guild or to line his own pockets."

I'd expected the receptionist to cover for him, but I was completely wrong. She seemed to show no mercy to anyone who dishonored the Commerce Guild.

"Wh-What are you... No! It's not like that at all!" Deel protested.

"Then what happened? Explain yourself," the guildmaster

demanded. “The Commerce Guild isn’t just a standard business. It’s an organization with a public role, acting as the bridge between merchant and customer. Deceiving customers and affiliated businesses to turn a profit is out of the question. We may buy and sell wares, but that’s simply a service offered for the sake of convenience, *not* to line our pockets. Most of our operating expenses are paid for with membership fees collected from our affiliated merchants. You should’ve learned this on your first day as part of your orientation! If you offered a low price intentionally, that would be a violation of staff regulations. And if you really did try to swindle this young lady out of money that was meant to help orphans…that would be a crime that sullies the Commerce Guild’s name and credit, and an act against the Goddess herself. You will *not* get off lightly. So, which was it? Did you do it on purpose, or did you make a mistake with your appraisal?”

“I-I made a mistake with my appraisal, of course! Those three gemstones are actually worth ninety-two gold coins!” Deel blurted out.

Oh, he messed up. Walked right into that one… It was so obvious too.

Sure enough, the guildmaster glanced at the merchant with a knowing look.

“Oh? And how did you come up with that price without doing another appraisal?” the merchant asked. “After taking a look at the gemstones, you claimed they were worth nine gold coins and six small gold coins, didn’t you? So where did that new price come from when you only had the information from your first appraisal?”

“Ugh…” Deel groaned.

“By the way, I appraised the value to be around ninety-three gold coins. If you consider that the guild’s purchase price would be slightly lower than market value, the price Deel just mentioned would be pretty much accurate,” the merchant added.

The appraiser and guildmaster fell silent. A moment passed, then the guildmaster asked, “Well, Deel?”

“Y-Yes! I made a mistake with my initial appraisal!” Deel repeated.

“I see… Well, I can’t hold you accountable for intentionally giving a low quote without any proof. I suppose I’ll have to take

your word for it."

Deel let out a sigh of relief.

Oh, this guy's done for.

"So, you're hereby terminated from your position," the guildmaster said.

"Whaaat?!" Deel yelled.

Knew it.

"Wh-Why?" he asked.

He thought he'd avoided punishment by insisting he'd made a mistake, but the only person surprised that he'd gotten fired was Deel himself.

"'Why?'" the guildmaster echoed. "For the Commerce Guild, nothing is more important than trust. So why would we keep an appraiser on staff who messes up an appraisal so simple that a merchant who's not even a specialist in the field can do it? Your punishment could have been lighter if you'd given in to temptation because you wanted to contribute to the guild, but we have no reason to keep you if you're so terrible at your job that your appraisals are completely unreliable."

"Ah..."

Yeah, the guildmaster had said all that knowing full well that the appraiser had been lying. He was just rubbing salt in the wound by claiming Deel could've avoided getting fired if he hadn't lied. Of course, even if Deel had said he'd done it for the sake of the guild, he would've been fired for some other reason. Everyone here knew he was just trying to worm his way out of this after trying to line his own pockets. No matter what he said, this was always gonna end badly for him after tarnishing the Commerce Guild's honor and credibility. The guildmaster had put on this show just to make Deel wallow in regret for supposedly saying the wrong thing.

This guy's mean!

Anyway, though Deel had been representing a guild and not a storefront, this was the Commerce Guild we were talking about. Therefore, a merchant's values and ethics applied here—and for any merchant worth their salt, trust was even more valuable than money. It would've been one thing if he'd only ruined his own reputation, but no one in the guild was going to cut him any slack after he'd discredited not just this particular branch, but also the Commerce Guilds throughout the country. This applied to the guildmaster too, of course. He intended to string Deel up

and make an example out of him, and for good reason.

"Deel, you are hereby relieved of your duties. Leave this building at once; you're prohibited from ever entering the staff rooms again. Don't try to go back to your desk or locker—I'll have your belongings sent to you later. Now, go! Oh, and this goes without saying, but if you've been borrowing anything from this guild branch, you must return those items immediately."

Deel said nothing. Judging by how practiced he'd seemed during the appraisal, this wasn't the first time he'd tried to rip someone off. He must have cheated a whole bunch of people who hadn't wanted to get on the Commerce Guild's bad side or simply didn't know any better. There probably wouldn't be any evidence in the building because he'd sold them off long ago, but he may have assumed he'd never get caught and left behind a coded ledger or something. It was possible, even if unlikely, so there was no reason not to check.

Afterward, the appraiser left the meeting room, his shoulders slumped in shame. The vice guildmaster accompanied him to make sure he didn't try anything funny. And that was that, it seemed.

"Well, we'll be going now..." I said.

"Ah, wait, please! Just a moment, miss!" the guildmaster said.

He was awfully respectful in the way he addressed me...but come to think of it, I was a customer and not one of his staff members, so it wasn't all that strange.

"My deepest apologies for what happened here! As a token of apology, I'd like to have someone else appraise your gemstones and purchase them from you with an additional three percent added to the purchase price!" he said.

"Huh?"

I thought about it for a moment. I'd heard the true value of the gemstones from the merchant and appraiser earlier, so I doubted they'd try to give me a quote that was too far off. And considering how high the price was, an extra three percent was nothing to scoff at. That only meant one thing...

"No, thank you," I said.

"What...?" the guildmaster asked.

I turned to the merchant and said, "Excuse me, sir, but would you please buy these three gemstones from me for ninety gold coins?"

"Whaaat?!" the merchant and guildmaster shouted in unison.

It was no wonder they were confused, considering I'd offered the gemstones for a price that was not only less than the amount the guildmaster had just offered, but also lower than the value the merchant had specified earlier.

"You've helped me so much already," I went on. "Rather than selling them to an untrustworthy organization, I think the money would help many more people if you were to buy these gems at a profit."

In other words, if I were to give out money, it would serve the people better to give it to good people instead of bad people, even if it was in the form of profits through their business.

"W-Well, I would certainly be more than happy to purchase them for that price, but..." the merchant trailed off and glanced at the guildmaster. Of course he was concerned, as the Commerce Guild would lose face if we were to go through with the transaction.



“I am not necessarily looking to sell to the highest bidder,” I explained. “As a servant of the Goddess, I wish for profits made through our transaction to go to an upstanding person who serves the Goddess as I do. That way, the profits made from the gemstones I’ve sold will be carried on to the next upstanding person and be used for good, thus expanding the circle of good faith. This would, at the very least, be far better than the money going to the hands of the wicked to be used for waste, extravagance, or an act of evil.”

“Ah! In that case, it would be my honor!” the merchant said happily. No businessman would turn down such an offer, especially when big profits were guaranteed.

The guildmaster looked rather sour, considering I’d basically framed the guild as evil; he’d wanted to sweep this whole ordeal under the rug by buying the gemstones off me at a slightly higher price. Even so, he had no right to complain. There was no denying that the appraiser, who was a guild staff member, was very wicked, after all. Besides, even if the guild had ended up buying the gemstones from me for the inflated price, it wasn’t as if they would’ve been in the red anyway. They still would’ve made a hefty profit, just slightly less than they could have. I wasn’t going to let them off the hook with that being their “token of apology.”

“Now, let’s continue this conversation at your store,” I said. There was no reason for our transaction to be discussed right in front of the Commerce Guild members, so we quickly left the meeting room. As we were walking through the building toward the exit, I said loudly, “Since I trust you more than I do the Commerce Guild, I’d like to continue providing you with my items for a lower price than I would offer the guild!”

The merchant looked surprised for a moment, then said, “I would appreciate that very much! It’s a pleasure doing business with you! Ha ha ha!”

Good, he played along perfectly.

Obviously, it was highly unusual to talk about something like this so openly, especially in front of so many other merchants. He’d immediately realized that I’d raised my voice for a reason and played along, even though publicizing information like this would be against his own interests. This guy was good.

Now, everyone knew that I valued trust more than a slight difference in profit, that I’d rather deal with a trustworthy

merchant than earn the favor of the guildmaster, and that I still had a lot of goods to sell. And although I wasn't affiliated with the temple, I was still a maiden, so I usually got treated with respect. By "usually," I meant most aristocrats and wealthy people thought of themselves as being above the likes of priestesses, and some thieves had no qualms about attacking us. But of course, there were some aristocrats, wealthy people, and thugs who'd never lay a finger on priestesses, and some would even offer a helping hand if we were in need. After all, the Goddess was known to exist in this world.

To the people here, I was an underage priestess helping others out of my own pocket—one who would willingly sell expensive gemstones for cheaper than the guild's buying price. I looked like I was from a wealthy family too. If something were to happen to me, they would love to get on my good side by offering a helping hand. On the other hand, the guild personnel were just hired hands. It wasn't as if their salaries would increase by aiding me, so they wouldn't go out of their way to help if it meant putting themselves at risk. Even if the guild missed out on an opportunity to make money from me, the individual guild staff members were just employees, so they wouldn't care unless they had a particularly strong sense of justice and wanted to save a young priestess in need.

The guildmaster might have been somewhat upset because he'd lost face from this whole ordeal, but it had all stemmed from his staff member's malpractice, so he was responsible as their superior. He might grumble under his breath about it, but I doubted he'd do anything to me out of spite. He'd have nothing to gain by doing so and would risk losing the trust of other staff members and merchants. He wouldn't do anything stupid like that—he wasn't an idiot, though there could've been someone that dumb and petty at the head of a Hunter's Guild or something. A capable merchant, however, didn't let emotions get in the way of business; that was what separated them from third-rate peddlers.

Anyway, the Commerce Guild couldn't do much when it came to matters outside of its jurisdiction, but in my experience, store owners would be willing to do what they could for money and connections as long as they didn't need to take on too much risk. You wouldn't call a merchant first-rate unless they could properly assess risk and reward, after all.

The time had come to visit the merchant's shop. I was in his meeting room, which wasn't just a small booth, but a proper reception area. The tea and snacks I'd been served were very high quality too; it seemed I was getting the VIP treatment. He didn't serve anything to my guards, the Blazing Valkyries, but that was probably par for the course. No proper bodyguard would eat something served by an opposing party anyway. If the client they'd been protecting ended up getting poisoned, no one would hire them even if they survived. I mean, I wouldn't want to hire such useless guards either.

"Now, do you agree to the previously discussed purchase price of ninety gold coins?" I asked.

"Yes, I'd be absolutely thrilled to accept your offer, but…are you sure about this? While the purchase price when dealing with the guild is that any non-merchant can sell their wares immediately without getting cheated, they act as an intermediary between the seller and purchasing merchant. This means the guild would require their cut too, so the price would be significantly lower compared to whatever price may be reached when negotiating directly with a proper merchant. I must admit, it doesn't feel right to pay you even less than that, especially when considering your money will be used for charity work," the merchant said.

I mean, I knew all of that already.

"Mister merchant, it would be far safer and easier for me to have you purchase them instead of looking for a proper retailer and negotiating with them," I replied. "In that sense, missing out on a few percent of the sale price really isn't a concern. I can simply make up for the difference by selling better quality goods, or a larger quantity."

The merchant seemed to be at a loss for words. Maybe because what I'd just said implied that I had so many gemstones that I didn't even care about how many I'd have to sell—not that my wares would necessarily be limited to gemstones.

"Your Holiness, I have one request to ask of you," he said.

Huh, he looks pretty serious. I wonder what this is about?

I didn't think he'd be the type to say anything weird, but maybe I'd been too forward with flaunting my potential wealth.

"It's just…if you could please learn and start calling me by my name, I would greatly appreciate it."

“Oh…”

Yeah, that was my bad. I had a habit of remembering people by titles like “merchant” or “guard” if I didn’t think I’d have long-term relations with them. It couldn’t have been pleasant to be on the receiving end of that.

Yeah, sorry about that.

And so, the negotiation for the three small gemstones I’d shown at the Commerce Guild was complete, but I felt like it’d be a waste for things to end here. The merchant—I mean, Darsen of the Oris Trade Company—was the owner of a decent-sized business, and he seemed trustworthy. What’s more, he seemed to be a devout believer in the Goddess Celestine, so he’d never think of deceiving or betraying me as her priestess. He had all of the qualities I’d want in an ally to protect me from those who’d be coming after me. Not to mention, he already knew my situation, and he’d come back to town to make sure I was safe, even though it meant risking his own bottom line. If I showed him that he had much to gain by associating with me, he could become even more of an eager ally. Plus, he might prove to be helpful when the time came for us to make our way to the royal capital. You could never have too many merchants on your side, after all.

“By the way…would you be interested in purchasing something like this?” I asked as I took something out of my pochette and showed it to Darsen.

“Huh? What is that?”

It was a red diamond—a variant of the rare and valuable pink diamond with a particularly clear, red tint, vivid in color and highly transparent. It was said that only one in ten thousand colored diamonds were red diamonds. Only a few dozen of them were known to exist on Earth, and it was nearly impossible to find them on the open market.

I did have one concern: As I said, only a few dozen of them had supposedly been found throughout all of the mines being excavated on Earth, and ninety percent of them had been found in the same mine. How many red diamonds had been found in this world, where they had inferior mining technology and there likely hadn’t been much research done on them? Not to mention, news of discoveries in distant countries might not have traveled to other regions. If that was the case, red diamonds may be totally unknown and not even recognized as diamonds. Even on

Earth, diamonds had been valued at less than an eighth of what rubies and emeralds were until polishing technologies were developed. Moreover, platinum had such a high melting point that it couldn't be smelted due to technological limitations at the time, so it was called fake silver and tossed away as garbage.

Even if something was valuable back on Earth, it wouldn't mean anything if its value wasn't recognized here—it would be no different from a child's marbles.

"Th-Th-Th... Th-Tha..."

Pardon?

"Th-That's a C-Carbuncle Diamond!"

Oh, so they're a thing here too. That's what they're called in this world...

Rubies had other names back on Earth too, so I guess it wasn't too strange that it'd be known as something else here. Besides, "Carbuncle Diamond" sounded way cooler than "red diamond"!

The problem was the price. Judging by Darsen's reaction, it definitely wasn't gonna be cheap. It was by far one of the rarest kinds of diamond out there, so its value was probably gonna be up there too. This was just something that was set in the ornamentation of my potion container, so I could make as many of them as I wanted.

Anyway, Darsen was acting really strange. I was starting to think I may have screwed up. There were lines you just shouldn't cross, and this Carbuncle Diamond seemed to have easily leaped over it. I decided this was a bad idea and put it back into my pochette.

"Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!" Darsen shrieked.

"I've changed my mind," I said.

"N-N-Nooo! Please!" he pleaded, his expression contorted in despair.

Wait, is he crying? Sorry about that...

It didn't seem like he was ever going to stop causing a scene, so I reached into the pochette to offer something that might bring him back to his senses.

"H-How about this, then?" I asked.

I placed an item on the table with a thud. Surely, he'd snap out of it if we went back to trade talk.

"W-Wait a second..." he breathed, his expression immediately changing back to that of a businessman.

“It’s a glass ornament,” I said.

He fell silent.

It was a glass ornament, sure, but not just any ornament. Back when I’d been working at the Maillart Workshop in the Kingdom of Balmore, I’d been going to the library, which charged an entrance fee that was quite expensive for a commoner girl. This ornament was made of crystal glass, which I’d been selling back then to earn the library admission fee. That stuff had the gall to go by “crystal glass” even though it was noncrystalline. It was made by adding lead oxide and other stuff to give it transparency and a brilliance that was unmatched by ordinary glass. This material either hadn’t been discovered here or it just wasn’t widespread yet.

Darsen still said nothing.

Huh? Why’s he so quiet?

I mean, that was fine. He could’ve been making a bunch of calculations in his head about the buying price and profit margins or something. But for some reason he wasn’t looking at me or the ornament, but directly at the pochette at my waist. The pochette, from which I’d taken the Carbuncle Diamond and then stored it again. The pochette, from which I’d just pulled out a glass ornament that was so big it couldn’t possibly fit in the bag.

“Oh,” I said.

I messed up. I know, I’ll use “that line!”

“Uh… Did I screw up again?”

Silence.

Yup, I’ve done it now.

I was thinking of showing him spices, knives, jewelry, and some simple industrial goods made on Kyoko’s mothership, but of course all that wouldn’t have fit in the tiny pochette.

I’m so stupid!

Darsen continued staring directly at it, but remained silent, as if thinking *I probably shouldn’t ask…*

“I… I hope these three sell for a good price! These gemstones, that is…” he finally said.

What, he’s worried about the selling price? Don’t worry, they may be small, but they’re the real deal.

I’d made sure to give them minute imperfections, but they were undoubtedly high-end natural products. The cutting and polishing work were top notch too, so there was nothing for him

to worry about.

Anyway, I decided to throw in a folding knife on the house. Its design had been stolen—I mean, it paid homage to the likes of Gerber, Loveless, Buck, Lander, and G. Sakai.

There was a long silence. We were on the way to our inn, but the members of the Blazing Valkyries hadn't said a word since we'd left Darsen's shop.

Awkwaaard…

"So…" I began.

"Y-Yesh?!" Ishris squealed. She was acting strangely, considering her usually composed demeanor.

Wait a minute…

"You saw…didn't you?!" I asked menacingly.

"Eeeeeek!" the ladies shrieked in fear.

Great… Just great.



We'd decided to eat at the inn. The guards found that more secure than eating out; there was much less chance of getting attacked or running into weirdos. Plus, as long as I gave them permission, and assuming they didn't overdo it, they'd be able to drink a bit too. I did decide to add some conditions just in case, though: only two or three of the five would be allowed to drink at once, and they wouldn't drink so much that it'd affect their ability to do their job. It was probably pretty unlikely that we'd get attacked in the inn, except maybe by the main group we were up against. It wasn't as if we were staying in a dangerous area, and if someone was planning an attack, there was no reason to do it while we were at the inn. Even if those four soldiers found us, it'd take at least four or five days, or even up to seven or eight for them to report back to their boss, come up with a plan, and then round up and mobilize their men. Naturally, that meant we'd be safe here for at least a couple of days, but I wouldn't be able to let them drink after that.

A party of five women had to be well-known in a town of this size. Not because of their abilities, but just because of how rare an all-female party was. So a random thug or low-level hunter wouldn't go out of their way to mess with a client these ladies were protecting, and the same could be said for any crooked merchants who might've set their sights on me at the Commerce Guild.

Anyway, the Blazing Valkyries had been acting odd, so I thought I'd get them to relax and talk a bit with some food and drinks (paid for by me), but…

Silence. No one had even touched the food on the table.

"Um, what's going on—"

"Please forgive us for our insolence!" they pleaded at once.

Ah…

Having some small gemstones was one thing, but I'd really screwed up by showing that Carbuncle Diamond and the pochette that broke the laws of physics. Maybe they saw me as a goddess that had descended to their plane to bring salvation or something. They'd probably end up putting their lives on the line to protect me at this rate, which made me feel kind of uncomfortable. I also didn't want them to get so tense that they'd punch someone just for standing behind me. I had to talk this out with them.

"Well, you see, this strange pochette was actually given to me

by the Goddess to save orpha—”

“I knew it!!!” they all said in unison.

“Uh…”

I messed up again!

“No, uh, I’m just a normal person! It’s just that I happen to be acquaintances with Celes and—”

“What kind of ‘normal person’ knows the Goddess on a first-name basis?!” they said.

Oh no, I’m only making this worse… The other guests and waitresses are looking at us too!

“So, as I explained, I’m just a priestess who’s received a little bit of a blessing,” I said. The others said nothing.

I’d managed to come up with a cover story on the spot: my father was heir to a wealthy merchant family, and my mother was a daughter of an aristocratic family. My mother’s bloodline was also a family of priestesses, which were basically like shamans in the old days. Kind of like Himiko from that one series.

“I may only be a commoner and descendant of a low-class noble family, but I *am* still technically of royal blood. And since my family is wealthy and has been gifted with minor blessings from the Goddess, I’ve had to deal with priests, merchant houses, and low-class nobles trying to get to my family’s fortune and prestige through me. That’s why I’ve been working as a stray priestess with no affiliation with the Temple. I wanted to make sure my money would go directly to those in need rather than the hands of corrupt priests,” I said, then raised the pochette into the air. “And this is the Celestial Pochette, which is said to have been granted to my mother’s ancestors by the Goddess herself and passed down through the family for generations!”

No one said a word.

Come on, really?

“…and that’s how the Celestial Pochette, which can hold far more than its size and is said to have been kept by the Goddess’s Angel, was given to my ancestors.”

The Blazing Valkyries remained silent. Their faces told me they still weren’t convinced, but I managed to get them to accept my explanation. Sometimes, you just had to brute force things.

As an aside, Kaoru Nagase was supposedly said to be either

the Goddess's Angel or a saint these days. On Earth, saints were humans, and angels were, well, angels. But in this world, angels could be one of two things: someone who'd been sent by the Goddess from above or a human who'd been favored by the Goddess and blessed with divine inspiration. That explained why different sects and religious scripts used inconsistent terms like "angel," "saint," or "great saint," but they all agreed that Kaoru Nagase was human—with the exception of one group: the Order of the Goddess Kaoru, the religion started by Emile and the members of the Eyes of the Goddess. Fortunately, they were just a minor sect with few worshippers. The thing was, that minority happened to include royal families, aristocrats, entire navies, powerful merchant families, sailors, shipbuilders, and more, so it didn't seem like it would ever actually die out.

In the Empire of Aligot, there were two major groups: those who believed Kaoru Nagase was a demon who'd nearly brought the country to ruin and those who believed she was the goddess of salvation who'd kept the damage from the invading army to a minimum and benevolently helped with the postwar reconstruction. No matter how much aid I'd offered them by telling them about the Western islands and teaching them how to build ships, those who'd lost their fathers and sons in that war would never want to worship me, and that was totally understandable.

Anyway, it didn't seem like there were any followers of the Order of the Goddess Kaoru around here, so Kaoru was known to be a normal human girl who'd been blessed by the Goddess, posthumously canonized, and finally returned to the Goddess's side after fulfilling her duties. Therefore, it would be completely unfathomable for Saint Kaoru to reappear in this world.

According to many of the remaining tales, Saint Kaoru was known to pull food out of seemingly nowhere and eat it. My story about my magical bag, the Celestial Pochette, being given to me by the Goddess and left behind when I'd ascended, didn't contradict any of the records about me. I'd told them Kaoru had bestowed the bag upon a priestess—my ancestor—before heading to the Kingdom of Brancott to fulfill her final mission, and it'd been passed down the family line ever since.

"You must not mention any of this to anyone," I warned. "The Celestial Pochette will lose its powers and become nothing more than an old bag unless a priestess receives it upon performing

the proper rituals. In other words, it would become useless if anyone were to steal it, but it would surely seem like a priceless treasure to those who don't know that. It might be best to consider it part of a set with me."

The Blazing Valkyries nodded. It was a pretty convincing story, considering any thug who learned about the pochette would think about stealing it.

