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2



Isekai Walking

Walking around the Otherworld

Holy Kingdom of Frieren Arc


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Walking around the Otherworld
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Ciel
A spirit who comes along on the journey. She can also be seen by those who sign a slave contract with Sora.
"Hah, that tickles. She's petting me."
Hikari
A former spy who went by the name No. 13. Began traveling with Sora after he saved her.
ISEKAI WALKING 2
Holy Kingdom of Frieren Arc


To the Holy Capital to attend the Advent Festival!
"A-Amazing. How did you do that?"
Layla
Leader of the adventurer party Bloody Rose. Like a big sister to the others.
Yor
The mage of the Bloody Rose party. She's a magic geek who's very interested in the spells Sora uses.
Sora
A high school student summoned to another world. Kicked out of the hero party, he's now traveling around the world.
Mia
The Saint who first received the prophecy of the Demon King's revival. She's supposed to have her official debut at the Advent Festival, but...


"I see. How much would it cost to buy her?"
As I walked up to the room, the figure on the bed glared up at me intensely. She displayed an intensity far beyond that of the other slaves.
Sera
One of the friends that Rurika and Chris are searching for. She seems to hold a grudge against humans.

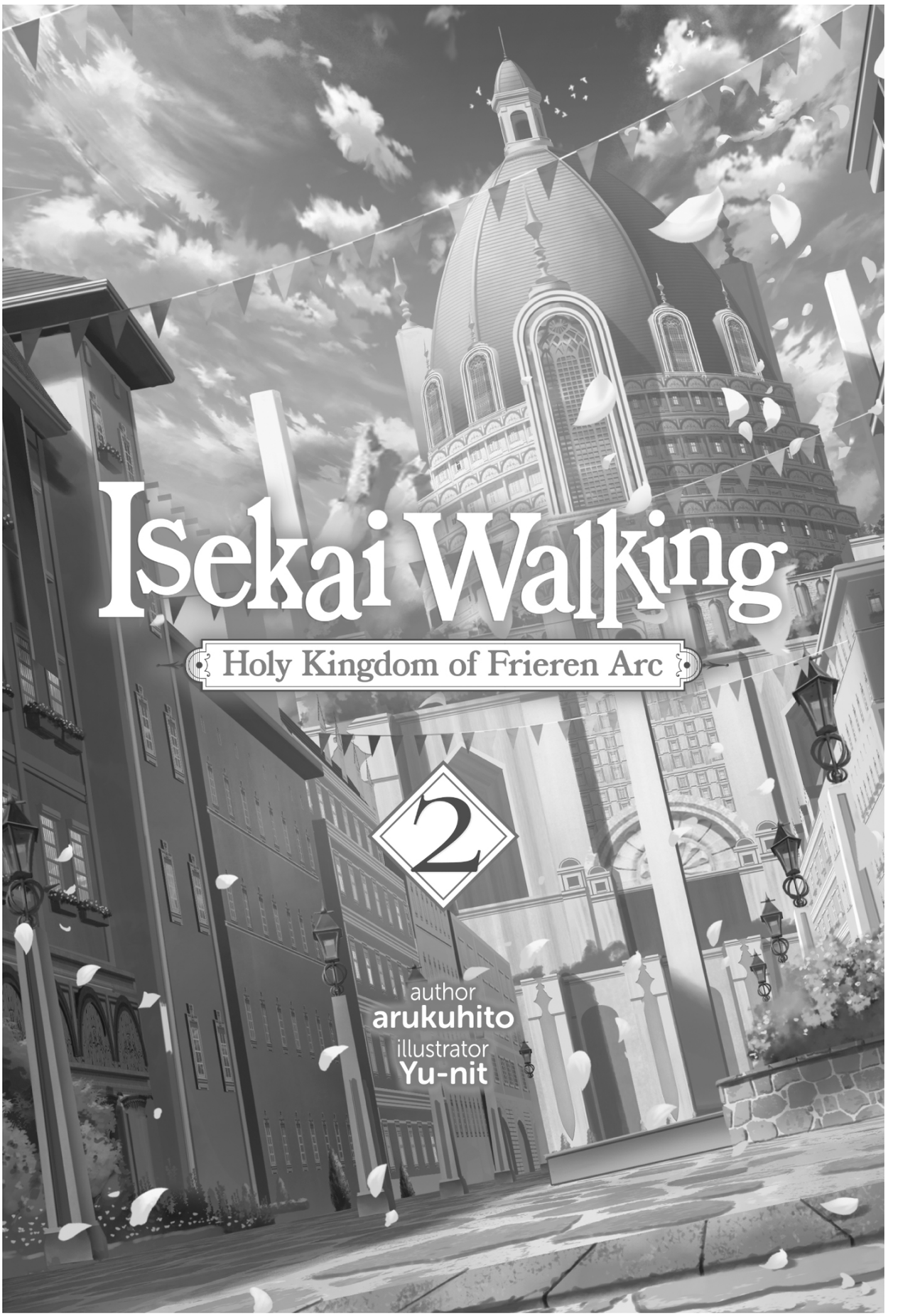

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Prologue

“Sora, are you lost?”

“Of course not. I’m walking through the forest because I faked my death before I left the kingdom. If I were to walk down the main road and get spotted, all the subterfuge would’ve been for nothing.”

This was all true, by the way. I wasn’t just bluffing. I could tell exactly where I was by using my automap skill.

I, my companion, and our “animal friend” were currently walking through the forest. Why weren’t we taking a proper road, you might ask? Because we were escaping the Kingdom of Elesia, whose ruler had summoned me from another world, labeled me useless, and kicked me out of the castle the very same day.

I was only alive right now thanks to the generosity of some very kind people, but also because of my skill, Walking, whose effect was “Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step).” The more I walked, the higher my level went, the more my stats grew, and the more skill points I received.

Spending those skill points allowed me to learn new skills, and I now had over twenty of them. Using other people I’d met in this world as a baseline, that seemed to be a very large number. I’d learned a wide variety too—from helper skills like Appraisal and Detect Presence to combat skills like Sword Arts and Fire Spells—and had used them to survive in this world.