Now, they'd consider me nothing more than an ordinary girl who just happened to be slightly favored by the Goddess and had a divine artifact that'd been passed down her family line. I couldn't have them letting their guard down on the job because they assumed the power of the Goddess would protect me. If someone stabbed me in the heart, drove a stiletto into my spine, or chopped my head off, it'd be over in an instant. It'd be one thing for me to be wary of danger on a battlefield, where enemies and allies were easy to tell apart, but I was pretty much powerless against sneak attacks while walking by someone or through a crowd. That was why it was so important for the Valkyries to see me as just a powerless girl. After all, I really was one when you took my potions and the equipment I'd borrowed from Kyoko out of the equation. In order to protect myself from ambushes at close quarters, I needed professional melee fighters who could reflexively draw their weapon and deal with the attacker, or someone who could spot suspects before they approached and then stand between them and me. That was the whole reason I'd hired these ladies in the first place.

Oh, and they also acted as a deterrent for thugs and scheming merchants. Regardless of their skill level, just having bodyguards around greatly reduced the chances of those small-time crooks trying to mess with me. After all, if my escorts deemed them a threat, they wouldn't hesitate to use their weapons and dispose of them. Bodyguards didn't mess around—there was no backing out of it once someone was deemed an enemy.

Even if an attacker got their hands or head lopped off, it'd just be a case of a thug trying to rob a girl and getting cut down by her bodyguard. It wouldn't matter if they were an aristocrat or some rich and powerful merchant. If a bodyguard just allowed their client to get attacked because their opponent was rich, no one would ever hire one through the Hunter's Guild. The guild would provide their full support if such an incident did occur, and

even noble and royal families hesitated to mess with the Hunter's Guild when they went all out. So if that was the case, the dumb aristocrat who attacked someone being protected by bodyguards that had been officially hired through the Hunter's Guild would be thrown under the bus.

I was in good hands for my counterattack.

"So...what should we do?" Ishris asked.

After their meal, the Blazing Valkyries were having a discussion in their room next to Edith's (Kaoru's). Normally, they should be in the same room as the client, but Edith had insisted they stay in separate rooms because she wanted her own private space. This wasn't too big of an issue, considering the walls were quite thin, so they could easily hear any loud noises or screams, and it would only take a few seconds to rush out into the hall and barge in through her door. The enemy would want to capture Edith without killing her, and it would be impossible to break into her room without making a noise as long as she locked the door and window, which were the only ways in, and put vases or pots next to them. They could easily prevent any kidnappings from their room next door, especially since they were on the second floor.

It was hard to imagine someone would be able to grab a girl who would resist, kicking and screaming, and then somehow escape from five bodyguards chasing after them. It might be possible if there were ten or more of them, but the commotion caused by such a large group was sure to draw a crowd, or even the guards. With all those factors considered, the Blazing Valkyries had reluctantly agreed to Edith's proposal to stay in separate rooms.

"A hunter must always protect their client's secrets. Besides...if we betrayed the Angel, I don't even wanna know what'd happen to us!"

"Agreed!" the group said in unison.

"Not that we'd ever even *think* about double-crossing her. We're all loyal servants of the Goddess Celestine, after all!"

"That's right!" they all agreed in a robotic, unnatural tone. They spoke loudly, their faces tilted slightly upward, thinking the Goddess could be eavesdropping—or rather, watching over her Angel and her companions with her great, omnipotent power.

"It's simple, really," Ishris went on. "We just protect Miss Edith,

who's just an ordinary person and our client, and we punish the enemies who seek to bring her harm. But this time, we won't even think about capturing the attacker to collect half of the profits for turning them in as criminal slaves. Even if it seems easy, don't ever let your guard down. We think about Miss Edith's safety first and foremost, and strike down her enemies on behalf of the Goddess. No matter what happens. Got it?"

"Yeah!" they chorused. It was at that moment that they became religious fanatics and berserkers.

"Let's take some safety measures just in case," Ishris said.

"What do you mean by that?" Chessie the subleader asked.

"If we mess up and our entire squad gets wiped out, there'd be nothing we could do about that. Whether we let our guard down or just weren't strong enough, that'd be on us. But we can't let the Ange—I mean, Miss Edith—fall into the enemy's hands because of our shortcomings. So we're going to have everyone in town help protect her. I'm sure Darsen already knows the truth, so we'll ask for his cooperation too. We can also rope the guildmasters of the Hunter's Guild and Commerce Guild into it. Maybe they could talk to their respective guild members and, if possible, the local lord too," Ishris said. Since it was just her teammates there, Ishris spoke in a rather rough tone compared to the classy act she put on for others.

"Sounds like a plan."

"I agree."

The other members all nodded.

If this had been a normal job, they would have put in an effort equivalent to the pay, but they wouldn't have recklessly charged at an enemy if they knew they couldn't win. They'd have surrendered to a group of bandits that far outnumbered them, and if they were attacked by a swarm of monsters that was impossible to fight, they would have abandoned their cargo to try to protect their client. If even that wasn't possible, they would have prioritized their own lives. They weren't obligated to get themselves killed trying to protect a client for a protection fee of a mere two or three small gold coins, and the Hunter's Guild agreed with that sentiment. Indeed, they were expected to put in work equivalent to the compensation and no more than that. Of course, betraying the client or fleeing without trying to protect them was out of the question. There were certain standards that they were expected to uphold when it came to protection.

But when it came to matters regarding the Goddess, it was a different story altogether. Celestine was the Goddess of compassion and abundance; the savior of the people. At the same time, she was a young Goddess who didn't hesitate to wipe countries off of the map when angered. This was her Angel they were dealing with. If something happened to her, the entire continent could end up sinking into the ocean. Everyone valued their own life, but not many would sacrifice the lives of everyone else in the land to save themselves—not that they would even survive if the entire continent went down. Therefore, each and every one of them had to avoid that outcome, even if it meant giving up their own lives. That was the natural conclusion to come to, even if one was an evil, heinous criminal. After all, the Goddess was known to exist in this world, so no one doubted the existence of an afterlife.

"All right. Tomorrow, we'll meet up with Darsen and the guildmasters of the Hunter's and Commerce Guilds. Chessie, I need you to leave the group after the second morning bell (9 a.m.) and contact the three of them. Tell them we'll meet at the first midday bell (12 p.m.) at the Commerce Guild guildmaster's room. When you talk to them, I want you to first declare 'Marth One' in our name."

"Got it," Chessie replied.

"Marth One" was a codeword that was used by hunters when they absolutely needed the other party to believe what they were saying. When declared, it meant they swore that the words that followed were true, and they were willing to take any punishment if they turned out to be false. When a hunter made this declaration, the other party gave them a serious listen, even if they claimed a stampede of monsters was approaching or a demon had appeared out of nowhere. However, if their claims turned out to be lies, they would be doomed to suffer the cruelest of consequences. As such, the phrase was not one to be uttered lightly, and one had to be prepared to pay the ultimate price when using it. Yet each and every one of the Blazing Valkyries nodded, their eyes set with resolve.

"Wait, where's Chessie?" I asked.

"Oh, she went to visit the guild for a bit. We need to keep tabs on what's been going on, even when we're working on long-term missions or if we go on vacation," Ishris explained.

“Ah, I see.”

That made sense. Information ruled the world, after all. You could probably find gossip about the surrounding countries and regions, news about monster outbreaks, and info on natural disasters pinned on the guild bulletin board or something. These ladies were working for me at the moment, but they surely needed to keep up with whatever else was happening so they wouldn’t be left in the dark when they had to move on to their next gig. Their diligence only made me trust them even more.

“Also, I’ll need to pay a visit to the guild myself a little before the first midday bell,” Ishris added.

“Sure, I don’t mind. It should still be a few days until the enemy shows up again, and four escorts should be more than enough for now,” I replied.

As long as they could keep me from getting ambushed, I’d be fine. We were in town, after all, so there was no danger of being attacked by monsters. Besides, the bodyguards already rotated in and out for things like going to the restroom anyway. They’d probably already planned things out so the rest of the party would finish whatever they needed to handle, like going to the restroom, to make sure they wouldn’t need to further reduce the number of people guarding me in her absence. Celes had saved me back when the former priest from Rueda had attacked me, but I still didn’t understand why. I couldn’t count on something like that again. Maybe it was some sort of auto-defense system that was always active, or Celes just happened to be watching me at the time and directly intervened. I’d been in the Item Box for over seventy years, so maybe my link with Celes had been severed and whatever auto-defense system that had been in place didn’t work anymore. Or maybe Celes had noticed me and reactivated it… Nah. There was no way. If the link had been severed, it’d probably been left like that.

Anyway, I wasn’t enough of a gambler to leave my life in the hands of something that may or may not exist. Should I confirm with Celes? Probably not. It was best to use my own safety measures, and if some lifeline happened to save me, I’d consider it a bonus. It was like that one person who died letting their friend shoot them from close range because they were wearing a bulletproof vest. Wearing a bulletproof vest didn’t protect you from a close-range shot, teflon-coated bullets, magnums, armor-piercing bullets, automatic rifles, sniper rifles, or large-caliber

anti-materiel rifles. And even against a small pistol with .22 ammo, a headshot would mean instant death. Something like that could easily happen to me too. Even the Arkonide ship that made an emergency landing on the moon got blown up with a pure hydrogen bomb because they didn't take humans seriously and used only a minimal defensive barrier. Fools learned from experience, the wise learned from history, and I learned from novels.

Indeed, pretty much everything important in life could be learned from novels.

Something felt off.

It'd be boring just sitting around and waiting for an enemy that may or may not show up, so I'd been visiting the Hunter's Guild and Commerce Guild to gather information and stay connected, as well as going to orphanages to donate and serve food...but something was definitely off.

Everyone was unusually friendly toward me. The orphanage always welcomed me with open arms, and there was nothing odd about that, considering I'd been donating money and supplies. The issue was the Hunter's Guild and Commerce Guild. Everyone in both guilds had been acting unusually friendly—not just the staff, but the hunters and merchants too. I mean, sure, I'd played the part of a good client with deep pockets, so they naturally wanted me as an ally, but they'd been acting downright bizarre.

"Welcome, Miss Edith!"

"Would you like some tea and snacks, Miss Edith?"

"Is there anything I can help you with, Miss Edith?"

"You need help with anything, missy? I can give ya a hand!"

I'd meant to show people that it would be beneficial to help me, but it seemed more like they wanted to help unconditionally without expecting anything in return.

Yeah, there's definitely something weird going on! Hunters and merchants should be greedier about their own interests!

People who were motivated by profit were easy to read and wouldn't betray me as long as I seemed useful to them...unless someone offered them even bigger profits, that is. When people approached me without expecting anything in return, I had no idea what their motives were, so it just creeped me out and made me uneasy.

“Miss Edith, the lord would like to invite you to a dinner party.”

Gaaah! What’s with you people? The enemy could be here any day now, so I should be on high alert…

“I’m glad you’ve decided to attend. Come now, take a seat!” the lord said with a smile.

He was completely treating me like a young noblewoman now. Well, at the very least, he wasn’t treating me like a commoner. The Blazing Valkyries had been offered a light meal and nonalcoholic drinks in the other room, but they’d refused, of course. They’d said that not only was there a chance of poison or sleeping drugs being put in the food, but no bodyguard would risk having to step away from their client to go to the restroom when they were on an important mission that would only take a few hours. That was why they’d already had some food and water and finished taking care of business before we’d come here. There was no way my personal bodyguards could attend a dinner party with the lord’s family, so they had to wait in a separate room, and that was to be expected. In fact, I was worried it would’ve been considered rude for them to come with me when the lord had sent his own bodyguards in the carriage that’d picked me up. When I’d apologized, he’d said, “No, that’s fine. Your bodyguards must carry out the duty they were paid for. Besides, the Goddess—I mean, *goodness*, everyone knows that’s what hunters are expected to do!” and waved his hands in a fluster for some reason.

Anyway, this guy was very kind, for an aristocrat. I’d been acting like I was a noble myself, so it was one thing to treat me with respect, but he’d been considerate of my commoner hunter bodyguards too. Last time, I’d spoken with the lord and some of his senior servants in a reception room before the dinner party…probably because he’d been concerned about introducing some strange girl to his wife and kids all of a sudden. I mean, I would’ve done the same. Why would I needlessly expose my family to danger? I’d definitely screen people to make sure they were harmless first. So, since I’d already passed the safety check, I was allowed to skip the reception room and go straight to the dining room. Though, we’d had to talk about some troubling subjects last time, like a priestess getting attacked by unknown men, so the reception room meeting was partially to get that out the way where the children weren’t present. But since we weren’t

talking business this time…why had I been invited here in the first place?

I invited the Angel. I've done it now…and this is the second time too. I mean, what choice did I have?!

The guildmasters of the Hunter's Guild and Commerce Guild had barged in without an appointment, which never happened unless there was a stampede of monsters or a large caravan was getting attacked by a group of bandits or something. Not to mention, Darsen of the Oris Trade Company, one of the more influential merchants of this town, was there too. As soon as I saw the looks on their faces, I knew this was going to be bad…and I was right.

A few days ago, the guild staff I'd been bribing for information had contacted me—and they'd come from both the Hunter's Guild and Commerce Guild, at almost the exact same time. It was about an ordinary commoner girl who'd been passing herself off as someone who'd been granted minor blessings from the Goddess Celestine. She'd be useful for publicity, of course, but also had the potential to bring complete ruin, so the risk far outweighed the potential benefits. Supposedly, some aristocrat or rich person had tried to take her by force, but she'd been saved by hunters and a merchant from this town, and she'd been taking shelter here since then.

Ever since the incident seventy-three years ago, the Goddess Celestine hadn't shown herself or bestowed any sort of visitation upon the people—so what were these so-called "minor blessings," then? They had to be some sort of coincidence or false assumption on this girl's part. She probably didn't even mean any harm. It was just that her faith was so strong that if she tripped over a rock without falling, she'd think the Goddess had protected her from harm, just like how hunters and a merchant just happened to have helped her when she was in danger. It was no surprise that a young girl who thought that way would think she'd been blessed by the Goddess just because she'd had a few strokes of good luck. And of course, no one dared deny this young priestess's claims. Anyone with a modicum of tact and decency would simply play along, as it made them look good in return.

On the other hand, it hadn't hurt anything to invite her to dinner and meet her, so she'd think the lord here was kind to a

commoner like her and a faithful servant of the Goddess, just in case she was the real deal. The only cost out of my pocket would be the price of whatever small amount of food would fit in a little girl's stomach. That was why I'd invited her to my home as soon as I'd heard about her. I'd been expecting a poor commoner priestess unaffiliated with the Temple to show up, but the girl who'd arrived had been wearing a custom-made priestess robe made with fabric so lavish that the daughter of a viscount—or even a count—might only have one or two pieces of clothing in its price range. She'd also been wearing religious accessories that weren't flashy, but obviously expensive; by the looks of it, she had to have been the daughter of a middle-class or or higher aristocratic or wealthy family.

That was *not* what I'd been promised! I'd done my best to hide my surprise as I'd talked to her in my reception room, then had her meet my family. I'd told my wife and children, "She's a poor commoner priestess, so don't mock or laugh at her because she doesn't know proper manners. Don't treat her as a poor commoner, but a young lady in service of the Goddess." They'd surely intended to follow my instructions, but the girl who'd appeared before them was clearly of a higher class than they. Not to mention, the graceful manner with which she conducted herself and ate her meal was slightly different from the manners of this country, but could only be considered to be in accordance with a high degree of etiquette. My family must have been somewhat intimidated by her presence, as they'd had difficulty keeping up the conversation with her. My hopes of winning this girl over through my wife and children had thus fallen flat.

But that didn't matter. My goal was to send the message that I was friendly even to commoners—I mean, priestesses that weren't affiliated with the Temple—and I'd surely made that clear. If I ever needed to make use of her down the line, perhaps to appease the common masses or to check the demands of the Temple, she should be more willing to help. That was the idea, anyway…until somehow, she supposedly turned out to be "all but confirmed to be the Angel" and "not a human that had been blessed by the Goddess, but the Goddess's own kin"?!

The reports had come from the merchant, along with the hunter party of five women who had declared Marth One, all claiming the same thing. In light of those testimonies and the variety of information they'd received up to that point, the

guildmasters of the Hunter's Guild and Commerce Guild had decided they needed to report to the local lord immediately.

I have no choice but to deal with this!

Well, for the town and as its lord, it was a great honor that the Angel had decided to stay here. That much was certain…but she was supposedly being targeted by some unscrupulous types. If something happened, this town—this country—even this entire continent—would all fall to ruin!

What am I supposed to do?! We don't have Fearsome Fran here, the legendary great hero and guardian of the kingdom who saved every living being on the continent by rebuking the Goddess Celestine herself!

No, that wasn't quite correct. She might not be in this specific town, but she was still somewhere on this continent. She would have to be over a hundred years old now but was said to still be alive—unless she'd passed away since he'd last heard of her, that is. That was actually quite possible, considering it was already a wonder she had been alive at such an old age.

Anyway, in order to prevent this town from becoming known as the devil town for having angered the Goddess Celestine and causing her to destroy the continent, I would gladly give up my family's lives, my own included. It would be a small price to pay.

What I couldn't figure out was, why did we have to keep the fact that we knew the Angel's identity hidden from her? Especially when the Angel herself acted as if she had no intention of hiding who she was. I couldn't wrap my head around it, but I had to do what had to be done for the sake of my beloved wife, my children, my entire family, the people of the territory I ruled over, my fellow countrymen…and everyone who lived upon this continent.

"So…how have your philanthropic activities been going?"

It was during the post-meal tea time with the lord's family that I'd been asked the question. Discussing heavy topics or anything work-related during a meal was considered bad etiquette, so I'd expected the main purpose of our meeting to be brought up around now. I got the impression that he would've preferred not to have this conversation in front of his wife and children, but he also hesitated to talk about it while we were alone together, so here we were. He must've come to this conclusion after taking my position into consideration, which should be commended.

“Oh, I’ve been going to orphanages and visiting the sick and wounded as usual. Though, all I’m able to offer is food service, a few small donations, and prayers, merely for peace of mind. From what I could tell, the Temple’s branches here only offer services to those who can afford to pay…” I said regretfully.

“Hmm,” the lord frowned.

I hadn’t meant that as a jab. The Temple stood apart from aristocrats, lords, and officials. A local Temple branch only took orders from the Great Temple in the royal capital, so even if the lord didn’t like what they were doing, he had absolutely no say in how they operated. Even if he tried saying something, they would just tell him that as their lord, he should use his own money to help the poor, and he’d have no way to argue against that. Yet they requested donations not only from the general populace, but from the lord too. Donations were meant to be offered out of the kindness of people’s hearts—it was wrong for the Temple to ask for donations or set a price as if it were a service fee.

Because of the incidents in the Holy Land of Rueda before I’d gone into the Item Box, I didn’t have a good impression of the Temple authorities. Sure, there were priests who seriously thought about the good of the people, but back then, they had been vastly outnumbered by the bad apples. Celes had stopped appearing before the people for over fifty years, if I recalled correctly. Supposedly, because of the events at the peace talks and how she’d shown herself when I vanished, there had been a resurgence of faith among the priests. What was up with that? The common people had always had faith, and the priests were the ones who’d stopped believing. What’s more, it’d been over seventy years since the last time she’d shown herself, and the priests who’d been alive back then and the elders who’d followed their teachings were still devout believers, but the generation after that—the relatively young priests—had been losing their faith once again. So, they were in an interesting situation where things were the opposite of the usual pattern, with the upper echelon having their heads on right and the lower parts of the hierarchy being rotten.

It was unfortunate for the general population, considering it was the rotten parts of the organization that they had to interact with on a daily basis. Though, that was part of the reason free priestesses unaffiliated with the Temple, like me, were welcome

with open arms. We offered prayers for a small amount of food, which was pretty much nothing compared to what the Temple demanded. It made me want to be careful not to ruin the reputation of other, *actual* stray priestesses.

"Oh, it's nothing for you to be concerned about," I said. "The Temple is always like that, and that's why there are priestesses like myself who distance ourselves from them and independently make an effort to help the less fortunate."

"Yes..." the lord said. He sounded rather unconvinced, and his tone told me he wasn't happy with the current state of the Temple. He must have been a good person who cared about the people and wasn't the type who'd join forces with the Temple for the sake of money. It seemed the hunters were right when they'd told me this territory was a good one.

We continued talking, the lord enjoying some drinks while his wife, children, and I had tea, fruit juice, and snacks. I'd started wondering if he'd really called me here just to make regular small talk, but then the topics and questions began veering toward my personal information. It was starting to turn into a background check, with them asking about my family name and other details. It was also obvious that he was steering things so I'd get chummy with his kids. They were two boys and one girl, the oldest being around twelve or thirteen and the youngest being around five or six. I mean, I probably looked like I was twelve or thirteen to them, so I couldn't blame them for thinking I was around that age, I guess. I mean, they also thought I was an aristocrat.

But even if their assumptions were true, his kids were sheltered little children who had barely ever left their manor while I was a vagrant who traveled solo and camped like it was nothing. He should've known that we'd be on such different levels in terms of common sense that we wouldn't even be able to hold a conversation...or so I'd thought, but actually, the kids seemed interested in what I was saying. Maybe even a bit *too* interested. But it wasn't that their father had instructed them to act that way—I could tell they were actually fascinated. I mean, it made sense. To them, I was about the same age as their oldest sibling and also from an aristocratic background. Of course they'd be intrigued by stories about my solo travels, camping out, getting chased around by monsters (which I made up), and punishing an appraiser who'd tried to trick me into selling my

gemstones for cheap (which I played up for dramatic effect).

At first, the lord had been listening along and reacting with surprise like his children, but his expression gradually grew troubled. The children were so into my stories that I'd been talking nonstop, giving him no room to extract information. Well, he could get information out of my adventure stories, but those weren't necessarily true. This continued for some time, and I could tell the lord was getting flustered. Suddenly, he shot me a wide-eyed, desperate look.

Ah! The look in the children's eyes... They're about to tell their dad that they want to go on an adventure too!

Their parents wouldn't permit such a thing, of course, and so the siblings would end up running away from home to go on an adventure against their wishes. If that happened, they'd be dead or kidnapped on the first day.

So he was trying to tell me to stop... I guess I got them a bit too *excited.*


AH!
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Afterward, I tried to warn the children about the dangers of traveling alone, then hightailed it outta there with the Blazing Valkyries. I'd probably failed to convince them, considering a little girl who couldn't fight at all had been traveling solo without any problems whatsoever. The lord probably hadn't gotten any useful information from our meeting, and he wouldn't want to invite over a devil that might entice his children down a dangerous path ever again, so I probably wouldn't get any more requests for those pointless visits.

That's one problem out of the way. Good...

As I'd thought...that priestess girl, Miss Edith, was the Angel herself. She'd mentioned getting chased around by monsters and escaping, but there was no way a little girl could escape from monsters with such little legs! And even if she was the daughter of a rich or noble family, she couldn't possibly go around selling expensive gemstones left and right. Besides, how would a girl with so much money and so many valuables travel by herself without getting attacked by bandits or other travelers and villagers?

A priestess would be less likely to be attacked, but that would only keep her safe for so long. It wasn't just bandits and thugs around town she had to look out for—a seedy traveler or villager, the merchant to whom she'd sold her gemstones, the clerk who'd watched the transaction, and others would've surely followed and robbed her. She would have then been stripped and sold to a slave trader or used for ransom—and it would have happened within a few days of starting her adventure, guaranteed. Yet she'd been keeping up her activities for months on end... Minor blessings from the Goddess wouldn't have been enough to keep her safe. There was some greater power at work here—she couldn't possibly be human!

What do I do? Aaah! Aaaaaahhh!

They're here. Here. We. Go!

An unfamiliar group of men had arrived in town. A lot of them. The group consisted of delinquent hunters, soldiers pretending to be hunters, and plain old thugs. They were the enemies I'd been waiting for.

One might wonder, how could I tell who they really were? I couldn't, of course, but the ladies of the Blazing Valkyries could.

Supposedly, the way they walked, their posture, the way they observed their surroundings, and how they looked at women as they made their way down the street all included habits that were telltale signs of their profession. Soldiers had good posture, and their strides naturally aligned as they walked together. They also had the same swords and footwear, even if they wore different clothes. They wouldn't feel comfortable going into combat with an unfamiliar weapon or footwear, and they probably couldn't find boots that were the right fit in time. Such items couldn't be mass-produced in this world, and expensive leather boots for combat probably had to be specially ordered.

The delinquent hunters and thugs were…well, exactly what they seemed. They hadn't tried to disguise themselves or anything, unlike the soldiers, who'd be in trouble if word got out that a group of foreign military types had infiltrated this place to kidnap a woman. The hunters and thugs didn't have to worry about that, though the hunters could still have their licenses revoked. Moreover, all of them could get arrested, after which they might even be sold as criminal slaves.

A group this large would've been better off disguising themselves as a trade caravan and its escort, but they would've had to prepare a carriage and supplies, and this lot probably wouldn't have known how to act like merchants. Besides, if they were supposed to be merchants, it would've been one thing for them to be carrying something small for self-defense, but such serious weapons could raise suspicions, so maybe that wasn't an option.

They had all split into smaller parties or were otherwise solo, but they were also still exchanging information with each other, so it was obvious that they were all from the same group. Whoever had hired them must've given them directions, but you couldn't expect much from bottom-of-the-barrel hunters and thugs. I'd hidden in my inn right away, and Chessie, the scout of the group, had gathered a bunch of intel for me. But like I mentioned before…there was a disproportionate burden of responsibility on Chessie! Probably because she was so talented that she could do everything better than the rest of the group. It was a common phenomenon for people to pile work onto capable people, after all. That was why it was best not to tell others about your abilities and qualifications at work unless it

was going to lead to promotions and better pay.

According to Chessie, the group had been asking about me at the Hunter's Guild branch. They hadn't bothered checking the Commerce Guild, probably because they hadn't guessed I would've made any connections with traders by selling my gemstones there. I'd been helped by Darsen during our last encounter, but the enemy party probably hadn't known his shop was in this town, so they must've thought we were no longer in touch. Besides, hunters, thugs, and soldiers had nothing to do with the Commerce Guild, so they wouldn't know how to get information out of merchants. Information was the fourth most important thing for merchants after their own lives, money, and reputation, so they wouldn't have given it away so easily anyway. On the other hand, hunters were generally cooperative with each other, and all you had to do was buy them a drink and they'd gladly give up intel as long as it wouldn't hurt them to do so. Thugs were generally in the same boat too. And so, they'd tried asking around at the Hunter's Guild branch, but...

"All of the hunters and staff there shut them out, claiming they didn't know anything," Chessie reported.

It seemed hunters protected people who hired them, which I was grateful to find out. Still, I wouldn't be able to escape my pursuers forever by just staying at the inn. If they went on to question people who didn't know what was going on, like shop workers, random townsfolk, children, or folks at the orphanage, it wouldn't take long for them to find out I was staying here. Given that, it would be best for me to strike before they had this place surrounded. They do say "The best defense is a good defense," after all.

Or so I thought...

"What the hell are you doing here?!"

"We just have business up ahead... Is there a problem?"

"..."

There was a somewhat undignified hunter group of four that wasn't from around here, and right behind their group was a hunter party of five that was clearly leagues ahead of them in rank. There wasn't much an outsider could say when challenged by locals like this. Besides, they had to avoid trouble in order to accomplish their mission for their employer, and they wouldn't walk away unscathed against a local party that outclassed and

outnumbered them. And so, the party of outsiders reluctantly backed off.

After some time, the local party finally went in a different direction. Just as the outsiders thought they could resume their investigation, they realized they were being followed by five soldiers who appeared to be local guards.

“What the hell! What did we do?!” one of the outsiders erupted angrily.

“Excuse me? We’re just on patrol. What are you so upset about? Are you up to something that you wouldn’t want seen by guards?” asked one of the soldiers.

“Ugh…”

After the guardsmen left, a group that seemed to be personal guards for a merchant family appeared, followed by a different group of hunters, with someone trailing them one after another.

“What’s going on here?! Forget kidnapping anyone, we won’t even be able to get any intel on people at this rate!” one of the hired hunters complained.

They were indeed hunters, but the Hunter’s Guild obviously didn’t condone such illegal acts, so they’d taken on this mission as freelance work without going through the official channels. Therefore, the strangers had no support from the guild for this gig, and since they were committing a crime, they would be expelled from the guild if caught. But perhaps that wouldn’t be much of an issue, considering that they would be arrested and sold as criminal slaves if they ended up getting exposed.

Their group had only been able to gather information for the first few hours or so after arriving. They had made zero progress since then, as someone from the town had been constantly keeping watch on them after that point. A few people from their organization couldn’t deal with being followed around and had snapped at their pursuers, but guards had immediately appeared for some reason and taken them into custody. Normally, such a light infraction would have been dismissed after a stern warning, but not one of them had been released since their arrest.

Finding this odd, one of them had gone near the guards’ headquarters, and reported that he had heard screaming from inside the building, as if someone was getting tortured. This was impossible—it would have been one thing if they were dealing

with criminals that had committed the most heinous of crimes, but there was no way the guards would torture someone just for getting into an argument and shoving someone's shoulder. Normally, both sides would be lightly reprimanded and shooed away. Perhaps there would be some favoritism for the locals, but one side being imprisoned and tortured while the other got off scot-free was unheard of.

Besides, the whole point of torture was to force information out of someone. What kind of information would the guards want out of someone who'd gotten into a minor argument with some strangers? Yet the faint sounds leaking from the guards' headquarters were unmistakably screams.

"It doesn't make any sense!" the hunter continued. "We were just supposed to find and kidnap some commoner girl. That's what you said! So why's the whole town turning against us?! Something's going on! What are you hiding? Misrepresenting the risk and withholding critical information about a mission is a serious breach of contract! We're entitled to the full commission plus a penalty fee and an immediate cancellation of the job. Those are the rules in our business!"

"Hell if I know! The job is just as I said: We capture the stray priestess our boss is after. She's not affiliated with the Temple, so they won't be getting in our way, and we won't have to worry about the local lord because she's just a twelve- or thirteen-year-old commoner who wandered in from another territory!" the commanding officer, who was there from another territory to lead the operation, said.

"Then how do you explain everything that's going on, huh?!"

The hired hunters and thugs joined in on the clamor, shouting complaints at the foreign commander and his soldiers. The freelancers were riled up about losing the opportunity to get their payment plus a penalty fee without doing the work.

"We have no choice... Let's reach out to someone from the criminal underworld. We won't be able to do anything without intel," the officer said.

The hired hands would only get their payment once their target was secured. The soldiers couldn't have brought such a large sum of money with them; if they had, there was a chance the hunters and thugs would simply run off with it without fulfilling their end of the bargain. Therefore, they didn't have a lot of funds on hand, though they had brought a bit extra just in

case. Their request wouldn't be particularly dangerous, so they should have had enough to cover the commission.

"Well, they say you should set a thief to catch a thief. I'm appointing you to reach out to someone from the underworld," the commander said to one of the thugs. "Here's some money for drinks for when you meet with them. I'll also talk to the higher-ups for you to get a bonus, so make sure you do a good job!"

He handed a gold coin to the thug, who grinned and accepted the job.

"No good... I bought drinks for some guys there and gave 'em a little money, made small talk...but as soon as I mentioned the priestess, their expressions changed and they wouldn't say another word. They probably didn't know much, but they must have orders from their higher-ups. One minute, they were feeling good with free booze, and the next, they completely sobered up. The orders must've been strict ones, coming from the very top," the man who'd been appointed by the officer said with a shrug.

"What? Why would both the public and underground society of this town protect this commoner who has only been here for a few days?! It doesn't make any sense!" roared the officer.

"Don't ask me! That's what I wanna know!" the thug said, frustrated that the bonus he'd been looking forward to wouldn't be coming to fruition.

"Probably because she's a saint?" said a hunter who had been listening to the conversation.

The officer frowned. "Nonsense. That's just a story made up by the local lord to prop her up and use her for his own benefit. Besides, if she really was blessed and loved by the Goddess, why would she be traveling around by herself helping the poor? She would be set for life if she got hired at the royal palace or by the higher nobles, or if she went to the Temple to get pampered there."

"But anyone who thinks like that wouldn't get the Goddess's love or blessing in the first place," the hunter pointed out.

The officer had no response to that. The retort was so convincing that there was nothing to be said.

"A-Anyway, she's no saint. That's just some made-up story, so forget about it and focus on finding and securing the girl!" the

officer barked.

"Well, it's not as if our efforts so far have been in vain," another hunter whispered as if to appease the agitated officer.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Since the townsfolk are trying so desperately to hide her, that means she's still somewhere here. And we now know the whole town's working together to protect her for some reason. This is a key piece of information we needed to plan our operation. You could call it a huge win for us that we figured that out before we made our move."

There was a look of realization on the officer's face. "I see... Now that you mention it, this isn't a bad first step in terms of our covert operation in unfamiliar territory. We split up into smaller groups before entering town, so they won't know we're all part of one larger force, and so the girl has no idea we're here, or why. In other words, we have a much bigger advantage both in terms of intel and manpower. We're not in a bad spot if you think about it that way. Not bad at all..." He looked at his men with a satisfied expression and said, "All right, we're done for now. You're all free to do what you want for the rest of the day. Go out into town and drink if you want! I'll allow it. But if any of you drink so much that it affects your work tomorrow or causes trouble, you'll be banned from drinking until this mission's over! Here's a little something for drinks, on me. Pay for the rest yourselves!" With that, he handed one of his soldiers a gold coin.

"Yeeeaaah!!!" the men cheered in unison.

Although the man was an officer, he was working undercover and leading a troop of hunters and thugs. If his identity ended up being revealed to the authorities of this territory and the lord who had hired him was questioned about it, he would most likely answer, "I have no idea who those men are. It's just nonsense from some lowlife thugs. Off with their heads!" And to make the story even more believable, the team was a mixed group of not just soldiers, but hunters and thugs who had no issues with committing crimes. If a fight did break out and a few lower-class corpses were left on the scene as a result, that would be the perfect scenario. So, the commander that had been assigned to this mission was nothing but a commoner who had just been promoted to a junior officer—as far as his boss was concerned, he was expendable.

It was quite a heavy expense for a man like him to give up a

gold coin just like that, but he'd offered it not just to his own men, but also the hired hunters and thugs, pretending it wouldn't hurt his own wallet to do so. He was likely a good man who unfortunately hadn't been blessed with a good superior and lord. However, that was the case for most men, and there was nothing that could be done about it.

And so, the hunter who had gotten their commanding officer to treat them to the lavish gift got slaps on the shoulder and words of praise from his fellow men.

"We found her. She's staying at an inn and seems to be protected by an all-female party of five mid-ranking hunters. They aren't bad in terms of skills, but they're just some women. They won't stand a chance against us soldiers, and they probably can't beat the hunters we hired either. As for the thugs…well, maybe they could serve as a diversion. They're just there to obscure our identities, after all. It wouldn't affect us one bit if they end up dead."

The report had come from a junior officer who had been working under the commander since before they had joined the operation. The commander smiled wryly. Their opponents may have been women, but it was highly unlikely that mid-ranking hunters would be beaten by some common thugs.

"We can't cause a commotion in town. It'd be a critical blow to us if the guards and local soldiers were to join the fray. We're all supposed to be individual groups of hunters, thugs, and travelers with no connection to each other. Besides, the town is full of folks who would be willing to jump to the girl's aid. So…"

"We make our move outside of town?" the soldier asked.

"Exactly. I want you to learn the locations and patterns of her activities. She may have bodyguards, but if she does something careless and stupid, we'll have plenty of opportunities to attack. I feel bad for the hunters who'll lose face for failing to protect their client, but let's hope they take it as a painful learning experience."

"Yes, sir!"

"…So, that's what's going on," Ishris reported.

"I see…"

According to the report, they were up against seventeen men total, though this included those who'd been arrested. Their

forces, who'd split up and infiltrated the town, included pretend hunters who were clearly trained soldiers, bottom-of-the-barrel hunters who took on illegal jobs behind the Hunter's Guild's back, and ordinary thugs you'd find just about anywhere.

"The lowlife hunters and thugs haven't done anything illegal quite yet, but it's a serious crime for soldiers to impersonate hunters. The Hunter's Guild already has enough cause to shut them down with full force. They could demand an apology and compensation from their employers, along with punishments for the perpetrators themselves. There are very rare cases where soldiers are registered as hunters, but I doubt all of them have gone through the trouble."

Wait, what?

"But once their identities are exposed, wouldn't the fact that a bunch of soldiers from another territory faked their identities to come here for some secret operation be a bigger problem than pretending to be a hunter?" I asked. "One false step could lead to huge consequences, like war breaking out between the territories or the king sending out his army, right? Besides, I don't think their employer would ever admit to being involved. They'd just act like they didn't know anything about it."

"That's…true," Ishris agreed, the realization setting in as she thought about it.

"Maybe they think they won't get caught, or they can just talk their way out of it if they do," Emis suggested.

"Or maybe they thought they could brute force their way out of trouble once they secured the Angel," Chessie said.

"Ha ha ha…"

They were joking, of course. After all, I was just an ordinary priestess who'd been slightly blessed by the Goddess.

Anyway, it wouldn't be immediately obvious whether we were dealing with real or fake hunters. With the level of technology here, it would be easy to make a fake hunter's certificate, or they could simply buy one from the black market that had been stolen or taken from a corpse. It wasn't as if the certificate could be immediately verified by contacting the guild of the town where it was issued, and there weren't any mystical ways of checking its authenticity by detecting its holder's magic energy or anything like that. So, at this point, it was virtually impossible to confirm whether someone was a real hunter or not before capturing them. They would simply be hunters on the move who

hadn’t committed any crime yet.

“To recap, the enemy’s numbers are fifteen in total. Nine of them are soldiers, and the rest are hunters and thugs… I’m sorry, but I’m afraid we won’t be able to defeat them in a fight. I think it would be best to hire additional bodyguards or ask the local lord to lend you some soldiers,” Ishris said, but I shut that idea down.

“No, they wouldn’t attack if we did that!” I said.

“What?”

“I mean, they wouldn’t try to attack unless they had an overwhelming advantage, right?”

The Blazing Valkyries stared blankly.

“Wait…you *want* them to attack?”

“Yeah. Otherwise, I’ll be stuck being a target, paying for protection the whole time, and not able to leave town,” I said. “Besides, we need to capture them and make them tell us who the mastermind behind all of this is.”

“Oh, but we’ve already been torturing them for answers,” Ishris said.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Whaaat?” we all yelled at once.

“…Never mind!” she said.

I wasn’t sure what she was talking about. I’d heard some of the enemy had been taken in by the guards, but there was no way they’d be tortured just for a little drunken argument. It wasn’t *that* serious of a crime. That was why I needed them to actually attack me, which was a crime severe enough to warrant a little torture.

“Anyway, I don’t want this dragging out too long, and it’s unnerving not knowing when they’ll jump out of the shadows. They might catch us off guard eventually. That’s why…” I trailed off.

“Yes?” Ishris asked.

“I’ll have them attack when I want, where I want them to!”

“Whaaaaaat…?” the Blazing Valkyries said in surprised unison. Of course, guiding the enemy toward the time and place where you’d have an advantage was an ironclad rule of combat.

“But even if you’re able to get them to attack at a time and place of your choosing, and even though half of their forces are low-ranking hunters and thugs…we would be up against seventeen men, nine of whom are career soldiers,” Ishris pointed

out. “We would need to at least match their numbers, or they’ll quickly take us down with multiple opponents apiece, then join another fighter elsewhere. It would only be a matter of time before they overwhelmed us. Besides, as more of their forces are freed up, they could decide to kidnap you while we’re preoccupied. Then it would all be meaningless!”

She had a point. And she’d only been talking about the perspective of protecting me and hadn’t mentioned anything about whether they would live through that situation. Normally, hunters wouldn’t take such a risk just because someone had hired them for protection once. It wasn’t as if they were fighting the people who’d killed their parents or something. It was just a job, and there was no need to expose themselves to danger beyond what they’d been paid to do. Our agreement was for them to protect me if I got attacked in town—that was very different from baiting a huge group of enemies into attacking us so we could launch a counterattack. Besides, if that was the job, it would’ve made more sense to go to the Mercenary’s Guild instead of the Hunter’s Guild.

“Well…it’s fine,” I said. “And I know this plan would deviate from the protection job you ladies have agreed upon, so there’s no need for you to be a part of it, of course. Oh, but I’d like to keep our contract going until we capture one of the enemies and make them talk, since they might attack again.”

“Whaaat?!” the Blazing Valkyries said once more. They seemed quite surprised, but I thought it would’ve been a given. I couldn’t tell them to die in a hopeless battle for the job description and compensation that’d been offered in the contract. Not to mention, I couldn’t have anyone other than my enemies see how I fought. That was why…

Wait, why are they giving each other those looks?

It seemed veteran hunters could communicate through eye contact alone. After they finished their infrared eye contact communication, they all turned toward me and said in unison, “We’ll join you!”

“Huuuh?!”

How did this happen?

“Wh-Why?” I asked.

“Well, if our client dies before we successfully complete the job, it would tarnish the name of the Blazing Valkyries! We must insist on going with you! (It’s not like we have a choice if we don’t

want this continent to sink!)”

What am I gonna do now?

If it was just me and my enemies, I would’ve had options. Sure, I’d be up against soldiers who were just following orders from their superiors, or people just carrying out the job assigned to them by their employer, but they were knowingly committing the illegal act of kidnapping me, so “they were just following orders” and “they have families too” were pointless arguments. If those statements meant anything, you wouldn’t be able to fight back against invading soldiers during a war. No one was dumb enough to actually think like that. Besides, even if I didn’t want to make their families sad, that was no reason for me to just let them kidnap me.

So I’d intended to wipe out pretty much every one of the enemies coming after me, make them spit out who the mastermind was, then go find those people and annihilate every last one of them. It wouldn’t have been a bad idea to spread the word that going after the stray priestess and saint would have dire consequences. It wouldn’t necessarily have to be about the Goddess’s protection or miracles either. Maybe there’d be a violent group of militant believers, or maybe an influential person whose daughter I’d saved hired a squad of guards to watch over me.

Whatever the reason, whoever meant me harm would be met with a terrible fate, and something good would happen to those who were on friendly terms with me. Such rumors would go a long way toward letting me maneuver more freely, both in terms of safety and…retaliatory activities. Even if something unfortunate happened to my enemies, it would’ve been done by a mysterious organization of their own volition, so I wouldn’t be responsible in the slightest.

For all those reasons, I’d planned on visiting the orphanage by myself. It was on the outskirts of town because the land was cheap and well-suited to farming, and the kids could live freely there without having to see how regular households lived.

Come to think of it, it was pretty uncommon for orphanages to be smack-dab in the center of the good part of town. If I brought a cart full of food to the orphanage, I’d probably get attacked for sure. They’d have plenty of time to see me on the way there and prepare to attack me on the way home. Plus, I’d be going out of town without anyone escorting me.

Normally, it would look like a trap, but they'd probably interpret it in a convenient way, like I was just a dumb commoner with no sense of danger or that I'd run out of money to keep paying my bodyguards. At the very least, they wouldn't have expected me to be able to prepare enough forces greater than theirs, and that was true.

This plan wouldn't be possible if the Blazing Valkyries were to go with me. There were a million ways I could deal with attackers as long as there were no witnesses, but the Valkyries would be witnesses I couldn't get rid of. And even if they did go with me, we'd stand no chance against a group of seventeen with soldiers in the mix. Even if we managed to come out on top, most of my allies would be dead or critically injured. It was safe to assume we'd lose, and I couldn't allow people to die or get hurt because of me. So...

"Denied!" I said.

"Whaaat?!" the Valkyries said in unison, but this wasn't up for discussion.

"This is my order as your employer. You're all to stay here at the inn when I instruct you to. If you disobey, our agreement will be immediately terminated as a breach of contract."

The Blazing Valkyries fell silent, but I had to do this to make sure they wouldn't get hurt. I knew they were all good people, but they wouldn't survive long as hunters if they did foolish things like risk their lives for an escort job lasting just a few days. Their judgment must've been clouded because they thought I was a child, but I was no kid, and I couldn't let them die.

There was a short silence that felt like forever, and there were infrared eye contact beams being shot between the ladies the entire time. Finally, Ishris nodded as if she were making a painful choice.

"Very well... We're working for you based on our contract, so we must follow your orders in accordance with the terms of the contract as long as those orders wouldn't compromise our own interests. Though it does shame us to do so..."

Good, that's what you should do.

To them, this was just a day job to make some money for living expenses. It made no sense to risk their lives here. All they had to do was put in an appropriate amount of work for the pay they'd receive. To hell with going above and beyond! If you wanna work for free, do it yourself! Don't drag your subordinates

into it!

Haah… Haah… Haah… Oh no, that brought back some bad memories from another life…

Anyway, the Blazing Valkyries finally agreed, so that was that. I still had much to do. I'd go buy some food first thing in the morning, then leave in the afternoon. Then I'd have time to cook it and feed the kids, and it would start to get dark by the time I began heading back. It would be easier for my enemies to attack when it wasn't the middle of the day, and it'd be less likely for a third party to witness their "divine retribution."

Good, good…

"This is an emergency! Sherna, report to the lord right away and request a deployment of troops! Emis, you head to the Hunter's Guild and report to the guildmaster there! I don't care if he's attending to guests, state your party name and barge in there! We've already declared Marth One, so no one's going to stop you. Chessie, you investigate the route to the orphanage and find spots that would be suitable for an ambush. Nailey, you'll escort Miss Edith with me. Now go!" Ishris ordered.

"On it!" the Blazing Valkyries said in unison.

After Kaoru retired to her room, the Blazing Valkyries had a meeting and declared their resolve, so that three of them could leave for town to fulfill their duties. Normally, Ishris should have gone to the lord as their party leader, but since only two of them would be available for escort duties, she had to remain as the most capable bodyguard of the group. And since she trusted in her party mates, there wasn't any doubt in her mind as she'd made her decision.