“Sora, is that true?”

My companion eyed me skeptically despite my honesty. The girl—previously known as No. 13 and now called Hikari—had been a spy for a kind of black ops agency in the Kingdom of Elesia sent to monitor me. When I’d found her out, she’d attacked me, hoping to apprehend me and take me back to the castle. Her dagger, which inflicted the status effect “Paralysis,” had nearly taken me out, and if I hadn’t been able to learn the Resist Status Effects skill, I’d have had no choice but to go back with her.

After thinking it over from a few angles, I’d decided to let her come with me. One reason for this was that, in a way, Hikari was a

victim of the Kingdom of Elesia as much as I was—she'd had her freedom stripped away through a device called the Slave Mask and been turned into a puppet forced to follow any orders she was given. The other reason was her appearance—not only did she resemble a child, she had dark hair, dark eyes, and a round face and flattish features that made her look Japanese. It was hard to dismiss her as a total stranger.

The "animal friend" I mentioned earlier was the spirit, Ciel, who for reasons unknown had taken to me and forged a contract with me. I still didn't know what she liked about me, but she was currently flying merrily through the air and looking all around her, probably scouting for food.

Apparently most people couldn't see spirits, and that included Hikari. Ciel used this fact to her advantage to play pranks, enjoying the shocked expressions they inspired in me. When I'd burst into laughter over seemingly nothing, though, Hikari would look at me with a piercing expression (despite her usual expressionlessness). I couldn't deny that it hurt; I could only pray that she wasn't deciding I was a weirdo. The next time Ciel did that, I would have to punish her by depriving her of her meal.

"You're not tired? You're okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Hikari responded.

"Just don't push yourself too hard."

I was nagging her for a reason. One time, Hikari had pushed herself to keep walking until she literally couldn't walk any farther.

This was partly my own fault—since I never got tired when walking, I tended to forget and just walk at my own pace, especially since I was currently in a hurry. Hikari herself was a girl of few words, and her previous occupation might have forbidden any show of weakness, so she had just kept pace without complaining. It was only by coincidence that I noticed her face momentarily twisting in pain.