"I'm counting on you girls…" she thought as she clenched her teeth and looked in the direction that they'd left in.

Chapter 78: Fishing

“So heavy…” Kaoru complained as she dragged the cart. It was around the second daytime bell, or three in the afternoon, and she was on her way to serve food at the orphanage on the outskirts of town. She couldn’t show up empty-handed, so she had to bring some cooking supplies and ingredients for the trip. Her large stock pot had been made on Kyoko’s mothership with a special alloy; it was a perfectly crafted pot with many tiny air bubbles in the metal parts, making it light, strong, and corrosion-free. Its thermal conductivity was top-notch as well. Vegetables had been loaded on the cart so that they were in plain view, but the meat was still in the Item Box to prevent it from going bad. She’d planned on taking it out right before reaching the orphanage.

The cart was beyond this world’s standards, but it looked like a normal large two-wheeled wagon at first glance, so it wouldn’t draw any suspicion unless someone inspected the material and build quality in detail. It would be one thing if she was dealing with merchants or engineers, but her kidnappers and the people at the orphanage wouldn’t care to look carefully.

“I’m visiting them on short notice this time, so I doubt I’ll get attacked on the way there. If anything, they’ll show up on the way back once they get their men ready for an ambush. I wouldn’t mind if they did try to get me on the way to the orphanage, but all the food I went through the trouble of preparing would go to waste. Yesterday, I secretly had Ishris let the orphanage know I’d be coming by, so I don’t want the kids to be disappointed,” Kaoru said to herself.

If she’d shown up completely without warning, they may have already begun preparing their meal or eating, so prior notice was necessary; Kaoru had enough common sense to know that. She’d had the Blazing Valkyries sneak there to inform them of her visit, so the chances of her enemies knowing about it were close to zero.

“They sure are professionals, though. They’re so cautious that they sent three people to do different tasks with only one of them going to the orphanage. The enemy’s only after me, so I

don’t mind them going somewhere temporarily. I doubt they’ll attack an inn in the middle of town when it’s still early evening anyway, because the guards, hunters, and mercenaries would be all over them if they did. Some thugs looking to earn a reward might even join in.”

Indeed, thugs who were looking to make some coin weren’t necessarily limited to joining the enemy’s side.

“Thank you so much, priestess lady!”

Kaoru left the orphanage to the sound of the children shouting in unison as they enthusiastically waved goodbye.

It was the same story every time: a god or goddess brought the orphans money and food, because that was what the children believed.

The ambush should be coming up soon… The orphanage is on the outskirts of town, but it’s not too far away. The area where the houses start getting sparse is considered the outskirts, and it’s just a bit farther from there. The land away from town can be used for growing vegetables, and the children don’t get bullied there. Plus, it’s not too distant, so they can still go into town to make some money. But anyway, the enemy won’t wait for me to get back when they finally have an opportunity to catch me out of town…

These were the thoughts on Kaoru’s mind as she pulled the cart, which had become much lighter now that the food had been consumed and heavy objects and things that would be a pain to remake later—such as special alloy cookware with air bubbles built into it—had been stowed away in the Item Box. There was no sense in expending extra energy lugging all that around, and she didn’t want any of it getting destroyed in the attack.

The meal had been dinner, and since she had taken some time to clean up afterward and deal with the children who wanted her attention, it was already dark outside. Just as Kaoru was thinking they should show up soon, a group of men appeared up ahead. She was a good distance away from the orphanage, and there were trees and other obstacles between her and the town. If there was an ideal spot for an ambush along her route, this would’ve been it. When she turned around, she found that there were several men standing behind her too. Grown men should’ve had no problem catching up to a little girl even without cutting off her escape route, but it went to show

just how cautious they were.

There's about ten of them in total... Seems overly careful for capturing a little girl. I guess they decided not to show up with all fifteen of them. Maybe some of them are waiting on the road ahead so whoever carries me can run over there and hand me off like a relay baton.

While Kaoru mulled that over, the men closed in on her from both sides. However, they still hadn't said a word, so there was a nonzero chance that they were completely unrelated to her situation and just happened to be walking by...though that chance was probably several decimal places less than one percent. So, Kaoru pulled her cart off to the side of the road, making way for the others to pass. However, the men obviously *hadn't* just happened to be walking by, so they regrouped from both sides and stood facing her.

Yeah, I figured!

She had been expecting this, so she was hardly surprised.

"You're Edith the priestess?" the man who seemed to be their leader asked.

"No, I'm not," Kaoru said.

"Whaaat?!" they said in unison.

She had no obligation to truthfully answer a question from a group of unknown men. However, she was simply messing with them and wasn't actually making an effort to deceive them and get away. Besides, she hadn't expected the other party to be so stupid that they'd take her word for it and leave.

"Don't lie to me! We already know who you are!" the man said.

"Then why did you ask? Are you stupid?" Kaoru shot back.

"Gah! Sh-Shut up!"

"Getting mad because I pointed out your stupidity makes you look really pathetic, you know?"



“Shut up!” the leader snapped.

“S-Sir! I thought the plan was to ask her peacefully to go with us at first!” one of his men pointed out.

“Ah…” the leader said, realization dawning.

If they’d asked her politely, she would’ve had no choice but to respond in kind, and she wouldn’t have been able to immediately label them as bad guys. But since they’d closed in on her with ten or so men and started yelling at her, it was a very bad look for them, and she had more than enough reason to yell for help, run away, or even fight back. They’d fallen right into her trap.

“Ugh, y-you little… L-Lady priestess, we’d like to ask that you come with us to meet with our master!” the leader had reconsidered and was making an attempt to change strategies. At the moment, there wasn’t anything decisive that would identify them as part of the same group as the four men who had previously tried to take her by force.

“What? Are you colleagues of the four men who tried to kidnap me, then tried to kill me as soon as things weren’t going their way?” Kaoru asked.

“Huh?”

“What?”

“I haven’t heard anything about that.”

“What’s she talking about?”

Confusion spread among the group of men.

“Oh? Did they lie about it so people wouldn’t find out what they’ve done?” Kaoru asked. “Wait, there they are! Those men wanted to kill me after capturing me because they didn’t want me telling their boss what happened!”

“Eek!” The four men yelped and turned pale as their leader glared at them.

“Hey! Take them over there and keep a watch on them!” the leader called out. One of the men walked the four to a spot in the distance, and the number of people facing Kaoru was down to half.

Kaoru grinned, thinking it was far easier to deal with half at a time rather than ten or so of them at once.

It’s about time…

Just as Kaoru was getting ready to make her move, a familiar voice rang out. “Stop right there! Have you no shame, ganging up on a young girl like that? Prepare to be punished!”

The Blazing Valkyries had arrived.

My plan is ruined…

Kaoru slumped her shoulders and said weakly, “Why…?”

“We are devout servants of the Goddess, the Blazing Valkyries! We cannot sit idly by as a young girl is endangered!”

“Uh…”

Kaoru hadn’t seen the Valkyries walking along the path. It was as if they’d appeared out of thin air. They quickly joined Kaoru and stood between her and the enemies.

“Wait, you were hiding here the whole time?!” Kaoru said.

Ishris smiled. Indeed, Kaoru had noted this was the perfect spot for an ambush; it was on the way back, far away from town, and in a blind spot for both the town and orphanage. That much was clear even to an amateur like Kaoru, so a professional would obviously realize the same thing.

The Blazing Valkyries had been aware of Kaoru’s schedule far before the enemy—long before Kaoru had left for the orphanage at the second daytime bell. This meant they had plenty of time to set up an ambush before the enemy began preparing their own. Plus, they were locals, they knew the lay of the land like the backs of their own hands, and they could easily predict where on the route an enemy would stage their attack. However, they wouldn’t have been able to take on so many enemies with just five women; Ishris had said so herself.

Their actions had been meaningless—a needless sacrifice that only got in the way of Kaoru’s plans. Just as her head was spinning with bafflement, another voice called out from the distance.

“Hey! What are you doing to those women?!”

“Huh?”

The attackers turned to the angry voice coming from behind them and found a group of twenty or so hunters marching toward them from the road leading to the orphanage.

“I’m the guildmaster of this town’s Hunter’s Guild! I was on the way back from a large-scale monster hunt with a group of our elite hunters. What business do you have with my lady guild members?”

The leader stared blankly, speechless. Elite hunters led by their guildmaster were powerful fighters who would put up a good fight even against veteran soldiers, yet his group consisted of bottom-tier soldiers who were basically cannon fodder, low-level hunters, and common thugs. Not to mention, they were

vastly outnumbered. There was no way they could win with each of them fighting a two-on-one battle. If this had been a fight with thousands of men on each side, the only ones who could engage in battle at once would have been the ones clashing at the front lines.

However, in a battle on a scale this small, all of them would be fighting all at once, so the side with the greater numbers could gang up on their opponents. As they felled each enemy, they would move on to assist their allies by cutting down the next foe from behind, and this process would repeat until the battle came to a swift end. In fact, with this extreme an advantage, it would all be over in an instant without all of those extra steps.

The Blazing Valkyries must have shown themselves first so the enemy would underestimate them and not bother to prevent them from regrouping with Kaoru. They had no reason to rush, as they thought the Valkyries would eventually surrender, and they could kill the women any time if they wanted. And it seemed they wanted to avoid killing, especially women, if it wasn't necessary. It wasn't unusual for the enemy soldiers to think that way; they weren't bandits, after all. However, if the Valkyries and hunters had played their hand too early, the enemy might have taken the priestess hostage or killed her and tried to flee. The Blazing Valkyries had planned things out so they could prevent that from happening and protect the priestess, since Edith had told them four soldiers had tried to kill her in order to keep her silent.

The commander looked somewhat troubled, but he didn't think it was too big of a problem yet. His unit may have been small, but he was a military officer; he'd come prepared.

He took out a whistle and blew it, and a sharp, clear sound rang out.

Suddenly, nearly thirty men appeared from the nearby trees. They were all dressed like hunters, but their short, buzz-cut hair, coordinated movements, and overall demeanor showed that they were obviously soldiers. The tables had once again turned in an instant. The enemy reinforcements were almost completely composed of soldiers; apparently, they'd had backup waiting nearby in case they were needed. They had only sent half of their men into town, with the other half being held in reserve. He was a military officer after all; he was well-versed in field tactics. He grinned, confident that he now had a major advantage.

“Hey, what are you doing to those women?!” another voice angrily called out.

“Huh?”

The commander slowly turned his head in a manner that sounded vaguely familiar, the movement so stiff it could’ve made a creaking sound. There, standing before him, were about forty fully armed soldiers.

“I’m the lord of this territory. I was on my way out for some nighttime training with my army’s elite soldiers. What business do you have with my people?” the lord asked.

The commander was in trouble now. Although his men were disguised as hunters, their movements and swordsmanship would quickly give them away as soldiers. The low-ranking soldiers weren’t properly armored because of their disguises, and they had no chance against fully armed elite fighters of the territorial army who also vastly outnumbered them. Even if they fought until the end, the majority of them would end up killed and the rest would be captured.

And since his men were lowly grunts and not specially trained spies, there was no reason to believe they would be able to endure whatever torture awaited them. Once they were forced to talk, they would reveal that soldiers from another territory had committed military actions in disguise and engaged in battle with a platoon led by the local lord. This could easily be considered an assassination attempt and the most heinous of conspiracies. It wouldn’t simply be a quarrel between territories; it would be no surprise if the national army ended up being mobilized.

The mission was a critical failure. There was no way they could win with such a disadvantage in numbers, and they wouldn’t be able to escape unharmed. And since they were dressed as hunters instead of in military uniforms, they had no right to be treated as prisoners of war. They would be treated as spies, saboteurs seeking to disrupt trade, assassins, or a group of regular bandits, regardless of what their actual intentions were. And of course, their own lord would not admit to any fault or try to retrieve them by paying reparations. They were considered expendable, and that was why their unit consisted of low-ranking soldiers, bottom-tier hunters, and common thugs.

Meanwhile, the local lord was considering what to do next.

With their overwhelming advantage, it would have been easy to wipe out the enemy forces. However, he didn't want to risk a single one of his soldiers getting killed or injured in the process. That was why he wished to avoid a fight if possible. Even so, he couldn't simply let them walk away. If he did, the other territories would take it as a sign of weakness and might be encouraged to do something similar, and then he would lose the trust of his territory's citizens and soldiers…along with the Hunter's Guild and Commerce Guild.

Of course, Kaoru was similarly troubled.

What in the world is going on?!

There was a harsh power creep on both sides with reinforcements appearing one after another. This was all completely unexpected—in fact, she'd already been lost when the Blazing Valkyries had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

If a fight breaks out, the lord's army will easily win, but not without casualties of their own. With so many people swinging swords at each other, a few of them will die or get seriously injured. Sure, soldiers signed up for the job knowing the risks, but they chose their profession to protect their town, their territory, their country, and the people they cared about. They didn't become soldiers to get dragged into some wannabe priestess's intrigue and get so badly hurt that they couldn't work anymore. Like hell I'm gonna let innocent people's lives get ruined because of me!

I could've blown them up with a nitro potion or taken them all out by creating poison, but the grunt soldiers were just following their superior's orders and weren't necessarily evil. I mean, what they were doing was bad, sure, but they were no different from soldiers in a country's armed forces, and it wasn't as if they could refuse the orders given to them. It was their job to do whatever profited the aristocrats they worked for.

It was hard to fine-tune the efficacy of my potions, and if I insta-killed them with poison, then revived them to full health with no negative effects, it wouldn't do much in terms of intimidating potential enemies from messing with me again. Besides, that would be seen as the Goddess's miracle and would stray from my story of being only slightly blessed. I had no choice; I had to use the thing I'd prepared just in case of an emergency…

Okay, speech time!

"It sure is convenient having reinforcements, isn't it?" I said and grinned. "Yes, convenient. That's why I prepared my own." I paused for dramatic effect. "When Saint Edith was still but a stray priestess, some shady nobles were running rampant to the south of the royal capital. Just who were those shadowy figures? In order to eradicate them, Edith called upon a masked angel from the land of deities…"

Everyone stared, mouths agape, unable to make sense of my sudden speech. Then, the one that'd been lying in wait, invisible, appeared out of nowhere with a full-faced smile.

"It is I, the Namahage!"

Actually, it was Reiko wearing an outfit made of straw and a red mask to hide the upper half of her face.



“Are there naughty kids around?” she asked.

“What the hell is that?!” everyone shouted at once.

Reiko was wearing a dual-layer disguise: a potion, plus optical camouflage through her bracelet, so she looked neither like herself nor the newbie hunter Can. That was why she only wore a simple half-mask covering her eyes. The Namahage—Reiko, that is—could use magic (probably due to some super-advanced science), which was easier to fine-tune than my nitro potions, and she could neutralize enemies in a way that looked more natural. Conversely, my nitro potions would just blow people into smithereens, and putting them to sleep would make it obvious that there was something supernatural going on. And of course, throwing them into the Item Box would be out of the question. That would definitely make it seem like a deity had gotten involved. Time was frozen in there, so the person who got stored inside wouldn’t know what had happened, but there were far too many witnesses around to use that method. It would’ve been fine if I had been all alone like I’d originally planned, but here we were.

On the first night that I’d arrived in town, I’d contacted Reiko and explained the situation. I’d thought I could handle things on my own, but you could never be a hundred percent sure about anything. It was always best to have a contingency plan or two just to be safe. If things really went south, I could’ve had Kyoko pick me up in her dinghy, and the story would’ve been that the Angel had come for Edith the priestess and they ascended to the heavens. I’d have to start from scratch with a new face and name in that case, but I’d gained a lot of knowledge during my time here, and I could keep a portion of my reputation as Edith by saying I was her younger sister or junior from the same organization… Oh, but I hadn’t told Kyoko about this case yet. It was best not to give her a reason to do anything rash, for the sake of my enemies, allies…and everyone else, really.

Anyway, the masked angel, the Namahage, had arrived. Everyone here was probably confused out of their minds, but the appearance of a small woman—who, judging by the parts of her face that weren’t covered by the mask, appeared to be a young girl who might or might not be a minor—wouldn’t make any difference in a battle of this scale. Therefore, the only reaction from both sides was a momentary surprise—until the Namahage began moving, that is.

Reiko the Namahage began walking toward the enemy soldiers, completely relaxed as if she were taking a stroll through a park. Although she hardly seemed like a threat, the enemy soldiers couldn't help but grow wary as the armed stranger approached them. Reiko then put her hand to her sword's hilt and drew it. Several of the enemy soldiers instinctively unsheathed their own blades in response, but it appeared they had reservations about all of them drawing on a lone little girl, maybe because that could have caused everyone on our side to also draw their weapons, triggering an all-out war.

As Reiko closed the distance, one of the enemy troops called out, "Stop! If you don't, I'll cut you down! This isn't just a threat; don't think I won't do it just because you're a little girl!"

He was the first person she'd walk into at the rate she was going, so he had no choice but to call out a warning, but Reiko continued moving forward without paying him any mind.

"All right, you asked for it! Don't blame me; blame your own stupidity for not stopping!"

With that, the soldier took a step forward and swung his sword. The other enemy soldiers averted their eyes slightly, perhaps because they didn't want to see a girl getting murdered senselessly, but they still kept watching us with their peripheral vision.

The soldier's sword closed in on Reiko, and she moved her sword to intercept it, but as an amateur, she lacked the skills. The blade was swung into her left shoulder with a diagonal slash known as a *kesagiri*. Everyone assumed she was dead. However...

Clang!

The enemy's blade stopped right in front of Reiko's shoulder, and she pressed her own sword against the immobile weapon.

"Ha ha ha, so slow! I can block your blade without even trying!" she said.

There was a heavy silence for a moment. Then...

"What the hell was that?!" they shouted in unison.

Their reaction was understandable. Reiko's sword was nowhere near fast enough to have intercepted the attack, but some of the people on our side were nodding sagely for some reason.

Wait, do they think Reiko's actually *an Angel because I said I called upon a "masked angel" earlier?*

If that was the case, they probably expected an Angel to be

able to pull off a feat like that. Why did I have to use phrases like “land of deities” and “masked angel”...? I mean, I had just been making a reference, but it was too late now. This mysterious masked Namahage would be one of the Goddess’s people. I was just an ordinary human who was slightly blessed by the Goddess, but she’d manifested to protect in my place the devout servants who’d put their lives on the line for a priestess— Wait, now everyone thought I’d summoned her with my speech earlier! I’d only done that because I’d thought it’d be funny, but I’d ended up screwing myself over. Unfortunately for me, I never learned from my mistakes...

Meanwhile, Reiko seemed to have realized she had gone a bit too far and decided to change her approach; instead of protecting herself with a magical barrier, she cast a spell to buff her physical capabilities. She’d once made me help with magic practice—or rather, with checking the effects of her magic spells. After much trial and error, she’d developed this spell, which strengthened muscles, improved reflexes, accelerated thinking speed, and allowed multiple thoughts to be processed at once. Not to mention, it came with a barrier. It pretty much made you invincible.

What kind of cheater is she?!

This time, she parried the enemy’s sword for real and struck back. There were several dull thuds and cracks, and the enemy soldier sank to the ground. Reiko’s sword didn’t have an edge to it, so it was actually more of a bludgeoning weapon, which meant the soldier’s arm hadn’t been cut off. It didn’t seem to be a fatal blow, but he looked pretty beaten up.

Everyone stared with their mouths half-open. As the soldiers stood dumbfounded at the shocking sight, Reiko rushed forward into the enemy group. There were more thuds and cracks as the enemy soldiers, hunters, and thugs dropped to the ground one after another.

Our forces are unstoppable!

Although this was the perfect chance to take out the enemy forces, the soldiers and hunters on our side simply stood where they were. Come to think of it, it would’ve been stupid for them to go out there and get themselves injured or killed when an invincible Angel was beating down on the enemy for them. It may have even been considered blasphemous if they’d gotten in the way of the Angel’s holy war. It would’ve been better for me if

they'd joined in, though, and we could have said that everyone had a part in the victory. Otherwise, this would be hard to describe as anything other than a one-sided beatdown by the Angel. It would've been a lot easier to twist the story in a convenient way if we could say our forces defeated most of our enemies with a tiny bit of help from the Angel.

There were only a few enemies left already. The enemy soldiers fought desperately, but they couldn't even hit the magically empowered Reiko, and even if they could, she'd already demonstrated that their attacks would be completely ineffective. Not to mention, the soldiers weren't fighting well. If I had to guess, they were being held back by the fear of potentially making an enemy out of the Goddess. Maybe their will to fight had been completely broken already.

Everyone in this world knew the Goddess was real and that she was a short-tempered and merciless deity. The hunters and thugs were committing to defense as if they just wanted to get by without dying or getting injured. After all, even if they'd won, they all knew what would happen to them if they ended up angering the Goddess. I had to give them credit for not fleeing—Actually, they wouldn't have been able to run anyway, not with so many of our soldiers and hunters here. My allies were just standing there doing nothing at the moment, but they were positioned in such a way as to cut off the enemy's escape route, so they'd probably stop any runners if it came to it—not with words, but with their swords. So, the best option for the remaining enemies was to survive until most of their soldiers were down, accept defeat, then claim they were just doing the job they'd been hired for. Of course, that wouldn't get them off the hook or anything, but the chance of them getting the death sentence shouldn't be very high. If they were lucky, they may only need to do twenty or thirty years of manual labor as punishment.

Anyway, our victory was pretty much assured, but I still had to figure out how I was gonna wrap things up here...

Chapter 79: The Mastermind

There was a mountain of injured men on the ground. They were still alive, though—Reiko wasn't *that* heartless. As long as they weren't dead, I could use my potions to alter their physical conditions as I pleased. I could heal them back to perfect health, heal them in a way so they wouldn't have any permanent symptoms but keep their bones broken, heal them just enough to live but without regard for whatever symptoms they'd be stuck with, etc.

There was room for sympathy for territorial soldiers who had no choice but to obey orders, but the scummy hunters and thugs who'd accepted an illegal job without going through the guild and knowingly helped with illegal activities could burn for all I cared. If I went too easy on them, they'd just go right back to committing crimes. If I cut off their thumbs, they'd no longer be able to participate in criminal activities because they wouldn't even be able to hold a sword. They also wouldn't be able to hold a hoe or plow, so farming wouldn't be an option for them either, but at least they could still be shopkeepers or porters carrying baggage on their backs. They could even go around picking herbs. I decided to go easy on the earnest-looking soldiers by making sure they'd heal slowly but surely—secretly, of course, so the others wouldn't notice. It'd depend on whether they cooperated with us and whether they showed remorse. Anyway…

The local hunters, territorial troops, the lord, and Hunter's Guild guildmaster all stared at me in silence. Yeah, I had an idea why they were here. It was a *bit* hard to believe that they'd all just happened to be here by coincidence because the guild was out hunting a monster and the lord's army was doing some special training, which only meant one thing.

As for Reiko, she'd already vanished after saying, "Evil has been vanquished! Farewell!" though she'd probably only made herself invisible and was still observing from nearby.

I had a feeling this silence would go on forever until I said something.

Ahh! Aaaaaargh! Damn it, am I screwed? Should I turn on the

charm? Hmm…

"Th-Thank you for coming today, everyone!" I said out loud.

What the heck am I saying?!

The silence was palpable.

See?! Now it's all awkward!

I heard Reiko stifle her laughter as she nearly cracked up while still invisible. *Damn it!*

"It seems the Goddess has sent an Angel for all of you because you tried to protect her priestess from harm!" I went on. "Yes! Not for my sake, but for all of you!"

"Whaaat?!" everyone said in unison.

This was my "I'm Just a Nobody" plan. The masked angel Namahage hadn't arrived to protect me, but to protect all of the selfless people who'd put themselves in harm's way to save a lowly stray priestess.

I walked over to the pile of defeated enemy soldiers and found what appeared to be the commander. I grabbed his jaw, forced his mouth open, created a confession potion in his mouth, then tilted his head back to make him swallow. *Oh, he's coughing. Must've gone down the wrong pipe. Looks like no one saw… It should start to take effect now.*

"Who sent you?" I asked.

"Count Tartus…" the commander answered.

"What were you planning to do with me?"

"We were going to take you to the count…by force, if you refused. If that failed, we were to kill you, because he didn't want to lose face when word got out that a mere commoner girl turned him down, and he didn't want you falling into the hands of other aristocrats."

"Thought so."

The people who heard our exchange looked surprised, but I wasn't sure whether it was because of what he was saying or the fact that he was giving up information so easily. The potion's effect would last for a while, and since the commander had spilled the beans so easily, his subordinates would all follow. There'd be no point in keeping their mouths shut when their superior had already talked, and they'd only get a heavier punishment for refusing to cooperate or show remorse. They were going to talk.

"Anyway, I have things I need to take care of now. Goodbye!" I said.

“Wait! Waaait!” the lord called out to stop me for some reason. “Hold on! Now that we know Count Tartus was behind the attempted abduction and murder of a young girl, we’ll have an inspector sent from the royal capital to arrest him! I will seek His Majesty the King’s blessing to have his house destroyed and his entire lineage eradicated. Please leave it to us and don’t do anything rash, I beg of youuu!”

What was going on? I mean, it wasn’t out of the ordinary for the government to punish an aristocrat for their crimes, especially when they were caught red-handed with so many witnesses. That much was fine, but...why was the lord begging me so desperately? And his demeanor became a lot more respectful near the end.

Seriously, what in the world is happening?

An old woman—that is, a woman who only seemed to be middle-aged, which was oddly young considering her actual age—was speaking to a girl who looked around fourteen to fifteen from a seat one step higher.

“A messenger has arrived from the lord of a country on the eastern coast of the continent. They say the Angel has been spotted, and that they seek the help of the Goddess’s guardians, the Einherjar, if we are to prevent the continent from being sunk into the sea.”

Einherjar was the title given to the one and only great hero and guardian of the kingdom, Fearsome Fran. However, it now referred to the group of fighters who had inherited some of her incredible fighting prowess and had gone through the extraordinary training regimen taught by Francette herself. Francette had four children, and if each of them had an average of around four more, the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren went from four to sixteen to sixty-four to two hundred fifty-six people. Their numbers totaled three hundred and forty, and nearly all of them were still alive. Even if Fearsome Fran was to pass away, the Kingdom of Balmore’s future was secure.

“After waiting for seventy-three years, your time has come...Falsetto, the Goddess’s guardian!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

There was a pause, then a drawn-out silence.

“Why are you still here?” Francette asked with a puzzled

expression as Falsetto looked at her blankly.

“Oh, uh, I thought you would bestow the divine sword Exgram upon me…”

“That sword is mine! You go get your own from Lady Kaoru!”



“Whaaat…?”

Francette was rather immature, even in her old age. Perhaps she was aware of how old she was, however, because she had appointed her great-great-grandchild to embark on the quest rather than volunteering to go herself. Yet even now, the only swords that wouldn’t break when swung with her full strength were Exgram and the four divine swords, the Exhrotti. However, after the Exhrotti had been given to the four royal guards, they had each kept them as family heirlooms and passed them down their own bloodlines, so they couldn’t be taken. That was why Francette had always kept Exgram by her side: so she could offer her life for one last battle if her country was ever in danger.


ﾅﾆ
HNNNG!

“Now go, O guardian knight of the Goddess, heiress to the blood and name of Einherjar! Protect the Goddess on my behalf in my old age!” Francette called out.

“Yes, ma’am!” Falsetto replied.

And so, a brawn-for-brains was released from the kingdom. Inside the kingdom, she was just one of hundreds of her kin. Anywhere else, however, she was an extraordinary fighter by all accounts—although her strength wasn’t comparable to that of Fearsome Fran. The worst part of it was, since she had grown up among her own kind, she had a rather skewed assessment of her own skills: She thought she had obtained higher-than-average-yet-not-exceptional power through hard work, but still considered herself average among the Einherjar.

The young girl mounted a silver horse, ready to ride through the streets with a sense of duty burning in her heart.



“Uh… Well, I guess, if the king’s gonna make sure they’re properly punished…though I don’t think that ‘eradicating his entire lineage’ thing is necessary. I mean, just punishing the people who were directly involved in the crimes might be enough?” I said.

Yeah, there was no need to punish people who had nothing to do with any of this. Sure, the count’s family would become commoners when his title got stripped, but that was his fault for using his status for evil. It was the same thing as someone’s dad getting fired because he’d abused his authority at work. His family would lose the benefits and position they’d enjoyed through him even though his crimes didn’t extend to them. That seemed like common sense to me.

“Ah, such benevolence!” the lord cried out. “Even if he was deprived of his house and title, his family would still have the option of returning to his wife’s relatives, and wouldn’t be left with nowhere to go. If we are to limit the punishment to Count Tartus himself and his associates without involving their families, the sentencing should go rather swiftly at the royal palace. If he insists on his innocence when you’ve shown such mercy, his punishment will default to the standard one with repercussions for his entire clan, so his family and defenders of his faction should keep their mouths shut. I would assume the culprits wouldn’t dare complain if they can spare their wives and children from blame.”

So that’s how it works…but what do I do now?

My original plan worked in four simple steps: First, I’d wait for the enemy to commit a crime so blatant that it warranted me using confession potions on them. After all, it wouldn’t have felt right to use it when they hadn’t done anything yet—though that wouldn’t have stopped me if I’d needed to use them to avoid danger, if they’d angered me, or if I’d run out of other options. Second, I’d confirm who the mastermind was. Third, I’d hit ’em and crush ’em. *What are they, iron demons?* For the fourth and last step, I’d inconspicuously leak information about the incident to deter others from messing with the stray priestess ever again.

I’d accomplished the first and second, but the local lord had stopped me from taking the third and fourth steps. He wanted to report the incident to the king to have the count officially punished by law, which was probably the proper response in a civilized society. On the other hand, I was seeking judgment at

my own hands; it was basically vigilantism. It would've been one thing if he wasn't gonna be punished by the law, but in this case, he actually was. There was no reason for me to carry out my own brand of justice. Besides, letting the government handle things would be a good deterrent for other potential bad guys in the future. It would send a powerful message to other nobles, and the commoners would praise the decisive judgment.

Wait, am I going to be used in some scheme by the royal family and aristocrats to win the hearts of the people?

Well, that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing, and it would accomplish the effect I wanted in a perfectly legal way. Maybe I didn't need to do anything else at this point.

"In that case, I'll leave the rest to you," I said. "I will resume my journey to continue my training and charity work."

Things would be resolved here without my involvement, so I decided to take my leave. The people in this town were acting a bit too suspicious for my liking.

"What? Wai—I mean, n-never mind. (I want to stop the Angel from leaving, but the thought of keeping such volatility in my territory is terrifying. Besides, the Goddess's blessings shouldn't be monopolized by one territory or country, but shared universally. That must be why the Angel has been on her journey rather than living a life in comfort at the Temple... She wouldn't agree to stay here, and it would be insolent of me to wish for her to do so.)" The lord was about to say something, but seemed reluctant to speak any further for some reason. I took that to mean it was fine for me to leave.

It was completely dark out now, but we were still within the town limits, so I didn't have to worry about running into monsters. Besides, I was just a few minutes' walk away from the rows of houses. Just as I was thinking that I'd be fine walking on my own, the Blazing Valkyries ran over to me and got into their escort positions. I had hired them to protect me, so I should've expected as much. I mean, I was walking around the outskirts of town at night; why *wouldn't* they escort me?

I guess that means I have no choice but to head back to the inn...

What to do now?

We returned to the inn, then I left the Valkyries to retire to my own room. And the first thing I did was...

"Come on out, Reiko!" I called out.

“Oh ho ho, ho ho ho ho!” Reiko said dramatically as she dispelled her concealment spell.

“The plan to bait them and take them out worked, but the lord took over from there,” I said, though Reiko had been watching while invisible, so she already knew this.

“It’s like someone read us just the first half of Adult Wolf Guy. It feels like…” she trailed off, then…

“There’s no closure!” we both said in unison.

“I mean, it’s not like our plans were for the sake of personal gratification, but still…” I trailed off too.

“It’s pretty frustrating!” we said together.

Reiko and I were usually on the same wavelength about this sort of thing. We both let out our anger when upset and got frustrated when things didn’t go our way. In other words, we let our emotions out like any normal person would…unlike the demon without malice, Kyoko. Reiko and I hadn’t included her in our plans this time because we didn’t want anyone getting hurt more than necessary.

“I think we’re getting to the point where I can’t continue my work as a wannabe saint without anyone messing with me,” I said. “There have been a lot of rumors about me going around, so there will be more cases like this in the future. Taking out all of the obvious bad guys will be a pain, and if an aristocrat or wealthy person goes the diplomatic route, I won’t be able to do anything crazy.”

“Yeah, and the king isn’t gonna like it if you go around taking out all of the noble families,” Reiko pointed out. She was right, and it wasn’t as if we wanted to fight them. That left us without much of a choice.

“Think it’s about time?” I asked.

“Maybe it is,” she said.

It was probably time to pack it up. We’d built up enough of a track record and gained publicity through local activities, and it was time for us to advance to the royal capital.

“Kyoko’s shop is becoming a big name, and there are some businesses that should be cooperative with us in the royal capital, like the Tavolas Trade Company branch store and the big-scale shop, the Hawkes Trade Company. And if things go south, we have a reliable ally in the Kurth Trade Company, who’d give us their full support. How are things on your end?” I asked.

“I’m up to Rank C now. Rank-wise, I’d still be considered a

normal hunter, but I've been putting my name out there as a girl hunter who fulfills any mission by solo hunting high-ranking monsters. But unlike you and Kyoko, I'm only well-known among the Hunter's Guild staff and other hunters, so aristocrats, merchants, and the general public don't really know who I am."

That couldn't really be helped because of the nature of her job. Though, if she really wanted to, she could get famous pretty easily by flying around the world on Kyoko's dinghy to hunt high-rank monsters with cheat weapons, and by using a special sensor to collect rare herbs and ores to sell to the guild.

In fact, I already had a bunch of those rare items stocked in my Item Box. If she'd gotten her name out there that way, not only would nobles have flocked to her, but she might've even gotten an invitation for a meeting at the royal palace. Kyoko, too, could easily have made a name for herself by auctioning rare items. Not only did we have materials the three of us had hunted together, but we had things that we'd crafted on the mothership, and my potion containers too.

As for me...well, my case was the most difficult. I mean, sure, I could've just created potions and called them the Goddess's blessings, but there'd be pandemonium as a result. It might not be as big of a deal if I stuck with minor blessings, but...actually, I'd probably get a visit from the Temple's personnel. Even if a doctor or apothecary could provide better treatment, a girl who could invoke (minor) blessings of the Goddess would be extremely useful as a walking advertisement for collecting donations and making political statements.

Anyway, there was a much bigger problem for us to deal with at the moment.

"We need to tell Kyoko about this whole incident, don't we?" I asked.

"If we want to be transparent with each other and to maintain a relationship of trust—yeah, of course," Reiko confirmed.

There was a moment of silence.

"Think she'll be mad that we left her out of it?" I asked after a pause.

"Yeah, definitely," she said. "In fact, I don't know why you think it's remotely possible that she wouldn't be."

There was silence again.

This is bad. Very bad.

"What are we gonna do...?" we said in unison.

Chapter 80: To the Royal Capital

The next day, I terminated my contract with the Blazing Valkyries and checked out of the inn. I made sure to give them a nice bonus on their payout after taking their actions the previous night into consideration. I then said my goodbyes at the Hunter's Guild, at Commerce Guild, and to Darsen at the Oris Trade Company, and finally left town. My destination was, of course…a nearby forest, where Reiko and I did some hunting. I figured getting experience hunting under Reiko's coaching could come in handy down the line. Come to think of it, I'd only hunted horn rabbits ever since I'd arrived in this world.

We were just killing time, though—we'd contacted Kyoko last night and asked her to pick us up in her dinghy, so we were just waiting for her to show up. We couldn't have her ship flying in right in the middle of the day, so our rendezvous would be later, after it got dark out.

"What?! That's so messed up!"

Kyoko had been at her shop during our whole ordeal, and she was predictably super upset when we told her what had happened.

We'd originally planned for one of us three to be at Little Silver at all times, but we'd decided to do away with that rule once the kids had gotten used to living there, since no one in town would dare mess with Little Silver's personnel anymore, and everyone from the Hunter's Guild, the Commerce Guild, the townspeople, the local lord, and his people including his army and guards, were looking out for them. Apparently, Muno's Tavolas Trade Company had been checking in on them from time to time too.

So, the kids had been handling the work at Little Silver all by themselves for the past few days. The concern about them getting emotionally unstable without us there had been mostly resolved, and they could now go ten days or so by themselves without problems. They probably understood by now that we weren't going to suddenly abandon them…or maybe they figured we wouldn't just disappear while leaving Hang and Scary there. As orphans, they may not have seen value in themselves,

but they could confidently say we wouldn't abandon two prize horses. Their reasoning may have been flawed, but at least it put their minds at ease.

With all of us assembled on the second floor of Kyoko's shop, we gave her the rundown of what had happened, and sure enough, she got mad. I couldn't blame her; I would've been upset too. So one might wonder: Why had we left her out of our plan? Simply put, neither Reiko nor I wanted people to die or have their lives ruined unnecessarily. We'd had no choice, really.

I wanted to move the discussion along, so I said, "Kyoko, we think it's about time we make our move to the royal capital. What do you think?"

"Oh? Yeah, I think that's a good idea!" she said.

I knew she'd agree. She'd been secluded because of her work at the shop, so she'd probably been itching for our reunion and to move Little Silver to the royal capital.

Sorry for everything until now, Kyoko.

"Is your shop gonna be okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I set up a new management structure by hiring some adults who grew up in orphanages, and things are running just fine. Even if they got any funny ideas about taking over my business, they wouldn't be able to keep it running without me supplying products, and no one would ever want to hire people from orphanages again if they did that, so those are powerful deterrents. Barring any extreme unforeseen trouble, the shop will run itself as long as they keep up the product deliveries. Besides, even if something happens while I'm not there, the orphanage personnel and people who grew up in orphanages should give the shop their full support. My business is like a test case for former orphans working as managers and employees, so they'll probably put their lives on the line to protect it for the sake of orphans who will look for work in the future. If some thug tries to mess with them, they'll probably take them out," Kyoko said.

"That's terrifying! You'd better teach them not to do anything stupid like that!"

She really was something... This was exactly why I couldn't trust Kyoko as an educator for children. Well, she did have her employees to take care of now, so she couldn't afford to let her business go under. Not to mention, she'd bought her shop outright instead of leasing it.

Anyway, even without her constantly being there, her business would probably be fine if she quietly restocked her products at night, ran some operational audits every now and then, and gave out orders to her crew. She could let her orphan team run things as long as she supplied the inventory as the owner and didn't need to be running the day-to-day tasks as a manager. The Commerce Guild in that town was very cooperative and had been checking up on them to make sure the employees didn't cause issues and other shops didn't try to mess with them. She seemed to have picked a good town.

"So, from now on..." I said.

"In the royal capital, with Little Silver..."

"We're starting part two of KKR's base operations!" the three of us concluded in unison.

"Einherjar has departed. That is, 'Musclehead Falsetto,' who's said to be the closest to the original, the one true heir out of the members of the fifth generation, has ridden off on the prize horse Flat. It seems the Fearsome One has not given up the divine sword Exgram. Falsetto's destination is the east coast of the continent, where the Angel is said to have been sighted."

An old man rose from his chair upon hearing the report from the information division.

"What the hell?! We've been sitting here holding back, and Fran just goes and does this?! Rally the officers from the information division, combat division, and development division. All of the elders too! We're having an emergency meeting!"

"Yes, sir!"

"...But Kaoru probably wouldn't want a huge commotion and doesn't like drawing attention to herself. Besides, we're not the weak people who need her protection anymore. We're the ones taking in orphans, giving them an education, and protecting them. So what we can do for her now is..." mused an old man; he looked far younger than his actual age, much like Francette. "Maybe we could make a branch store for the Tears of the Goddess and leak fake info claiming the potions with extraordinary effects came from us? We could have the staff at that branch tell people they already sold the one bottle they had, and that they get the potions from the main store, so they don't know any details. No one would bother crossing the continent to investigate here, and even if they did, I could educate them on

all there is to know about the Order of the Goddess Kaoru. Come to think of it, I think we could start up a branch of our order on the east coast…”

“The Goddess has appeared?!”

“Yes! She’s being called an Angel there, but judging by Fearsome Fran’s reaction and everything else going on, it’s highly probable that this is the coming of the Goddess we worship.”

Upon hearing his subordinate’s report, tears rolled down the old man’s face as he lay in bed.

“It all happened back when I was still sixteen… Backed into a corner, our empire took a gamble on a plan to ambush the Kingdom of Balmore from two sides at once. I was still just a new recruit back then, and…”

The old man had started recounting tales from his past, and they had a tendency to be rather long.

“And that’s what happened,” he said, finally done with his story. “Summon the commander in chief of the navy and the chairmen of the major shipping companies. Tell them it’s for the expansion of trade routes to the eastern coast of the continent. Now is the time to repay my country’s savior, Lady Kaoru! Ah, to think I would be blessed with such a godsend while I was still alive. O Goddess! Ah! Ahhh!”

Suddenly, the old man’s face turned sober. “I’ve heard the Goddess dislikes appearing in public… Perhaps I should be very careful about this and protect her from the shadows.”

“We’ve received a message from headquarters.”

An old woman gave a dubious look as she heard the report from her butler.

“Hm? It’s not yet time for our regular communication, and no shipment is scheduled to arrive. What is it about?”

“It seems to be an emergency.”

“What?! Read it to me at once!”

Unlike the members of the Tears of the Goddess, the woman had only consumed a potion that improved her abilities without applying any sort of health-bolstering effect when she was a little girl. Therefore, she had aged like any normal person and was often compared to a wizard or supernatural being from folklore.

Since her vision had diminished, she had her butler read

anything written in small print for her. Other than “the message” that had been sent to her several months ago, it had been many years since the last time she had gotten emergency mail from headquarters, which went to show just how rare it was.

The butler began reading aloud. “From General Director Emile Nagase, addressed to Countess Raphael. We’ve confirmed the location of She Who Has Come For Her Second Vacation. The Fearsome One has pulled a fast one on us and sent out the young Einherjar on horseback. We are to dispatch the ‘eyes,’ ‘ears,’ and ‘mouth,’ and build a branch store at said location. Do refrain from any conspicuous action. That is all.”

Tears glistened in the old woman’s eyes. She was still full of life in her old age, yet she was considered quite old by this world’s standards. In that moment, the expression on her face made it seem as if she had regained years of youth.

“She’s here… She’s here, she’s here, she’s here, she’s here at laaast! O Goddess, I will repay my debt to you with everything the house of Countess Raphael has to offer!” she exclaimed, then turned to her butler. “I am calling for an emergency family meeting. Gather the heads of each house! And reach out to Viscount Dorivell as well. I wouldn’t hear the end of it if we didn’t invite him.”

The woman then put her fingers to her mouth and whistled. A moment later, a dog entered through the door and a bird flew in through the window. She gave each of them an order: “Summon the commanders of the Countess Raphael Dog and Bird Battalions, respectively.” The dog and bird each nodded and left the room. The old woman wasn’t compared to a supernatural being or wizard simply because of her appearance.

“If he sent not just the ‘eyes’ and ‘ears,’ but the ‘mouth’ too, he must intend to manipulate information and public sentiment in addition to gathering intel. And he asked me to refrain from conspicuous action, which means I’m free to do anything that’s *in*conspicuous. That Emile, he certainly does know me well,” the old woman said to herself, then chuckled. “How fortunate it is that I have an opportunity to repay her, not in the heavens or afterlife, but during my lifetime! I can no longer travel long distances or contribute to battle in my old age, but my descendants can carry out my will in my stead.” She laughed gleefully.

Her butler couldn’t help but smile seeing the joy on her face.

As the butler of a noble family, he of course had a full understanding of the house's history and his master's benefactors…and he himself was a believer in the Church of the Order of the Goddess Kaoru.

"So, Reiko and I have been away from Little Silver for a while, but…" I said.

"Little Silver will be fine even if we're gone for ten days or so. But if we leave the kids alone for any longer than that…" Reiko said.

"They'll get emotionally unstable again," the three of us said in unison.

That was the issue. The kids were abnormally independent for the most part, but their mental health crumbled if none of us were around for an extended period of time. We'd had employees from Muno's place stay the night before, but it seemed to have no effect unless one of us three was there. Still, they'd gotten a lot better. I mean, when they'd first started staying with us, they'd gone into full-blown panic mode when the three of us passed out drinking in our secret underground headquarters because they'd thought we'd abandoned them. They still worried they could be abandoned to this day, but they believed we wouldn't leave two prize horses behind, which seemed to help alleviate their worries a bit. It was still only "a bit," though, and wouldn't keep their minds at ease for more than ten days. At this rate, they would never be truly independent.

I think we made them too reliant on us. What are we gonna do?

We hadn't taken them in on a whim, but because they had resided in that building before we arrived. Not to mention, taking care of them benefited us in many ways too. We didn't intend to randomly take in any more orphans, so once half of them reached the legal age of adulthood at fifteen, I planned on making them rent their own place and live on their own. We'd still make sure they had a way to make a living, of course. It was a bit of a hassle, but we'd watch over them for a few more years—a few years was nothing for us, after all. We had to do something about their dependence issue in the meantime, though.

"Anyway, in the royal capital, we'll use the rental property we secured last time as our base of operations. Whenever we need

a place to meet up or stay the night, we'll go there. We can stay at an inn as needed too," I said.

The rental was located in a quiet residential area some distance away from the inner city of the royal capital. There was some space between the house and its neighbors, so if we slowly landed the dinghy late at night with gravity control in silent stealth mode, we could enter without anyone noticing...probably. We wouldn't go that route unless absolutely necessary, though. Instead, we would look for an empty space in a forest somewhere nearby and land the ship there. If there was no convenient location, we could just make one...by flattening some land with a beam or something. A spot without any trees in a big forest wouldn't be too out of the ordinary.