She'd denied it at first, but I'd had her take off her shoes and found her feet covered in blisters. In response, all she'd said was "It doesn't hurt. I'm fine." Even when I offered to cure it with a potion, she refused. Although the removal of the Slave Mask had left her memories fuzzy, this seemed to be an instinct drilled into her over many years. The thought of the horrific treatment she'd been subject to increased my anger toward that kingdom.

Not that my opinion of it could go any lower. It was already rock bottom.

"I think it's time to rest," I said.

Ciel's reaction to this statement was immediate, but unfortunately, she wouldn't be getting what she wanted just yet. I found a good spot to rest, prepared the ground, and set up camp. Once that was done, I got ready to cook. I started a fire with my Lifestyle Spells skill, took out my pot, and made soup. We'd covered a lot of ground today, so I decided to make some wulf meat steaks.

Hikari and Ciel sat side by side as they watched me cook. Was that expectation sparkling in their eyes?

"Let's eat," I said once the food was prepared, then started eating. Hikari always seemed hesitant to start eating even when the food was ready, so prompting her like this was my way of signaling that it was okay to start. I watched Hikari stuff her mouth with hot steak, blowing out steam, while I had some of the soup.

I suspected we'd be getting out of the forest soon, and I was hoping we could stop by a town. I could store a lot of foodstuffs thanks to my extradimensional Item Box, but I had to take into account that I was feeding a second person, plus an animal friend. I still had orc meat and wulf meat, but I was running low on the spices I needed to make them taste right. I didn't want to eat meals that were filling but bland.



“Hmm? What’s up?”

While I was thinking that over, I noticed Hikari had stopped eating and was staring at something. I followed her gaze and saw that my plate, which had been filled with meat before, was now empty. Ciel sat nearby, looking satisfied.

Ciel… I telepathically admonished her, and she jerked up and started flitting around in a panic.

I understood that she couldn’t help herself, but I wished she would learn some restraint already. This kind of thing would clearly happen more often as we continued our journey with Hikari. The question was, how to explain it to her? The fact that Hikari couldn’t see Ciel was an issue.

“Would you like more?” I asked Hikari to distract her. She nodded, so I added another slab of meat to her dish. Ciel watched enviously, but I told her to hold out a little while longer.

Afterward, Hikari finished eating and went to sleep, and I prepared a proper meal for Ciel. I watched her eat happily while I checked my stats.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Scout / **Race:** Otherworlder / **Level:** None

HP: 350/350 / **MP:** 350/350 / **SP:** 350/350 (+100)
Strength: 340 (+0) / **Stamina:** 340 (+0) / **Speed:** 340 (+0)
Magic: 340 (+0) / **Dexterity:** 340 (+0) / **Luck:** 340 (+0)
Skill: Walking Lv. 34
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 208021/490000
Skill Points: 13

Learned Skills
[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 3]
[Enhance Physique Lv. 9] [Regulate Mana Lv. 8]
[Lifestyle Spells Lv. 7] [Detect Presence Lv. MAX]

[Sword Arts Lv. 8] [Dimension Spells Lv. 7] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 6] [Boost Recovery Lv. 7] [Hide Presence Lv. 5] [Alchemy Lv. 7] [Cooking Lv. 7] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 4] [Fire Spells Lv. 4] [Water Spells Lv. 4] [Telepathy Lv. 5] [Night Vision Lv. 6] [Sword Tech Lv. 2] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 3]

Advanced Skills
[Appraise Person Lv. 4] [Detect Mana Lv. 3]

Contract Skills
[Holy Spells Lv. 1]

Titles
[Spirit Contractor]

My skill levels hadn't gone up much. I'd hoped I could use my Alchemy skill to create a magic item that would make a spirit visible, but sadly, it wasn't on the list. If I maxed out Alchemy like I had with Appraisal, would that let me learn a related advanced skill? And would it let me make the item I needed?

I lifted up the pendant around my neck and gazed at it. It reminded me of Rurika and Chris, my veteran adventurer friends whom I'd befriended in the Kingdom of Elesia. They'd probably have reached the Las Beastland by now, but I couldn't be sure.