"How about the shop?" Kyoko asked.

"It's still early. We could make it famous overnight if we put some actual cheat items up for sale, but that would also attract an unwanted crowd. We should hold off on doing that until we can use other influential people as a repellent," Reiko said as she adjusted her glasses.

"Got it!"

Kyoko didn't necessarily want to open up shop in the royal capital right away. She must've had some attachment to her first shop in the town where she'd been staying, and she had a responsibility to look after her employees there. That said, there was pretty much no concept of employee rights in this country, and she was allowed to fire people on the spot without severance pay if she wanted. I'd heard some of the bigger stores offered things like bonuses and lump-sum payments, but that was very rare. At the very least, there were no expectations for small businesses to offer any such thing. Still, Kyoko didn't have it in her to abandon an orphan she'd decided to look after. The day she relinquished that store would probably be the day she passed off ownership to an orphanage. That was just the type of person she was.

"So, what's our plan for now?" Kyoko asked. That was our main concern at the moment.

"We'll look to see if there are any good properties, but we won't make any moves yet. Even if a property we like gets sold, we'll just let it pass. Our main goal here is to see what the market is like. When supplying products to the royal capital, we'll route them through the Hawkes Trade Company headquarters for the

time being. That way, other businesses won't try messing with us, and we can put the trader shop on the map as a supplier for those products.

"We won't involve the Tavolas Trade Company, so we don't have to reveal the location of our base at Little Silver. Oh, and the Kurth Trade Company... The owner there has turned over a new leaf, so we can supply them with some of our products too. I doubt they'll show any blatant hostility toward two major stores. As for the Relinas Trade Company, Muno's former employer, we can ignore them. Muno doesn't seem to hold a grudge against anyone there besides the second son, and that guy has already gotten his well-deserved punishment.

"As for the shop, we can let the manager handle the retail sales there and keep business running as usual. The town where the shop is located is far from the royal capital, and the whole town seems to have its best interests in mind, so there isn't much to worry about there. No one will be able to pry any information out of there, so as long as the employees aren't in any danger, I don't care if products get stolen or anything like that.

"Kyoko, I want you to handle stocking the special products made on the mothership and the regular products made in this world, along with wholesaling them to the two shops in the royal capital. Oh, and supplying your own shop too, of course.

"Reiko plans on going to the Hunter's Guild in the town that's her supposed home base, saying her goodbyes to the hunters there, announcing that she'll be operating out of the royal capital from now on, and transferring her registration to the royal capital branch. The Hunter's Guild in the royal capital should know about Reiko's peculiarities through her town's guild branch and the hunters there, so she can bring her reputation with her and shoot for a promotion to B Rank. She'll be turning in rare items and high-ranking monster parts to accelerate her rise to fame, of course. She can use our rental house whenever she visits the royal capital too. As for me..."

Reiko and Kyoko waited for my next words. This was the most difficult part—if I set the bar too low, no one would give me the time of day, or they'd just assume I was some weirdo. But if I overdid it, I'd be hailed as a great saint, or worse, I'd be treated as the Goddess's Angel again, and end up in the Item Box like at the end of season one, or be surrounded by sycophants and be

stuck under house arrest. In order to avoid that…

“We’re upgrading the Goddess’s blessing!” I announced.

“Whaaat?!” the girls said in unison.



Their shock was understandable, since my suggestion would steer us dramatically off course from our initial plans.

"The whole idea of me only having minor blessings of the Goddess just doesn't work," I explained. "If the Goddess—Celes, that is—has blessed me in any way, shape, or form, that's no longer considered 'minor.' The Temple would love to call me a great saint and use me for publicity. A girl who's beloved by the Goddess would be very useful for aristocrats too, even if my miracles are less effective than what a physician or apothecary could accomplish. And they might assume that when Celes protects me from danger, she'll also protect whoever is nearby."

That was the only possible explanation for the strange behavior of the lord and townspeople. If that was the standard mode of thought for the people of this world, a "girl who has minor blessings from the Goddess" had a far greater impact than I'd imagined. If I stuck with that backstory, I'd be taken straight to the royal palace or temple as soon as I stepped foot in the capital.

"But aren't you the one who came up with your background information? You said you spent years in this world and have a good grasp of how things are here," Kyoko said.

"Hmph, it's hard to admit mistakes made in my youth," I said.

"Oh, shut it!" they yelled in unison.

"Anyway, aren't things only gonna get worse if you power up your blessing?" Kyoko asked.

"No, because publicly, we're gonna stick with the story that my blessings are pretty weak. We'll only tell a select few people about the upgrade. The general public should still see me as a pitiful priestess or saint, but to certain influential people, I'll be considered highly dangerous. That way, the higher-ups who know about my 'powered-up' self should step in to stop anyone who tries to mess with me and provide other kinds of support when needed. When it comes down to it, I could make a sad face and say something like, 'I suppose another continent is gonna end up destroyed...'" I explained.

"Do you have no heart?!" they shouted.

Anyway, we'd decided on a change of course. I was originally supposed to go from a stray priestess to a saint, then a great saint, but now, I was gonna play a useless priestess for the most part, but would at times be a saint favored by the Goddess to retain influence in the royal capital—no, this entire country.

“It would’ve been a shame to let the renown I’d gained as Edith the stray priestess go to waste, so we’ll maintain that public image for the commoners. Also, Edith, Can, and Salette are strangers. Our original plan was for us to move forward as if we didn’t know each other even in the royal capital, and we were supposed to interact for the first time at some sort of event early into our stay there, then become friends and eventually rent out a place to live together.”

Indeed, we hadn’t intended to go there as friends who already knew each other, but as strangers who recently met in the royal capital. It would’ve been far too suspicious if we were already close from the get-go. I mean, any idiot would think there was a link between us if three girls around the same age, each with special abilities or rare items, appeared in the same country at the same time. That was why we needed to construct a scenario where the three of us met by chance—no one would question us being together from then on. Without that step, we wouldn’t be able to make contact with each other during our entire stay in the royal capital.

“Well, I don’t have any other ideas, so do whatever you want,” Reiko said. “Worst-case scenario, we could start all over again in another country or on another continent. We could bring the kids with us, no questions asked, if we get Kyoko’s mini cruiser out and tell them it’s a new type of ship without a sail or something.”

Wait…what is she saying?

“Um… Reiko? You *do* realize the kids know about Kyoko’s dinghy, right? We all rode it back to Little Silver after we met up with Kyoko, remember?” I pointed out.

“Oh…”

Even Reiko slipped up sometimes despite being the smartest of us three. But by combining our wits, power, and courage, there was nothing we couldn’t handle!

We’d arrived in the royal capital—or, technically, just outside of it. The capital was a fortified city shielded by walls, and we were in a long line at the gates to get in. It wasn’t as if they kept records of every citizen who came and left, and we could’ve just snuck in with Reiko’s magic or by using Kyoko’s mini vessel at night, but I didn’t want to trouble them over something so minor. Plus, it was better for us to actually walk through the gates,

because doing so might be important for us in the future.

After our meeting, we'd returned to Little Silver and given some attention to the kids, who were moments from exploding, thereby managing to pacify them. We had to spend time with them regularly or the bomb icon gradually grew bigger— Wait, what was this, a dating sim from back in the day?

Anyway, I spent about a week showering the children with attention, then came to the royal capital alone, leaving Reiko behind. Meanwhile, Kyoko had gone back to her shop because she didn't want to be away for too long when she wasn't even needed yet. I hoped her employees would be able to run things on their own soon. She'd told me that she ideally wanted the manager she'd hired to stock normal products through normal routes and cut back her supply of special products to a minimum. That way, they'd learn to run the business without using Kyoko's support and cheat items. She'd been thinking about the future in her own way too.

Now, there was one thing I had to do at the royal capital first and foremost: it was time to go where orphans who weren't in orphanages hung out. It was my job as a stray priestess to help orphans! But apparently, things weren't so simple.

"Name, status, and your purpose for coming here?" a bored-looking gatekeeper said when my turn came up. I mean, he had to ask the same thing hundreds—or even thousands of times. I couldn't blame him for being curt.

In a world without photographs, it was pretty much impossible to tell if someone was a wanted criminal unless they had some standout characteristics. It wasn't as if spies from other countries had cheat sheets with secret codes on them, communication devices, portable pen-shaped guns, or anything. There was no way to catch them even if questioned. There weren't any passports or travel permits, and a gatekeeper couldn't determine if a handwritten document was forged or not. So, there was a gatekeeper because they couldn't just let people freely go in and out of the royal capital unchecked, but people were generally let through unless they were overtly suspicious. They just didn't have time to carefully check every single one of such a large number of people trying to go through the gate.

The "status" that the gatekeeper had asked about wasn't referring to social classes like nobility or royalty; instead, he was asking whether I was a merchant, hunter, farmer, or something

like that—which made sense, since nobles and royalty wouldn't be lining up with the rest of the commoners.

"I am Edith, a free priestess," I answered. "I am in the middle of a missionary and service trip, and have come here to rest and to raise funds."

The Temple's influence reached far and wide in the royal capital, so I wasn't planning on doing my work as a free priestess too publicly. Still, it would be completely normal for someone like me to visit the royal capital to gather information, rest, and meet up with sponsors and patrons.

As an aside, the title of "stray priestess" was something I called myself in a self-deprecating sort of way, and the term was only used by others when they meant it as an insult. Technically, priestesses who weren't affiliated with the Temple were known as free priestesses, though it was pretty rare for anyone to use that phrase unless it was in an official setting.

"Oh, you're a stray—I mean, a free priestess. Welcome. Take your time in the royal capital, uh…Edith? Ah! Well, I've been told to interview free priestesses and traveling merchants about what's going on in other regions and report on my findings. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to ask a few questions in the station, please…"

Huh.

Priestesses were generally respected despite being commoners, so I was being treated normally at first, but he seemed to have panicked and then became even more polite. Maybe he was a devout believer, he'd felt guilty for taking up my time, or he was being nice because he didn't want to deal with me being uncooperative.

Anyway, I understood where they were coming from. Traveling merchants and free priestesses had professions that required visiting various villages and interacting with the local people. It was much easier for us to get candid responses from villagers who may have refused to respond to investigations by officials and soldiers. If a politician wanted to hear the true thoughts of the locals, this wasn't a bad method and it was quite respectable considering many aristocrats and royal families had no interest in the lowly masses…unless the administration was so bad that they were only looking to get intel out of fear of uprisings and rebellions, that is. But that didn't seem to be the case from what I'd seen so far, so there was probably no need to

worry about that.

"Hey, what are you doing? Hurry up and follow up on that report!" the person who was escorting me said to someone who was presumably a low-ranking official.

"Huh? O-Oh, yes, sir! Right away!" the man replied and ran off in a hurry.

It sucked being at the bottom of the totem pole no matter what world you lived in.

Afterward, the leader of the gatekeepers—that is, the highest-ranking supervisor of the few people manning this gate—asked me a bunch of questions. He wanted to know which route I'd taken here, whether I'd noticed anything funny in the villages along the way, and if any unusual events and things that seemed out of the ordinary had occurred. He also asked about my personal information, like my age, place of birth, my family, favorite food, marital status, etc.

What is this, a formal marriage interview?! Or maybe he's interested in me... Hmm.

Anyway, the wait time was getting ridiculous. I didn't know how many free priestesses came through here, but they surely had a ton of traveling merchants visiting all the time. Had they been spending this long interviewing each one? And did they ask some middle-aged dude about his favorite food and whether they were married or not? What was going on?!

As I was going on an internal tirade, the door opened and several men entered the station.

"Thank you for waiting," a man said as he walked in.

Is that a knight? Oh boy, here we go!

"Allow me to escort you to the royal palace. Follow me to the carriage, if you please."

Did I say something horribly wrong or something? Did I insult the royal family or criticize the establishment, maybe? I don't think I did...

If they were here to arrest a criminal, the people they'd dispatched would've been far too high-ranking for the job, and their demeanor was way too polite. The carriage was really nice too. I wondered what was going on, and then the realization hit me.

That's what that low-ranking officer's report was about!

If the purpose of that exchange was to call for these people,

the answers I'd given during the interview had nothing to do with any of this. The only information I'd given them before the report went out was the fact that I was a free priestess, my name, and the purpose for my visit, which were all completely standard answers. The only thing that was different about me compared to other free priestesses was my name…

Waaait a minute! That's it!

They'd come to secure Edith, the stray priestess with minor blessings of the Goddess, even before I'd told anyone about my upgrade!

"I'm glad you've come, Sister Edith!"

Well, since he's not from the Temple, I suppose it doesn't matter to him whether a priestess is affiliated with the Temple or not. All priestesses are the same to him.

On second thought, that wasn't actually true. Temple priestesses would be beholden to the will of the Temple's upper echelons, while free priestesses would rather work on their own in a poor environment than obey the Temple. Which would be easier for a third party to take in under their control? Not to mention, Temple priestesses only worked in the city, where there was more money to be made, whereas free priestesses took risks by going out into the boonies and offering prayers for free —being compensated with a place to stay and some food at best. It was pretty clear which would be better liked by the general population, especially when considering that the Temple didn't think highly of free priestesses, even though they both worshipped the same goddess. Supposedly, they didn't go as far as to harass or antagonize the powerless free priestesses, but I wasn't sure if that was because they actually understood the concept of shame or they were just afraid of the negative reaction it would get from the masses.

"So, what is it you want?" I asked without bowing.

Everyone around, including the person who'd just spoken, glared at me. They were the ones who'd brought me here, no questions asked. And sure, they were polite enough when speaking to me, but they showed their true colors as soon as they realized I wasn't groveling at their feet. So, I'd decided I would treat them coldly and see how things went.

I mean, the clergy were technically supposed to be free of secular status and influence. Of course, that wasn't how things actually were in practice, but that was how things were

“supposed to be” nonetheless. A servant of the Goddess shouldn’t be subordinate to a mere human, after all. Royalty and nobility were just statuses made up by humans, completely unrelated to the Goddess. This was the Temple’s ultimate weapon to keep themselves from taking orders from the royal palace and aristocrats and anyone who publicly denied that claim would be under fire from the Temple’s collective forces—that is, in a political sense, not a military one. They would boycott products from the offending aristocrat’s land and treat people from that territory coldly as retaliation. The Temple would accuse not just that aristocrat and their clan of being heathens who’d picked a fight with the Goddess, but also the entire population of their fiefdom and faction too. That was quite effective in a world where there was only one main religion, so no one could complain if a priestess refused to bow to anyone but the Goddess and her kin…though, generally, no free priestess acted that way. They didn’t want to make enemies unnecessarily or put themselves in other people’s crosshairs.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t afford to lick the boots of the aristocracy or the royal family, given my plans moving forward. Besides, if I did that, I wouldn’t know what to say to Celes. That’d be like saying someone who was favored by Celes was beneath those who weren’t. If everyone recognized that, even aristocrats wouldn’t dare act so pompous toward me.

From the looks of it, no one here seemed to be royalty. I had figured as much, since the royal family wouldn’t have abruptly decided to meet a commoner of unknown origin. Besides the two knights behind me, there were six men here, and they seemed to be aristocrats or commoners in senior bureaucratic positions. Judging from their demeanor, they didn’t actually believe I was blessed by Celes, and they just wanted to play along with that narrative so they could use me for their own gain. If they hadn’t believed it but also hadn’t intended to use me, they wouldn’t have called me here, and if they had believed it, their attitudes would’ve been different. They were dealing with a little girl here—they should’ve pretended to be believers at the very least. Sure, I may have acted a bit cheeky, but they were acting against their own interests by giving me reason to feel distrust and caution toward them right off the bat.

“I show you a bit of kindness and respect, and you let it get to your head, you stupid little girl,” the man growled. “Do you

realize what happens to those who claim to be a saint or an Angel?! You'd better do as we say if you don't want to end up hanged—"

"Oh, I've never once said I was any of those things. Who told you such false rumors?" I asked.

"What...?"

"I'm nothing but a free priestess with minor blessings of the Goddess, so I'd never make such bold claims. If you want to hang someone, you should hang whoever was spreading those rumors!"

There was a drawn-out silence.

Yep, he's stumped now.

"Quiet! You just shut up and—"

There was a loud bang as the door slammed open. An important-looking man and several guards entered the room.

"What in the world are you all doing in such a crude place, calling in the priestess without permission, and without taking her to His Majesty?! Explain yourselves!"

"Huh?"

"L-Lord Chancellor? What are you doing here...?"

Oh? Does that mean he's the second-most important person next to the king? That must mean you'd have to be around the rank of a minister, marquis, or duke to speak to him on an equal basis.

"Your Holiness, I'm terribly sorry about this! We'll prepare a room for you right away, so please head to the guest room for now. You've gone through the trouble of coming all the way to the royal palace; would you like to meet His Majesty? Or perhaps you would like a tour of the palace with the princes and princesses?"

"Whaaaaaat?!" everyone—besides the guards who were desperately trying to maintain their composure—screamed in surprise, including me.

Sure, priestesses were respected religious figures, but this was completely unheard of!

"Wh-Wh-Wha..." the leader of the group that had brought me here stuttered, shaking with disbelief.

I mean, I felt the same way. Sure, I was a priestess, but why was someone so important giving a commoner girl like me the VIP treatment? It made no sense! Maybe they'd heard about my minor blessings, but they hadn't even confirmed if the rumors were true yet. The skepticism and contempt from the group

that'd brought me here was far more understandable, to be honest.

"This way, please..." the Lord Chancellor said to me, then turned to the rest of the aristocrats and said, "Oh, you're all to stay here until you're given further orders. Guards, stay here and keep them safe."

"Yes, sir!" the guards responded.

Wait, what?

I couldn't understand why he'd give that order to the guards. This was the royal palace, wasn't it? Why would a bunch of aristocrats just waiting here need guards? There must've been some reason that a mere commoner like me couldn't understand.

After the Lord Chancellor and Kaoru had left the room, the six aristocrats and two soldiers remained. The noblemen looked ghastly pale, and were soaked in sweat despite the mild temperature.

The urge to say something grew in the noblemen as the uncomfortable silence stretched out for what felt like an eternity. What was going to happen to them? What would the Lord Chancellor say to them after he spoke to that commoner girl? They needed time to talk so they could get their stories straight, but that was exactly why the two soldiers were keeping an eye on them. The Lord Chancellor had claimed it was to "keep them safe," but what could they possibly need to keep them safe from?

Whatever they discussed now would go straight to the Lord Chancellor through the guards, so they had to choose their words carefully.

"Just what is going on here? Why is the Lord Chancellor treating that commoner girl with such respect?"

"We've done nothing to deserve this treatment. All we've done is invite a common stray priestess to the royal palace so we could offer to be her sponsors. It wasn't as if we wanted to make a move on her or had any other ill intent. Besides, if I wanted to do something like that, I would've done it alone. And with a more attractive girl too. Why would possess me to share a commoner girl with such a scrawny body?!" one of the men complained, and the other five nodded in agreement. This was a highly convincing argument, and they didn't mind if the Lord Chancellor heard it. Surely, the guards watching over them would agree,

and it was the truth—the girl did in fact appear to be twelve or thirteen, and they hadn't intended to do anything of that sort to her.

Their plan had been to use a mix of threats and kindness to make the girl who was supposedly slightly favored by the Goddess do their bidding. Of course, they knew she hadn't been blessed by the Goddess at all, but she claimed she was, and the people believed her. There was no reason not to play along. Even if her lies were to be exposed later on, they could have claimed that they had faith in the girl because they were devout believers themselves, and no blame would be placed on them.

Perhaps the girl didn't even think she was lying and believed her own story. It was only a matter of time before she was struck down by divine punishment for lying about being blessed by the Goddess Celestine. Celestine was known to be a ruthless deity, after all. It was hard to imagine a little girl like this one would have the guts to knowingly take such a risk.

In any case, they would have to somehow talk her into obeying them, contact the Temple, and make an arrangement so she would be recognized as a saint. They would then use her as a pawn to build a connection with the Temple and influence over the masses. She would also be useful for raking in money, and would benefit from the arrangement herself. Their group, the girl, the Temple, and the people would all be happy, with no one getting the short end of the stick. It was in fact, an altruistic effort and nothing to be ashamed of. So why were they being treated this way? The only thing that didn't make sense was the Lord Chancellor's actions. The little girl's attitude was understandable—her foolish actions were that of an ignorant, rude little girl, which was nothing out of the ordinary. It was unlikely that the wise Lord Chancellor had been fooled by that commoner's lies, and even if he had, he had enough influence to treat the highest authorities of the Temple as equals. There was no reason for him to be so humble with the girl, even if she really had been blessed by the Goddess.

They just couldn't understand it. However, they couldn't speak openly about their true feelings with the soldiers keeping an eye on them. Whatever the Lord Chancellor had to say to them later, they knew it couldn't be good. After all, he had clearly stationed the soldiers here so they wouldn't try to flee.

I was waiting in the guest room with the tea and expensive-looking snacks I'd been served when the Lord Chancellor arrived…along with several men and a few maids pushing a wagon full of more snacks and a tea set on it.

I thought he brought me here so I could rest!

"Apologies for the wait. Please allow me to introduce His Majesty the King, one of his ministers, and several civil officials. They wished to meet you in person…"

Are you being serious right now?! And where's the king's crown?! I had no idea who he was!

Though, come to think of it, wearing that thing on your head all day would probably be pretty annoying and could cause a sore neck and shoulders. It'd probably be bad for your hair too. It made sense not to wear it unless it was for a ceremony or something.

I was afraid to find out what they wanted to discuss, but the king and his cohort just wanted to make small talk. They'd asked me about my family, but I'd told them my status and relatives in the secular world had nothing to do with my work as a priestess, and they'd left it at that. If I'd told them I had no relatives, they might have taken it to mean I had no one to support me and gotten some funny ideas, so I'd been deliberately vague with my answer. Besides, if I had no family, it would've contradicted my backstory about not needing money.

On the way home, I was told to come and let them know if I ever needed anything, and that they would send someone right away if I said my name at the gate.

What the?! This king is so kind to a mere commoner priestess… Well, I'd acted in a way that'd make him assume my family was wealthy, but still, a king wouldn't normally be so considerate of a random priestess like me! This guy's a man of character! Maybe I can count on his help if some weirdo aristocrat or rich person starts messing with me… No, I can't let my guard down.

Even if there was a good person at the top of an organization, the middle and lower levels could still be involved in criminal activity or accept bribes and favors from crooks. Still, I felt a lot safer knowing there was someone good at the very top.

It's good to see this is such a nice country!

A private meeting was taking place in a conference room

where the king, Lord Chancellor, and other important figures were gathered.

“Thank goodness, she didn’t seem too upset…” the Lord Chancellor said.