I could infuse the pendant with mana to find out where they were, but I could only do that so many times, so I resisted the urge for now. I hid the pendant back under my clothing, lay down next to Hikari, and closed my eyes.

Chapter 1

On our tenth day of walking through the forest, we finally made it out.

I might have been able to get out a bit faster on my own, but there was no way Hikari could have kept up with that kind of marathon. By the way, she looked about ten years old, but she was definitely on the heartier side for her age group. You could tell she'd done spec ops work for such a long time.

"Someone's coming," Hikari said as we came out onto the main road, and I did indeed see some human readings nearing on my automap. I could also see that following this road would take us to a city soon enough. Probably before sundown, from what I could tell.

"I'd love to sleep in a real bed tonight," I mused.

"I'm all right anywhere," Hikari responded. She'd started clinging to me while we slept since that first night when we'd talked and I'd fed her. She sometimes cried out in her sleep like she was having nightmares, so I couldn't push her away.

We were passed by wagons, some of which were transports and others merchant caravans. They all eyed us suspiciously. This was understandable, as I was wearing a domino mask.

While walking through the forest, it had occurred to me that it wouldn't be safe to show my face. I'd used alchemy to create the mask based on the Slave Mask that Hikari had been wearing. It made for a decent disguise, but if I ran into anyone I knew, they'd recognize me right away for sure.

We definitely made a strange-looking pair—a masked man walking next to a child.

"Sora, you look suspicious."

"Too bad. I told you why I had to do it, remember?" I refrained from mentioning that she'd been dressed the same way not so long ago.

We continued to walk along while different wagons overtook us and eventually made it safely into town. There was a crowd in front

of the gate, so we lined up at the back and waited patiently for our turn.

There must have been a lot of people heading the same way, because even more people lined up behind us while we were waiting. The city in question didn't look especially large, but maybe it was an important waypoint? From the conversations around me, I learned that the city was called Idoll. There was no town by that name in the Kingdom of Elesia, so it looked like I had safely crossed the border.

"Next," said the gatekeeper.

I stepped up.

"Do...you have an ID?" The gatekeeper paused in the middle of his question. He was clearly staring at my mask.

"I'm afraid not, sir." I sensed him grow a little more wary at this, so I continued quickly. "I was hoping I might register in this city. And...ah, I'm sure you're wondering about my mask. I wear it to cover up a scar." I showed him the bag I was carrying and explained that I wanted to register with the merchants' guild. "I'd also like to ask something. May I?"

"What is it?"

"Well, you see, I found this girl on my way here and took her in. What do you think I might do with her?"

"You found her? What in the... Wait a minute. Let's go to the guard station and you can fill me in."

I followed him to the station as he asked. His demeanor suggested I had no right to refuse, nor did I have the option to run away.

"All right, tell me exactly what happened."

"I'm afraid I don't really know. I came upon her dressed in rags on the road. I don't know where she came from, but I didn't want to just abandon her, so I brought her with me. What might my options be?" I made it sound like I genuinely wanted help. If he asked any more questions, I'd have to come up with more excuses, so I was a little desperate.

"Let's see. The best thing would be to leave her at an orphanage, but..." The moment he said that, Hikari trembled and grabbed nervously at my sleeve. The guard frowned a little bit at this. He clearly took his job seriously, but he might have been a bit of a soft touch deep down.

“We’ve been together for a while, and it appears she’s grown rather attached. But I’ve heard that there’s an age minimum for IDs, so I understand that’s not an option?”

“She can register with a city, but it’s true that she can’t apply for an ID, which she’d need to come and go, at least. Dear, would you like to go to an orphanage?”

Hikari shook her head fervently.

“Well, that’s a problem. So, did you come here for any particular reason?”

“I was hoping to register with the merchants’ guild and sell my wares. That’s what I left my village to do… I don’t think I could handle being an adventurer.”

“You want to be a solo merchant? It’ll be hard without connections…but I guess that’s your business. Oh, I know. Do you know the slave system?”

“A bit of it. I believe there’s crime slaves, war slaves, and debt slaves?”

“Yeah, and also another kind called special slaves. It’s a system to protect those who can’t have IDs. Not many people use it, though.”

I told him this was the first I’d heard of it.

“The main reason for that is that it’s basically all downside,” he responded. “But in practice they’re treated like debt slaves.”

He explained that a special slave was an underage person without an ID whom you raised until they were old enough to register for themselves. Of course, instead of raising them, you could also make them work or help you out. On rare occasions, major merchant companies used them. The idea was to raise them from a young age and hopefully guarantee a future worker for the store.

“I see. I’ll try to get registered, then. She doesn’t seem eager to leave my side.”

I paid entry for two into the town, asked the gatekeeper where the slave market was, and entered the city.

“You fooled him.” Hikari was smiling a nasty smile. The average person wouldn’t have noticed a change in her expression, but I’d spent enough time with her now to recognize some of her emotions.

“I’m glad the gatekeeper was such a soft touch. Not a great

attribute in a gatekeeper, though."

"Agreed."

Even I knew my story was full of holes.

Incidentally, the reason I'd slightly changed my manner of speaking with the guard was because Hikari had told me to. She'd said that if I was going to pretend to be a merchant from now on, I should use more polite speech, and that merchants often used polite language to get the better of people. I was a bit dubious about the idea, but if I spoke more like I had been doing, I'd probably come off as too aggressive for a merchant, so I tried it. I think it still came off as a bit awkward, though.

We followed the directions we'd been given until we reached the slave market district. It was on the outskirts of town as usual, but it was small compared to the ones in the kingdom. Because it was a smaller city, perhaps?

"Hello, sir. How may I help you today?" the slaver asked after looking at me, then at Hikari, then back to me.

"I want to form a special slave contract with this girl. Would that be possible?"

"Why, of course. I'll make the preparations right away."

I paid the contract fee of ten silvers. A bit of this went to a processing fee, but it was mostly just the cost of the necessary magic item. Unlike the standard collars worn by slaves, this one was all black with three silver stripes.

Hikari and I stood in the magic circle while the slaver recited a chant. I put a drop of my blood onto the collar, and the trader spoke the chant again and completed the contract. It was that simple.

"When it's time to undo the contract, just visit your nearest slave trader. You can do it anywhere."

"I understand. One more thing, do you have any beastfolk or elves here?"

"Not here. You might find some at the holy capital. Is this your first time in this land, sir?"

"Why do you ask?"

"The locals wouldn't ask that kind of thing. In the Holy Kingdom of Frieren, slavery is quite frowned upon. Teachings of the Goddess, you see."

“But it’s not outlawed?” After all, it did seem like slave markets still existed here.

“Correct. No matter one’s beliefs, slaves are still useful things. They talk a good game, but they can’t escape reality. Of course, some are more fervently opposed…”

“Understood. I’ll be careful.”

“Come again, sir. Oh, and our company has branches in other lands, so we hope you’ll patronize them. We have a storefront in the holy capital as well; please stop by if you need to.” The slaver gave me an oily smile and bowed respectfully.

I headed outside with Hikari, and looked up at the sign. It read “Howler Slave Company.”

I had a hard time getting a room at an inn. The fact that there’d been such a long wait to get in suggested there were more people than usual at this time of year. I asked why and was told that there were pilgrims heading for Holy Capital Messa for the Advent Festival.

“Advent Festival?”

“Never heard of it? It’s a festival to celebrate the Goddess coming to this world and bestowing her blessings upon us. People come from outside the Holy Kingdom every year.”

“Really? Is that why there are so many people?”

“Yeah. And it seems like there’s going to be an authorization ceremony for a new Saint, so it’ll be an especially extravagant affair. There have been rumors about it for a while, and apparently there’s going to be a grand unveiling.”

That meant only fairly expensive rooms were left. I paid for three days of that, and it was six silvers in total. Soon enough…

“Master, this is delicious!” Hikari exclaimed.

The slave contract had changed a lot about her. First, there was the way she addressed me—I’d told her she could carry on like before, but she’d stubbornly refused. Was it some kind of personal principle? Either way, I was the one who gave in in the end.