“Indeed. I thought my heart would stop when I heard what those idiotic nobles were up to. I can’t begin to express how relieved I am that things didn’t get out of hand. If the Goddess is enraged, I wouldn’t mind taking responsibility by being beheaded, but I wouldn’t want to go down in history as the sinner who’d caused the entire continent to be destroyed,” the king said, and everyone nodded in agreement. “In any case, that lord who notified us by sending an express message with multiple horses and riders deserves the highest of praise. He’s this country’s—no, this continent’s savior. Give him a medal, and come up with some kind of reward for him. Given the situation, we can’t publicly announce the reason, but his merits shouldn’t go unrecognized. The Hunter’s Guild branch and Commerce Guild in that town deserve some sort of reward as well. We were fortunate that the incident happened in a town with a proper lord and guilds. Oh, and as for the noble families who attacked the Angel—I mean, the free priestess and devout servant of the Goddess…take them out!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

There was the only possible option. He also had to figure out a punishment for the moronic aristocrats who’d put the entire continent in danger with their selfish actions.

The Lord Chancellor would be quite busy for a while. However, although he felt immense pressure knowing he had the responsibility of protecting his homeland, there was no cause that could be more worthwhile, and he found himself filled with a sense of excitement and elation.

When Edith the stray priestess had stopped by to bid him farewell, the lord had casually asked her where she was headed to next. In response, Edith had told him she was going to the royal capital. As soon as Edith left, the lord had immediately begun writing a letter and ordered horses and riders to ride forth at full speed, switching out mounts along the way as needed, so they could deliver it without regard for cost.

The letter had been addressed to the king. There was no time for pleasantries or etiquette. A moment’s delay could result in

the end of the continent. He'd written the letter in a desperate race against time. Even though he'd miswritten some parts, there was no time to fix his errors—he'd simply crossed them out and continued writing. The letter was far from anything that was proper enough to be sent to the king, but considering what was at stake, the thought of embarrassing himself was the last thing on his mind. And so, he'd continued writing as if his life depended on it.

Afterward, he'd written a set of instructions to be read by one rider to the next, handed it and the letter to the first rider and explained a few things, watched him depart...then collapsed on his bed—his body and mind fatigued, yet his heart full of satisfaction, knowing he'd saved the continent from certain doom.

"What?! Whaaaaaat?!" the king couldn't help but cry out in bewilderment at the letter.

It was an emergency message from a certain local lord—a confidential one at that. Even letters addressed to the king were normally opened, checked, categorized, then processed by a clerk, and he himself didn't personally open all of them. This was because not all letters were worthy of the king's time, and many of them were actually something for the bureaucrats to handle, even if they were addressed to the king. However, the confidential designation meant it was for the king to open himself. Typically, the only people who would send a letter this way were his personal friends or family living in distant lands. If the letter had come from anyone else, it wouldn't have been odd if a clerk had ignored the "confidential" label and opened it. In fact, they definitely would have under normal circumstances. However, since the sender was a lord, and it had come by express mail, the person who received the letter felt something was amiss and delivered it to the Lord Chancellor, who had then handed it to the king.

"Y-You read it too!" the king had ordered.

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty..." the Lord Chancellor said as he accepted the letter, then began reading. After a few moments had passed, he'd also raised his voice in stunned surprise. "What?!"

"Summon the ministers! I'm calling for an emergency meeting!" the king called out.

“Right away!”

“So, that’s the situation. Any questions?” the king asked the notables of the nation after explaining the contents of the letter that had been sent to him.

“Pardon me, but…can this report be trusted?” one of the ministers asked.

“*That* is the question, of course,” the king said. “I trust you’ve all read *The Angel Records*?”

The men all nodded.

The Angel Records was a folklore-esque book of records that was read to those who were of a marquis or higher rank when they became the head of the family, or when one was promoted to a ministry, military command, or other important position in the country. There were an endless number of books and records regarding the Goddess Celestine, from picture books for young children to academic and religious texts.

Among them, out of books written in the past seventy years or so, there were mentions of “Saint Kaoru,” “the Angel Kaoru,” and in a select few, the name “Goddess Kaoru” could be found. Those were the names of a saint who was said to have appeared a little more than seventy years ago. She wasn’t just a priestess, but a friend of the Goddess Celestine, and had used the blessing bestowed upon her to create countless miracles. And when she’d met her unfortunate end due to the treacherous act of some vile cretins, the Goddess Celestine had nearly sunk the continent to the depths of the sea, but the great hero and guardian of the continent, Fearsome Fran, the Einherjar, had silenced her with repeated slaps to her face. Even in the modern day, parents scolded their children by saying, “If you don’t behave, Fearsome Fran will come and slap you around!” to silence their crying.

Among the many texts and legends, *The Angel Records* was in a league of its own in terms of authenticity as a classified document that had only been passed around the leadership of each country.

Below are some quotes from a section therefrom, titled *Lady Kaoru Chronicles — The Goddess*:

“Celes isn’t a patron god of humans or anything. She only shows up in human form when she talks to humans. If she wanted to talk to a dog or cat, she’d change her form to match. Probably.”

“Celes’s job is to protect the world’s harmony and eliminate

distortions as early as possible. She doesn't care how many humans die, other than the ones she really likes. Well, maybe she cares about humans as much as humans care about the ants in their yard. If a whole lot of them are about to die, she might give them a warning if she feels like it."

"She said she'd destroyed a country just because it pissed her off."

"She said she wants me to live a long life, so I wouldn't mess with me if I were you. Unless you want your country wiped off the map, that is."

And in fact, when the Angel Kaoru had perished, not only was the country about to be annihilated, but the entire continent had been in danger. The thought of what would have happened if not for Fearsome Fran the Einherjar's slaps was quite chilling.

"Praise be to Fran, great hero and guardian of the continent! Save us from the clutches of evil!" the king suddenly prayed out loud.

"Fran, O Fran! Fran, O Fran!" The rest of the room seemed to infer the king's thought process and joined him by chanting in unison.

"When we consider the contents of *The Angel Records*...and the teachings of the Order of the Goddess Kaoru—they may be but one of many religious sects, but at the root of those records are the orphans who were raised by the Angel, Lady Kaoru. I understand why they would want to worship her as a goddess, but if we subtract that part from the narrative, the text regarding Lady Kaoru can be trusted in terms of accuracy. There are simply far too many similarities to ignore. In other words..." the king's eyes shot wide open as he yelled, "That young girl named Edith is the beloved child of the Goddess Celestine and the new Angel who has reappeared for the first time in decades! But the Angel dislikes causing a commotion, so she's been hiding her true identity...or at least, she seems to be trying. So, of course, we must respect her wishes and act as if we aren't aware of the Angel's existence. However...we must do everything it takes to make sure she is never displeased and that she doesn't forsake our country and leave it for another. Understood?!"

The men fervently cheered and chanted, "Edith, O Edith! Edith, O Edith!"

And so, the royal capital had begun their preparations to welcome "just a stray priestess girl who they definitely didn't think was the Angel."

I booked a room at an inn to get some rest. I couldn't use the rental we'd secured in the royal capital quite yet. There was a chance that someone had been trailing me after leaving the royal palace, and it would've exposed the hole in my story if anyone found out that I'd already rented a house in this city. For now, I had to keep playing the role of a stray priestess who just happened to stop by the royal capital for rest and fundraising.

Oh, I should sell some jewels so I have a record of procuring funds here…

I still had plenty of money, but I had to stick to the script.

There wasn't much to note about my meeting with the king at the royal palace other than how overwhelmingly supportive they were of a mere priestess like me. They'd probably let me meet with him as a token of apology for the men who'd taken me there against my will. It must've been very rare for a free priestess to get the opportunity like that. What a nice king he was.

This place was all the way across the continent from where I'd made a mess of things back before the Item Box incident, and it'd been seventy-four years since then. There weren't any TVs or newspapers in this world, and rumors wouldn't even be recognizable as the original stories by the time they made it across the continent. The archives from back then were probably gathering dust in some storehouse somewhere, and there were very few people with accurate information from back then who were still alive and healthy by now. Not to mention, I was said to be a normal human in religious teachings—other than in the teachings of the Order of the Goddess Kaoru, but that was just a minor sect. No one would even fathom I could still exist looking just like I did back then; there weren't any photographs in this world, and the only illustrations of me left had beautified me so much that they barely resembled me at all…like the face that was on Kaorun coins. *Nobody* would recognize me if that was their point of reference.

Besides, if someone who looked just like Queen Himiko was walking around in modern Japan, no one would stop her and ask, "You're Queen Himiko, aren't you?" That was pretty much what it meant for someone to ask me if I was the Angel Kaoru. No one would have the nerve to do such a thing unless they wanted to be thought of as insane.

The men who'd taken me to the royal palace were probably getting scolded by the Lord Chancellor, so all I had to look out for now was that aristocrat who'd sent people to attack me.

What was his name again...? Oh, that's right, Count Tartus!

I'd used a truth serum to get that info straight from his own soldier, so it was definitely true. The lord had said he'd definitely take care of it, but he didn't have any authority over Count Tartus or anything. In fact, there was a chance that Tartus's country was in a superior position and the lord couldn't do anything about it. Besides, would a nobleman declare all-out war against another noble family over a random stray priestess? Probably not. It was probably best to assume it had just been lip service to make me feel better at the time.

Even Count Tartus probably wouldn't send a big group of men to attack me at the royal capital, but he could send someone to attack me in my sleep, drag me into an alley at night, or pick a fight with me head-on using his influence as an aristocrat. Still, his goal probably wasn't to ambush and kill me, so I wasn't too worried. I'd be fine as long as I had some time to act and he wasn't gonna headshot me from afar with a bow and arrow or take me by surprise with a blade to the heart.

I decided to sell some jewels tomorrow. I'd said my goal for coming here was rest and fundraising, so I had to accomplish both to avoid suspicion. There were plenty of shops that would be willing to buy jewelry in the royal capital, and the market price should be better here than in provincial cities.

"Shoo! Shoo! This shop isn't for beggars like you. Having your kind loitering around would make us look bad, so scram!"

"If you're here to beg for food scraps, at least go around to the back!"

Sheesh, talk about a bad attitude! I'm not here to beg, damn it! Sure, I'm a commoner, and stray priestesses are generally poor, but I'm a cleric! And my boss is supposed to be Celes!

I'd just been visiting jewelry stores and looking for a place to sell my goods, and this was the treatment I'd gotten. I was thinking how things were never this bad in provincial cities...and then it hit me. Temple officials who only cared about money were despised in rural areas, while free priestesses who performed funeral prayers, gave blessings at festivals, and offered prayers to ward off illnesses and more for a very

reasonable price were cherished. On the other hand, the royal capital was full of Temple advocates, so free priestesses were looked down upon. Plus, today I was wearing my so-called stray priestess outfit, which were cheap and durable clothes that I wore for touring the provincial regions.

All right, time to go back to the inn and change!

"Hmm, I can do eight gold coins and three small gold coins for this one. This other one would be seven gold coins..." the jeweler said.

"Oh, I see. Thank you!" I replied and walked away.

"What? Hey, wait! Hold on!"

A jeweler had started taking me seriously once I'd changed into expensive-looking clothes, but because of my appearance, age, and the fact that I was looking to sell instead of buy, he'd tried to rip me off with ludicrously low prices. I had no time to waste on bogus appraisals, so I immediately took my leave. I would've agreed if he'd offered me twice as much, and they would've made a hefty profit even then. Maybe he would've offered a fair price if he knew I wasn't an idiot who didn't know the market price, but I wasn't gonna deal with dishonest businesses that judged customers and looked down on them because of their looks, even if they then offered a better price afterward. So they got one chance at an offer, then they were out. I heard him desperately trying to stop me from behind, but I ignored him.

This was a private shop, so whatever price the owner wanted to offer was up to him. That was where private businesses differed from a semi-public organization like the Commerce Guild. Similarly, it was ultimately my choice whether I wanted to sell my jewels at a shop or not.

I didn't really feel like selling to the Commerce Guild. I'd had enough of that experience from last time. The Commerce Guild in the royal capital would likely give me a proper offer, but it was pretty much guaranteed that info would leak out if I sold at a guild, and it'd probably lead to more hassles down the line. That was why I wanted to deal with a normal store.

I just needed to have a record of me selling goods for funds, but without the other party assuming I was a sucker and without lining the pockets of bad guys.

Okay, on to the next shop!

“This would be eleven gold coins.”

“Eight gold coins and five small gold coins.”

“We can offer a special price of nine gold coins and five small gold coins, plus an additional six silver coins!”

Gaaah! You all think I’m some naive child…

“If the next shop tries to rip me off, I have some ideas of my own…” I grumbled, and walked into the next and final shop.

“You’d like to sell some wares? Excellent, please follow me to the back.”

They’d at least started hearing me out after I’d changed into nicer clothes and put on my accessories.

I was taken to the back of the shop, then a female associate walked up to the man who was taking care of me and said, “Chief, the boss is calling for you.”

“I’m taking care of a customer right now. Ask him to wait for a bit.”

“He insists you go now; it’s urgent,” the woman said. “He just wants to ask you a quick question. He said it’s top priority.”

“What?! Top priority?” the man said, then turned to me. “My sincerest apologies, but please wait a moment.” He then turned around and called out, “Hey, bring our guest some tea and snacks, quickly!”

Well, sometimes businessmen just had to attend to sudden and urgent matters. That was understandable, especially since it was the shop owner calling for him. I told him not to worry about it and gave him a little wave.

A few minutes later, the chief returned, looking rather pale. Maybe he’d been given some bad news, but it wasn’t as if I could help him, so I didn’t think much of it. I handed him the jewels for appraisal, and he took some time to inspect them.

“Twenty-four gold coins and four small gold coins… And this one would be twenty-one gold coins and two—no, three small gold coins…”

Oh! That’s the price I’d been expecting, give or take one small gold coin!

The price was still much lower than retail, but they obviously had to make a profit too.

“Sold!” I exclaimed.

Nice, I found a shop that offers fair prices in the royal capital!


"Nooo
ooone caaan
caaatch up,
da-daaa
dadaa!"
SLAM
STAND
CLUTCH

“So, I ran in through the back door and called for the shop owner in a hurry, then had him tell the person handling the sale, ‘You don’t have to make the price so high that you’d lose money, but offer a purchase price that’s fair and honest. That’s an order from the king!’ and the situation was resolved without issues. I must say, it was quite terrifying when the undercover guards reported that the priestess was growing displeased because the jewelry stores had all been dishonest in their appraisals, and they’d heard her grumbling, ‘If the next shop tries to rip me off, I have some ideas of my own…’ I haven’t run so hard in decades,” the Lord Chancellor said.

“Well done, Lord Chancellor. The next cabinet member on immediate standby duty is the Minister of Finance, if I recall. You may go home and rest for today,” the king replied.

“Thank you, Your Majesty! Then I will be off to see my grandson for the first time in a while.”

“Good. We must protect this continent at all costs, for the children’s sake as well.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Chapter 81: The Temple

I'd sold three small artificial jewels to raise some funds, and thus my public-facing reason for coming to the royal capital was complete. I figured I'd take it easy for four or five more days, then buy some souvenirs and head home. Next, Reiko would arrive as a Rank C hunter and make a name for herself in the royal capital branch. Her immediate goal was to get to Rank B; she could use our rental house when that time came.

While Reiko worked on that, I decided to have Kyoko sell some rare and interesting products in the royal capital.

The continent had been in peril because of some greedy jewelers, but catastrophe had been avoided thanks to my hard work.

I…saved this country—this continent! Ha ha. Ha ha ha ha…

But the bigger worry was the Temple. Supposedly, the previous generation's Angel hadn't had an especially positive relationship with them. That was widely acknowledged by everyone…except the Temple associates themselves. It made sense, considering that the Angel disliked being in the spotlight. It was hard to believe, but it was said that the Temple sought to put her in the public eye and use her to increase their own social standing and thereby receive more donations from the people. It was no wonder she'd tried to distance herself from them.

However, the Temple had never mentioned their own wrongdoings to the future generations, including their own priests in training. That was why there were some things that the royalty, nobility, and general populace knew but the priests didn't—the relationship, or lack thereof, between the Temple and Angel being one of them. Other than a select few Temple officials, most of their associates hadn't realized the previous Angel had been avoiding them and firmly believed they would be unconditionally accepted by her. I was unsure what this Angel thought of them, but the fact that she'd been working as a stray priestess spoke volumes.

Besides, why would the Angel, who could speak directly with the Goddess Celestine, need to listen to or take orders from

members of the Temple? Did they actually believe a pope or cardinal, who were appointed by other humans, were higher in rank than someone who'd been chosen by the Goddess herself? What made them think they had the right to give her orders? It was no wonder this Angel hadn't affiliated herself with the Temple and had instead chosen to be a free priestess—also known as a stray priestess—so she wouldn't have to take orders from anyone other than the Goddess and her kin.

If the Angel had fallen into the Temple's clutches, they may have become so arrogant that they'd start needlessly interfering in politics and the lives of the people, or even forcing people to give donations. That was why we hadn't told the Temple about her existence, but we wouldn't be able to keep it a secret for long. Some aristocrats were quite devout—a phrase that *sounded* good, but they were the type to value religion over national politics and society's well-being, and would happily leak information to the Temple in exchange for favors. To make matters worse, they wouldn't consider their actions wrong—they'd believe they were serving the Goddess and would receive well-deserved blessings in return. Criminals who knew full well that they were selling information in exchange for bribes were far better in comparison.

Then there was that region where the Angel had revealed her powers. There were ordinary inhabitants, hunters, and merchants there, and among them were loose-lipped individuals, visitors from other countries, and those who understood such information would make good money. There was no way to stop the news from getting out. It would've been one thing if the information getting leaked was going to be completely accurate, but it'd be a different story entirely if the details got muddled. For example, if word got out that "she could heal the sick and wounded" but the crucial part of "if you mess with her, the continent will be put in danger" was missing, or if the rumors claimed she was a stupid girl who could be easily manipulated…it would be over for us all.

On second thought, that wouldn't happen if the Angel was alive. If the continent was destroyed, all of the people the Angel cared about would perish along with it. The Goddess Celestine could be careless and rash, but even she wouldn't…

No, she'd send just the Angel and the people around her to another continent before sinking this one…

No. No, no, no, no! I won't allow that to happen. As the Lord Chancellor—nay, as a man of this continent—I will stop that from happening no matter what! I will put my life on the line to follow in the footsteps of Fearsome Fran!

"There's someone here who wants to see you…" the proprietress of the inn said to me, though I couldn't imagine who'd want to visit me now. Sure, I knew some people from the Tavolas Trade Company's royal capital branch and that one clinic, but none of them knew I was here at this inn, or even in the royal capital for that matter.

"Who wants to see me?" I asked.

"They're priests from the Temple," she answered.

"Ah…"

How did they find out I was here? And *what* had they heard about me? I mean, I already knew it was some far-fetched story that was a terribly distorted version of the truth. They either wanted to prop me up as a saint, even if my blessings were nothing to write home about, or intended to use me as a tool until I wasn't useful anymore. Whatever the case, all I could think of when it came to the Temple were the people from Rueda… In other words, I felt disgust before anything else, and it made me not want to deal with them.

Sure, there were probably some priests who earnestly wanted nothing more than to worship Celes and offer salvation to the people. There were some priests who lived in poverty and some who worked in soup kitchens and provided relief to the poor districts, but those types of people probably wouldn't have formed a clique to barge into an inn to bug a priestess who'd only been in the royal capital for a day. The proprietress had implied there was more than one of them—why would they need such a big group just to talk to a little girl? The only logical explanation was that they intended to strong-arm me into doing something or to kidnap me.

"I don't know any priests in the royal capital," I said. "As you can see, I'm just a stray priestess, so the Temple doesn't think highly of me. I'm sure they just want to find some excuse to shake me down for some money or to take me away somewhere. Please tell them I'm tired from my travels and I'm sleeping."

"Understood!"

She was probably used to getting demands to see guests who were staying at the inn and did what she could to protect them, even if she was dealing with influential people. I appreciated that. There was probably nothing she could do if the police or royal knights made the demand, but if she was willing to send away priests, that made this an earnest and trustworthy business in my book. It even had a bath too. I was a woman traveling solo, so I'd obviously ruled out cheap lodging where rooms were shared with others and opted for an inn that was on the more expensive side. It wasn't as if I were hurting for money anyway. It seemed I'd made the right decision.

I was mulling over my thoughts when I noticed a commotion downstairs. Judging by the timing, the priests were probably arguing with the proprietress of the inn, but there was no reason for me to poke my nose out there, and it would only make things worse anyway. I decided to leave it to the staff, since they were probably used to handling this sort of thing. Religious affairs were a pain to deal with—especially if it involved fanatics.

I mean, I have religious fanatics worshipping me! I know what I'm talking about!

The commotion downstairs continued for some time, and I realized the priests had decided to push their way through. It seemed even the inn's staff couldn't hold them back or remove them by force. Maybe the priests had foreseen this and brought some muscle along for this exact reason. Maybe the inn had a tough guy or two on their staff instead of guards in case they had some rowdy customers, but they were unlikely to have hired any actual mercenaries or hunters. The Temple side probably had soldiers and shady agencies to carry out their illegal and dirty work...right? Y'know, like the Hellsing Organization and Iscariot Organization. Even Japan had Buddhist warrior monks. What was up with religious groups having their own military anyway?

Anyway, they seemed to have gotten past the inn staff and were making their way upstairs. I could hear the staff desperately shouting after them as the footsteps approached. This was definitely trespassing and obstruction of business. *Forcible* obstruction of business, even.

All right, if you wanna play that way...

I removed my outerwear, unbuttoned the top two buttons on my shirt, and exposed my shoulder.

Suddenly, the door opened without so much as a “Pardon me.”

“Your Holiness, there’s something—”

“Aaaaaahhhhhh! A stranger barged into my room while I was changing! It’s a burglar! A kidnapper! A rapiiist!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, being overly descriptive with my exclamation.

“What? Huh? Ah! No, I didn’t mean to! We’re from the Temple, and—”

“Ahhh! The criminals are claiming to be Temple associates! I can’t help but wonder if they’re trying to falsely pin the blame on priests or if they’re actually priests who are trying to force themselves on a helpless priestess!”

I sounded rather calm and descriptive for someone who feared for their life, but no one would pay attention to that detail.

“N-No! That wasn’t our intention at all! Calm down! Please, be quiet!” the priest pleaded.

“Eeeeek! He just ordered me to be quiet! Stay away from meeeee!”

I didn’t listen to a word they said. I merely trembled in fear at the sudden intrusion without even attempting to converse. There was nothing they could do.

With the window wide open on the second floor, my screams projected far and wide. Not to mention, this was a luxury inn located in the center of town. Which meant…

“Stop right there! You’re under arrest for trespassing and sexual assault!” a group of armed men barked as they flooded into the room.

Yep, the guards’ headquarters was right around the corner.

Even so, their response seemed a bit *too* fast. It’d only been thirty seconds or so since I’d first started screaming…

“And a guard station just so happened to be built right next to this inn?” I asked.

“Yes. The headquarters and station have different functions, so although the headquarters is close by, we determined that a station would be necessary to be more responsive in case of emergencies,” the guard answered.

“Ah, what a wonderful idea! You really do care about the people,” I said.

I was surprised to find out a guard station had recently been built right next to the inn by complete coincidence. And this was their first deployment too. It was no wonder they'd been so gung-ho about it.

The priests were taken aback by the guards' unprecedentedly forceful attitudes, but they'd barged into a room where an underage-looking girl was changing. Even though they were priests, that was far beyond the limits of what could be swept under the rug. Celes's followers worshipped Celes, not the priests. In fact, any priest who committed evil in her name was considered a heretic and enemy of Celes. Just as police officers who'd committed crimes were held to a higher standard than normal, priests also deserved a good bashing for cases like this. The Temple would normally cover up such scandals, but this incident had far too much public attention for that now.

Besides, although the Temple wasn't on good terms with free priestesses, barging into the room of a young girl who was supposed to be a fellow worshipper of the same goddess was definitely not a good look. To top it all off, it was common knowledge that I was well-off because of the high-end inn I'd been staying at and the clothes and accessories I'd been wearing when I'd exchanged my jewels for money. So, it could be inferred that the men had been after my body or my money.

Regardless, there was no reasonable way to refute the claim that they had nefarious intentions in barging into the room of a girl they didn't know. There were plenty of witnesses who could verify that I'd refused visitors due to being tired from my travels, that the men had forcibly pushed their way through when the staff had tried to stop them, and that they'd entered my room without permission. Now, even if the Temple sent more priests or other officials, all I had to do was scream, "Aaaaaahhh! The Temple sent people to silence meeeeee!" and anyone who was familiar with this case wouldn't question my statement.

I mean, there was a real chance they really would try to silence me. The folks from the Temple would gladly sacrifice a stray priestess's life if it meant they could cover up a scandal of their own.

Anyway, it was pretty reassuring to know there was a guard station right next door. It seemed I'd picked a very good inn by complete coincidence.

Good job, me from a few days ago!

“Wh-Wh-Whaaat?! The girl who may be the Angel, who the royal palace was desperately trying to win over, mistakenly thought the priests were trying to force themselves upon her, and the ones who’d been sent to escort her back were all arrested by the guards?! How did this happen?! More importantly, I must do something about this! I must do something now!!!”

“The Temple attacked the Angel—I mean, the free priestess?! Those absolute imbeciles! Do they want to sink this continent?! S-Send someone to check on her at once! If the priestess is injured, flustered, or scared, send bodyguards to escort her to the royal palace immediately! However, prioritize her desires above all else! Do *not* try and force her to do anything she doesn’t want to! Understood?! Send your most trusted— No, *you* go investigate personally! I must send the one I trust above all others or else I may regret it later. Don’t forget that countless lives depend on the decisions you make. Now go!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the Minister of Finance’s face had turned pale from the colossal weight upon his shoulders, but he’d given the most reassuring answer he could muster before leaving to fulfill his duty.

“Send a messenger to the Temple! Tell them the king said, ‘If you don’t wish to die, bring someone who knows and can explain everything about this incident right away, along with someone who has the authority to make decisions on behalf of the Temple. If you don’t all want to be slaughtered because of your representative’s stupidity, you’d better choose someone with some wit and sense—this is one decision you *don’t* want to regret.’ Go at once!”

“Right away, Your Majesty!”

The Minister of War, who had been standing beside the king, bowed his head. He would likely carry out the order personally rather than send someone, as would anyone with half a brain, considering he had been listening to the conversation between the king and the Minister of Finance. If he sent a subordinate and that man relayed the message to an intermediary from the Temple, and then the message continued to get handed off akin to the Telephone game, the slightest difference in nuance in the king’s words could lead to catastrophic results. With this in mind,

no one would possibly have the guts to leave such a critical task to another.

And so, the Minister of War ran off, his face, too, pale from the monumental pressure and fear, but the mission to save his country and continent fueled his heart with purpose.

"So, that's what happened," I explained.

"You can't be serious..." Reiko shook her head.

"Ha ha ha ha!" Kyoko burst into laughter.

"I mean, it'll be a pain if the Temple develops a fixation and keeps bugging us, right?" I asked.

"Says the very person who did something that would draw all of the Temple's attention and hate to her," Reiko said.

Kyoko just kept laughing.

Now that the incident had been settled, I'd gone back to my room at the inn, contacted the two of them, and explained everything that had happened. Kyoko was laughing so much that she couldn't even participate in the conversation.

"Kaoru, you went way too far! The priests weren't even trying to kidnap you or anything like that, right? Now you've made it look like they attempted to abduct a minor... They could've been ordinary faithful folks with wives and children, just following orders from the higher-ups. Escorting someone who was blessed by the Goddess would be the right thing to do as a priest, and maybe they thought you'd be happy to go with them, since it would be an honor for a stray priestess to be invited to the Temple."

That was one way to look at it, but...

"But I had the inn's staff tell them I was tired and sleeping from my long journey. The staff tried to stop them, and they forced their way through. They tried to barge into a room where a girl was said to be sleeping by herself because she wasn't sleeping well—without even asking for permission, I might add. That's just selfishly pushing their demands without an ounce of respect for the other person. Why should I spare any sympathy for people like that?" I said.

"Oh, in that case, they deserved it. We can probably just let them deal with whatever consequences come their way," Kyoko agreed.

"Still, isn't it a bit much for them to be excommunicated from the religion they have faith in and be treated as criminals? They

might deserve a few days in jail at worst, but do they really deserve to be labeled sex offenders?”

Kyoko and Reiko were in complete disagreement.

Hmm, what to do…

Kyoko was typically an advocate for strict punishments at times like these, but Reiko’s policy was that the punishment should fit the crime. Reiko attached importance to the offender’s intent, while Kyoko cared more about the facts of what had been done. She was of the opinion that the offender should take responsibility for what they’d done, regardless of whether they had ill intent or not. She’d also say something like, “What, so you did it without any malice? If you can do something like this without ill will, then that means you don’t think you did anything wrong, and you’ll do something like this again without thinking anything of it, right? And if this is what you do *without* malice, then you’re capable of doing something much worse *with* malice. Am I wrong?” and steer the conversation so the offender would be punished even harder.

As for me, I placed importance on the scope of the damage the offender had tried to inflict and the probability of a repeat offense. If someone came at me with a knife, whether I got stabbed and killed or avoided it and lived would only matter in hindsight—it made no difference to their intent and actions. Therefore, I was of the opinion that the offender deserved to be punished harshly regardless of whether the victim avoided death or not. If they got a light sentence just because they didn’t kill their target, they’d come back to try and finish the job too. That was why the damage they *tried* to inflict and whether they’d be a repeat offender was what mattered, not the actual result. This line of thinking wouldn’t be accepted in Japan, but here, it was a different story—when I was the victim, anyway. As for this case…

“Hmm, they were probably gonna force me to go with them, but that might’ve been the extent of their violence. And I’m sure they were just following orders… Maybe I would feel a bit sorry for them if they got punished too hard. Whether they’d do something like this again would depend on their higher-ups, and even if they’d refused, the ones giving the orders would just have sent someone else. I guess their superiors are the ones to blame, not them…”

That was what it came down to. Just because there were a few bad apples, it didn’t mean the entire organization was evil.

Unless we were literally talking about a secret society of evil planning on world domination, that is. There were surely some devout believers among the Temple's priests who were genuinely faithful to Celes. Back then, it was the original headquarters, the Holy Land of Rueda, that was rotten to the core. The Temples in other countries considered Rueda's pope to be the top of their religious hierarchy, but they still hadn't aided Rueda during the war. They'd been followers of Celestine and therefore considered each other kindred, but that didn't mean they were going to blindly obey the pope, who was just an ordinary human.

Besides, the Celes that had manifested herself at the peace talks had said to the representatives of each country that they'd be allowed to continue using her name if they completely cut ties with Rueda. In other words, she'd given them a free pass by making it clear that the blame for that incident would fall solely on the Holy Land of Rueda. That was why Celes hadn't punished the priests of other countries even when I'd vanished thanks to Rueda's remnants. That day, every religious official on this entire continent had repented, but things had been muddled again by the passage of time.

"Okay," I said. "Tomorrow, I'll go to the guard headquarters and ask the captured men why they came to visit me and what their intentions were. Depending on their answer, I'll try to get them a lighter sentence."

"Yeah, good idea," Reiko agreed.

"Whaaat?" Kyoko said, sounding disappointed. Kyoko was merciless when it came to bad guys; she'd smile cutely before ending their lives. She had the body of a child and a mind that could be childish too.

"If they say something stupid, I'll ask for a harsher punishment," I added.

"Well, in that case..." Kyoko relented.

So, it'd been decided.


HMM...

“Oh, dear Angel! I see the misunderstanding has been resolved! We should’ve been the ones to get you; my apologies for making you come all the way here…”

“Insolent girl! How dare you turn down a summons from the Temple! Apologize at once and explain to the guards that this is all *your* fault!”

I’d come to the guard headquarters to visit the four priests, and their reaction was split, with two of them being apologetic and two of them insulting me.

Ah…

“Please have these two released and those two punished severely. Thank you,” I said to the guards.

“Whaaat?!” the two priests who’d been insulting me said.

I had no idea why they were surprised. Seriously, what had they expected? It must’ve been those two who’d pushed the inn’s staff aside and forced their way through. The mild-mannered ones had probably failed to stop them. It was one of the mild-mannered ones who’d tried to explain himself when they had walked in on me changing, if I recalled correctly. I thought for a moment that they might not be bad people, but if that was true, they wouldn’t have barged into a room where a woman was lying in bed because she didn’t feel well. The ones with a bad attitude had probably just stayed quiet at the time because they were surprised to find I was in the middle of changing.

Understandably, there were factions and power struggles within the Temple’s organization too. Each faction wanted to send their own guys to escort me, so they must’ve ended up on a team with multiple factions mixed together; there were those who wanted to treat me with respect and those who thought I was lying about being blessed and just wanted to use me.

“Those two are the culprits,” I said, pointing at the ones who’d insulted me. “The other two were still respectful and probably just failed to stop the others’ rampage, so let them off with a mild reprimand. As for the culprits…please punish them severely in accordance with the law.”

“Understood. Please leave it to us!” the guard who’d let me in promised with a nod.

“Oh, we are eternally grateful!” two of the priests said.

“Wh-What?! Why?!” the other two asked.

You seriously don’t understand why?!

“What?! The Angel—I mean, the priestess went to the guard headquarters to see the men who’d been arrested?! And the priests hurled insults at her? You fool, why did you allow such a thing to happen?! Didn’t you tell those idiots that they’d lose their heads if they disrespected her?!”

“No, Your Majesty, I never imagined she would try to visit them…”

“Well, you have a point… No one would expect the victim to visit the culprits responsible for a case like this. I suppose this was unavoidable—there’s no need to punish the guards. Damn it, we’re always one step behind…but it was an excellent turn of events that we were able to set up the temporary guard station in time. I shall reward the ones who were in charge of that initiative. I will also give a bonus to the royal guards who handled this incident. They did well by stopping those priests just in the nick of time.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” The messenger from the guard squad bowed appreciatively. It seemed he was one of the royal guards who had been deployed to the incident at the inn. There was no other way to send skilled swordsmen with sound judgment who could also keep their mouths shut on such short notice, and the king’s decision to send the royal guards had proven to be the correct one.

The king himself couldn’t have been prouder or happier about having sent the order.

I wonder why those aggressive priests were so confident. They were even trying to boss the guards around. Maybe the Temple has a lot of authority and can influence the guard squads? But they’ve been handling this incident properly this whole time. Is it because the victim is a stray—er, free priestess? Or maybe because I look like a minor? Anyway, I’m definitely not complaining. The guards have been doing an outstanding job with public safety for an undeveloped country. I’m impressed!

Ever since Kaoru had heard the Temple had a strong influence in the royal capital, she had been wondering if the guards would side with them. The guard squad was an organization controlled by those in power, and the Temple was often connected with the administration. The Temple was supposed to be an intermediary between mortals and Celestine, a Goddess who was known to exist in this world. No one could blame the authorities for

maintaining cordial relations with them.

On the other hand, there were good, devout royalty and good aristocrats. That was why Kaoru had caused such a scene when the priests had forced their way in. It was her intention to make it clear to the public that although the offenders were priests, their actions were not righteous ones as members of the Temple, but rather breaking and entering and attempted kidnapping: obvious crimes. She had loudly announced exactly what was going on to everyone in and around the inn so the guards wouldn't be able to cover it up.

I just needed the guards to put a pause on the situation by stopping the priests from dragging me away and didn't expect anything more than that. I figured they'd release them right away anyway. I never thought they'd oppose the Temple just to side with a commoner. I'll eventually have to return the favor somehow...

"Wh-Wh-Wha..."

When the two priests had returned to report what had happened, the Archbishop was at a loss for words. Thanks to the incident with the Holy Land of Rueda, the title of "pope" had become synonymous with "evil bastard" and had fallen from grace. Since there would have been major conflicts if the Temples in each country had appointed their own popes, they left the positions of the pope and cardinal—who acted as the pope's advisor—vacant, and the highest-ranking position was the archbishop. Therefore, this archbishop was the highest Temple authority in the country.

"I had just rushed out to answer His Majesty the King's summons, which was practically a thinly veiled threat, and thought my heart would stop when I heard what he had to say. I finally return, and *this* is what awaits me...?" He turned to his other men and ordered, "Kill them!"

"A-Archbishop..."

The Archbishop's reaction was understandable considering he had been born in the generation immediately following that historical incident seventy-four years ago. He hadn't been there to experience things firsthand, but those who had been there had repeatedly hammered the lessons learned that day into his generation from early childhood. These lessons had followed him as he grew into adolescence and adulthood, and when he'd become an apprentice priest.

The great benevolent saint, Kaoru the Angel.

Celestine, the goddess who at times saved the people with predictions of catastrophic events but at other times destroyed entire continents.

The savior of the kingdom and guardian of the continent, the great hero Fearsome Fran, who had dared to stand against the Goddess's atrocity and saved the continent.

It was a time when there were plenty of living witnesses who had seen them in person, and there was no shortage of people to hear their tales.

When he was still young, the Archbishop had become absolutely enamored with Fran, who had already been in her fifties by then but looked young enough to be in her twenties. He understood all too well just how terrifying the Goddess could be and was eternally grateful to the Angel and to the guardian of the continent for advising her against doing anything rash.

Now, those who knew the details of that time firsthand had mostly died out, and records of the past incidents were buried in dust-covered libraries. Those incidents had occurred in distant lands, on the opposite side of the continent... Furthermore, the stories had been embellished by the time they reached their land, to the point where they were hardly believable. Even so, they had still been passed down in official documents and written reports. The archbishop could not believe that, even within the temple, there were those who disregarded matters concerning the Goddess so callously. It was such a shock that he'd felt hopelessly resigned for a moment, though he managed to collect himself.

"I apologize. No matter what happens, it's my duty as a cleric to protect the people," he said. "You two have done well. It's a shame you weren't able to stop the others, but aside from that, you deserve recognition for compensating for their actions and showing the Angel that there are still those who revere her. The fact that she has shown you two mercy proves this, and she seems to understand we are not her enemy by any means. At the same time, she now understands that not everyone in the Temple feels the same way as us. So, when engaging with the Angel, this will give us reason to only send those who wish to protect the blessed child, while distancing those who would try to use her for their own gain. This incident was a major blunder for the Temple as a whole, but this one point can be considered

an achievement. Now, you two have been recognized by the Angel—that is, the priestess—as an ally. I will be counting on you to act as mediators with her moving forward!”

“Yes, Archbishop!”

The mission was an honorable one, yet it came with an all-too-heavy responsibility. The priests were happy to be trusted with it, yet they couldn’t help but turn slightly pale as they left the room.

“The previous Angel, the great saint Kaoru, is said to have distanced herself from the Temple, even before the Rueda incident—though this isn’t mentioned in the official records. Perhaps she disliked being touted as the Angel and wished to live a quiet life as a cleric. The girl in question is said to have been blessed by the Goddess, but no one has confirmed it for certain. Lady Kaoru accomplished miracles that no mortal could even dream of. Can doing something that a normal doctor or apothecary can do truly be considered a miracle? If she truly does have minor blessings, there should be no problem with recognizing her as a saint. No one would protest it, considering she is helping orphans and the poor with her own personal funds. Even the diehard faction would agree, considering it would only increase her usefulness. Yet there still isn’t enough of a case to recognize her as a great saint… Well, there’s no point in thinking about this now. I must first meet her in person and evaluate the situation before taking things any further. All I can hope for is that the blessed Sister Edith will be on amicable terms with the Temple’s moderates…and that her eyes are not too terrifying.”

With that, the archbishop headed toward the prayer room.

Side Story: In Search of Materials

“Let’s go on an adventure!” Kyoko said.

“Where is this coming from…?” asked Reiko.

“Well, a good merchant should have all sorts of rare products that can fetch a high price, right?”

“Kyoko, didn’t you say you’ve been collecting a bunch of things during our world trip?” I asked.

“Yeah, I gathered things far from human settlements and bought stuff with money I made selling jewelry, but I never hunted monsters on my own,” she answered.

Kyoko wasn’t the animal-hunting type, so she must’ve focused on finding rare items by scanning around with some sort of detector and buying things with money. An ordinary girl would probably get attacked by a bunch of bad guys if she walked around with so much money, but this was Kyoko we were talking about… I hoped whichever thugs messed with her rested in peace.

“So, I’ve been hoping to get some rare monster and animal materials, along with some herbs and stuff…”

Ah… She’s probably not lying about wanting to gather materials, but I get it. She wants to go on a trip as a trio for the first time in a while.

I couldn’t blame her. For me, it felt like five or so years had passed before we were reunited, but it felt like decades for them—and we’d been busy the entire time since. Even when we weren’t putting out fires, we had to take care of the kids, develop our business, and all sorts of other things. Going on a trip together like we did back when we were students didn’t sound bad at all. Plus, Reiko had already crossed the continent on a carriage (with some parts on horseback), and Kyoko had looked really envious when she’d heard about it. The kids would probably be fine on their own for a week or so as long as we explained the situation beforehand, and we could ask the local lord and Hunter’s Guild to keep them safe.

I gave Reiko a look, and she nodded.

Okay, then.

“Let’s do this!” we said in unison.

“Well, we’ll be out for a few days to go gather some materials, so be good while we’re gone. Make sure you contact the guards, Hunter’s Guild, Commerce Guild, or the lord’s manor if anything happens! I’ve already reached out to them, so they’ll come help right away!” I said.

“Okay!” they said at once.

Good. No, we’re off!

“Hold it right there”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!”

Hm?

“We hardly ever get to do anything—you think we’re just gonna let you go on a trip without us?”

“You *do* realize we’re riding horses, right? Oh, and we can pull a carriage too!”

Oh, it’s Scary and Hang.

They had a point, and I sympathized with them.

“Okay then, let’s go together!” I said.

“Yaaay!” they cheered.

Scary and Hang had been pouting in silence for a while now, the jubilation from earlier now completely gone.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, but I was met with silence.

I had no idea what was going on with them. They’d been in such a good mood when we’d departed from Little Silver with me on Hang and Reiko and Kyoko on Scary. Ever since it’d gotten dark and we all boarded the dinghy, they’d been completely quiet.

I wonder what’s wrong…?

“This is the Western Continent. Looks like the people from our continent haven’t discovered it yet. There are all sorts of cool places here, like the unexplored land near the center of the continent and the Forest of Death near human settlements, where it’s said that those who enter never return,” Kyoko explained.

“Cool places” was an interesting way to describe the areas feared by the locals. I mean, I understood she could just use barriers and shields and shoot beams down from the sky, but still. She’d only been here to gather things when she’d been here

solo instead of hunting, so she'd probably used sensors to scan the area, headed straight toward her objective, then put up barriers in the vicinity to search by hand, with a manipulator, or a machine without an ego that just followed orders. Whatever she'd done, it had to be a method that hadn't exposed her to an ounce of danger. And even on our hunt today, our risk level wasn't much different.

Damned cheater...

"So, what do we do about this poor victim...?" I asked.

An animal was lying on the ground before us, convulsing. The horn on its head had been cut off, and it looked like it was dying...

"We don't need its meat or fur, so I guess we can just release it," Reiko replied.

Kyoko had something to say about that. "That's cruel! That fine horn was probably its pride as a strong male. It probably won't be able to attract a mate or protect its herd without it."

"Oh..." Reiko said.

Kyoko was right. So what were we supposed to do?

"Perfect! Simply perfect!" Kyoko said.

Reiko and I stared in silence.

We were in the infirmary—or more like the operating room—on Kyoko's mothership. The surgeon was, of course, a fully-automated surgery machine. Although Kyoko knew how to operate all of the machinery on the ship, it wasn't as if she had any medical knowledge or skills herself. Besides, even if she did, no one would be brave enough to put their lives in her hands if they knew what kind of person she was...

Laid out on the surgery table, knocked out with anesthetics, was the poor unicorn whose precious horn we'd cut off. Now, a replacement horn made of special alloy had been fused into the remaining base—one that would never rust, break, or bend.

Yeah, that looks super cool. I'm sure it'll get all the ladies now.

The medical robot had claimed the chances of the artificial horn breaking before the creature died of old age was nearly zero, but we'd made it so it would send us a signal if the horn fell off or broke while it was still alive, just in case.

Such flawless care!

Now we just had to put it back where we'd found it and

protect it with a barrier until the anesthetics wore off.

The pious unicorn that had offered us its horn awakened, then realized it still had the horn it thought it was missing. It seemed to dismiss the earlier events as a dream, shook its head, then left.

All right, mission complete!

“Off to our next target! Let’s go!”

“Yeah!”

Kyoko pumped her fist, seemingly overjoyed that no animal had fallen victim to our hunt.

Of course, we hadn’t known at the time that after this, that unicorn tore through its enemies with its invincible horn and massively expanded its herd’s territory, causing a surge in the unicorn population as a result…

“Hey, Kaoru… Couldn’t we have just used your potion to regenerate its horn instead of attaching one made of special alloy?”

“Oh…”

Afterword

It’s been a while. This is FUNA. The book version of *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* has finally hit two digits with the release of volume 10! The stray priestess Edith has finally begun making a name for herself, and the bad bugs have started flocking to her. It’s time for her to swat them away and make her way into the royal capital! The execution of her plan progresses flawlessly…or so Kaoru and her friends think. Meanwhile, the king and his cohorts see through them completely and act accordingly. In the next chapter, KKR’s secret endeavors in the royal capital will begin!

Reiko: “Kaoru, sell them some medicine for their stomach.”

Kyoko: “Some hair growth serum too!”

To my editor, the illustrator for the book version and spin-off comic *Hanano and Lotte’s Trip* Sukima, Onshin Futsu, who worked on the comic version for the main series, the binding designer, the proofreading supervisor, the typesetter, the publisher, distributor, bookstore workers, the management of the novel submission site Shousetsuka ni Narou (Let’s Become a Novelist), and everyone who picked this book up, I am grateful from the bottom of my heart. Thank you!

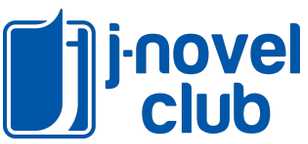
I hope to see you in the next volume…

FUNA






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I Shall Survive Using Potions! Volume 10
by FUNA

Translated by Hiroya Watanabe
Edited by William Haggard

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