“Yeah, I wish I could make food this delicious,” I agreed. It really was good enough to justify the price. I thought I’d gotten pretty talented thanks to my Cooking skill, but tasting this stuff forced me to admit I had a long way to go. I’d have to restock on spices here and practice some more.

“Give it your best effort, master.”

“I think you’re supposed to offer to try doing it yourself.”

“Everyone has strengths and weaknesses.”

So she’s never going to try to cook, huh?

The other change was that Hikari could now see Ciel.

After forming the contract, I’d noticed Hikari staring at something and followed her line of sight to see Ciel hovering there. The little spirit had discovered a stall and was moving busily around it, and Hikari’s gaze moved to follow her every movement.

“Hikari, can you see that?” I’d asked.

“Yeah, it’s a floating white thing. It looks tasty.”

As if Ciel had heard that, a shudder had gone through her body and she’d quickly hid behind me.

So Hikari really could see Ciel now…but why? She definitely hadn’t been able to see her before. Did it just suddenly happen? The only change I could think of was the slave contract. Was that why?

Whatever the reason, the fact that she could see Ciel was a load off my mind.

“Hikari, do you know about spirits?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“Just think of them as mysterious beings that love to eat.”

Ciel started whapping me with her ears at this, but it didn’t hurt at all.

“Ah, is that the one that’s been eating all the food?” Hikari asked me.

It looked like I hadn’t covered that up very well after all. “Yeah, that was her. Her name is Ciel. She’s harmless, so I hope you’ll get along.”

“Sure, let’s eat delicious things together.”

Apparently liking the sound of that, Ciel streaked up to Hikari and started nuzzling her.

“Hah, that tickles. She’s petting me,” Hikari laughed.

Ah, it took me a lot longer before Ciel let me touch her… I guess they just have a kinship.

Not that I was bitter about it or anything.

“Now, about our next destination, I was thinking of heading to the capital. My first priority is visiting different slave markets to

find the people I'm looking for, but as long as we're here, I thought we could check out the Advent Festival."

I couldn't wait to see what a festival in another world looked like. And it sounded like the unveiling of the new Saint meant the scale of it would be bigger than usual.

Despite my own feelings of elation, Ciel and Hikari didn't look interested at all. "I'll do what you say, master," Hikari said indifferently.

"I bet there'll be lots of delicious and rare foods at the festival, though…" I added, feeling a little dejected about the response.

Suddenly, they both looked up at me with interest. "Is that true?" Hikari asked.

"I think so. At the very least, that's what it was like in my homeland."

"I'll follow you, master!" She spoke firmly, her fists clenched. Ciel looked excited as well.

I hope this is okay… What if otherworld festivals are different somehow? I wondered. There was no one to ask about it, so I'd have to leave it up to fate and chance. *I'll have to make some kind of apology dish if things go badly, won't I?*

That night, my companion, our animal friend, and I slept side by side together. Hikari had her arms around me, of course, but I was used to that by now. It no longer made me nervous. Was this what it was like to have a little sister?

I was an only child, so I couldn't be sure, but the people I'd known had made it sound much less pleasant than this.

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We woke up, ate breakfast, and left our inn. Our next destination was the merchants' guild.

Hikari still seemed sleepy even after breakfast, so I dragged her along behind me as I walked. It looked like she still hadn't recovered from the long walk just yet.

The receptionist I spoke to narrowed her eyes at first at the sight of my mask, but she didn't hesitate to give me the explanation I requested. *Being courteous to a suspicious man in a mask… Ah, such professionalism!* Customer service was an important part of being a merchant, so maybe the staff had also

learned a degree of emotional self-control.

I finished my registration as a merchant as planned and looked at my new guild card.

I knew a bit about what merchants did already, but the receptionist here told me a lot more. The biggest thing was that you had to register with the merchants' guild to open a shop in a city. To open one in a city with a guild branch in it, you'd have to file an application. Having them vouch for your identity was useful even if you were a traveling merchant, though, and it helped people to trust you even in villages without guild branches.

In addition, the guild card had a function similar to a cash card back on Earth. Apparently other guilds had a similar thing, but at the merchants' guild you could use that function immediately after registration. I asked how it worked at other guilds, and they said there were more strings attached. For instance, at the adventurers' guild, you had to raise your rank to a certain level first.

"And are dues automatically taken out of it?"

"That's up to you, but most people do it that way." You didn't want to forget to make your payments and end up with a nonfunctional card. "Stores where you can pay with your card will have signage to that effect, so keep an eye out. You can't use it at most stalls, though. It saves a lot of time and trouble for merchants with large stocks."

Not that that part mattered to me, since I kept my stock in my Item Box.

I asked them to split three gold into the appropriate equivalent of silver, copper, and commons, put the change away in my Item Box, and then paid for the card.

"Oh, and I'd like to sell these... Would that be all right?" I then pulled thirty healing potions, ten mana potions, and ten stamina potions out of my bag and put them on the counter—a total of fifty. I also laid out my wulf fangs, claws, and hides.

"Potions...and wulf materials? I'll call the buyer, so please wait here." The receptionist went into the back and returned with the person in question.

The nervous-looking man in glasses peered cautiously at the potions. "Where did you acquire these?"

"From a go-between during my travels." I couldn't tell him I'd made them myself. That was classified info.

“Some of these appear to be of a rather high quality. And you wish to sell all of them?”

“Er, yes. If you please.”

The lower-quality ones were the ones I’d made for practice and still had in stock.

“I see. The healing potions range from one copper to three silvers; the mana ones from five to fifty silvers; and the stamina ones from ten coppers to ten silvers. I’ll give you four golds and seventy coppers for the lot. What do you think?”

It was all a little much to throw at me all at once, so I asked him to explain the math. He did so, and I realized what a difference the quality could make.

“That’s fine, then. It’s a deal.” I hesitated for a moment but agreed. I probably should have checked prices at a local item shop first, but his offer was only a little lower than the prices in Elesia, so I decided to just sell them.

“Would you like to put it on your card?”

“Just three of the golds, please.”

“Understood. Also, would you like to buy a contract kit? If you’re going to be a traveling merchant, you may need them for deals that come up unexpectedly.”

“Does having a contract change anything?”

“Having something in writing can help you to avoid trouble.”

Deciding an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure, I bought one. I was surprised that paper and a pen set me back one gold, but it seemed paper was a rare resource in this world.

“Where are we going next, master?”

“The item shop. Oh, and the weapons shop too, I think. You have the dagger you used before, but I’m using a backup sword right now. We need to get you some clothing too.”

We were heading to Messa next, so we’d need good equipment. And because we’d had so much trouble getting a room at the inn yesterday, we hadn’t had time to buy clothing. Instead, Hikari was looking a little silly in a spare outfit of mine.

“Okay. I’ll protect you, master.”

“Thanks. But don’t push yourself too hard. I don’t want to see you hurt either.”

“You’d be sad, master?”

“Yeah, so please value your life.”

“Okay, got it.”

Hikari had such an indifferent manner that I wasn’t sure I could get it through her head unless I really drilled it into her. She agreed with what I told her for now, but if she ever reached a rebellious phase and started telling me to shut up, it would probably be very hurtful.

After that, we headed for the weapon and armor shop and got our equipment. I bought a new primary sword and a spare dagger for Hikari, as well as various throwing knives I was comfortable with.

For armor, Hikari got a matching set. The outfit was still all black, but it was a slightly cuter design.

“Is that okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Easy to move in.” Hikari lifted her arms and rolled around her shoulders, then nodded in satisfaction.

Afterward, we stopped by a clothing store to buy her something like a dress and pajamas, though they would probably only be useful when we were staying in an inn.

Then I looked into the transport wagon schedules and…yep, already full. Reservations seemed completely booked for the foreseeable future too.

“Master, are we walking?”

“I think so. Can you handle it?”

Hikari nodded firmly. She even seemed a little enthusiastic about it.

“Well, tomorrow I’ll buy ingredients for the dinners we have coming up…then let’s go around the stalls and find something really good to eat.”

“Great idea.”

Ciel nodded firmly as well. She’d been looking curiously at the stalls for a while now. Today we’d had so much to do that we hadn’t been able to take a good look around.



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“Oh, you’re heading out?” The gatekeeper who’d first checked us in called out to us when he saw us.

“Heading for the capital. Partly for the Advent Festival, but I’d also just like to see the place.”

“Walking there?”

“Yes. I couldn’t get a reservation on a transport wagon.”

“Might be tough to do now, yeah. But are you sure about this?” His eyes turned to Hikari in understandable concern.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect my master.” Hikari puffed out her chest, and the gatekeeper looked at her warmly.

“She seems to want to do it, and I’ll make sure we pace ourselves. It looks like we still have time before the festival,” I said.

“I see. I think it should be safe if you stick to the road, but you never know what you might run into. Be careful.”

We thanked him for his warning and set out. Maybe because we were heading out so early in the day, there were also a lot of adventurers setting out around us. Some of them cast glances in our direction.

Because I was a merchant now, I hadn’t gone to the adventurers’ guild, but maybe I should have stopped by to get information on local monsters and such.

We walked about an hour, rested, walked another hour, then took an early lunch. We found a place a bit off the road to get ready for camp, and I decided to try some of my newly learned spells.

NEW
[Earth Spells Lv. 1] [Wind Spells Lv. 1]

Earth Spells gave me some basic attack spells, but I could also combine it with Regulate Mana to manipulate the earth around me, which let me easily create a fire pit. This would rapidly shorten the time I needed to set up camp. I could do some of these things with my lifestyle spells as well, but it took more time.

I’d learned Wind Spells to have some attack magic in forests where I couldn’t use fire spells. I thought it might also have other

uses, like erasing my scent to prevent tracking. I wasn't actually sure if I really needed it, but I'd gotten it because having access to the four main elemental spell categories would let me choose the Mage job.

Jobs provided stats bonuses as well as other benefits. I got boosts to my alchemical skills as an Alchemist and to my search skills as a Scout. The success rate of Alchemy or the range of my search skills also increased accordingly.

Hikari and Ciel sat side by side, watching me as I cooked. But all the while, Hikari also kept her attention up around her. What about Ciel, then? Ciel...was just watching me, brain empty, eyes shining. All she was thinking about was what kind of food I might make.

Today's lunch was a soup packed with vegetables. For protein, I balled up a few pinches of wulf meat and put it in. Someone would've been sad without any, after all. I won't say who.

Several merchant caravans passed us while we ate. They must have been going just a little faster than walking speed, since the escort adventurers were walking around the wagons. A lot of them glanced our way, but they probably couldn't see much because we were so far away.

"Master, time to go?"

"Are your feet okay?"

"Yeah. Healing herbs are great."

I'd used healing herbs to make a kind of poultice and had Hikari try it out. I had no way of testing its effect myself as long as I was walking, and I didn't want to start running just to test it. I'd be wasting the experience points. My Boost Recovery skill would throw off the results anyway.

We hit the road again, but the caravans were nowhere to be seen by this time. Maybe because we'd taken so much time on the meal? When they took lunch themselves it would be a more simple meal, probably consisting of rations, based on the calculation that less time spent cooking meant more time moving.

We caught up to the caravans a bit later, around sundown. They were setting up camps in their own little groups. The smell of their food wafted by on the breeze. Perhaps noticing it, Hikari and Ciel became suddenly restless.

The reason the different caravans came together was for

security reasons. The more people you had, the easier it would be to deal with night raids, and it was the best policy to prevent theft. But as we passed through the resting caravan, I felt a nervous air. The sizes of the different caravans seemed to create a sense of power dynamics. From a large caravan's point of view, a small caravan might be seen as a parasite. It did look a little bit like the adventurers would try to rough up a lone merchant.

If we tried to rest here…it probably wouldn't be taken well.

"Hikari, can we walk a little longer? Ciel can't eat with us if we stop here." It was a little cruel to Hikari, who was beginning to show signs of weariness, but I wanted to be considerate to Ciel.

Hikari cast a glance over at Ciel, who had also learned that she couldn't really eat when there were a lot of people around. Her eyes watered up in grief. Hikari nodded, and Ciel nuzzled her cheek in gratitude.

We got far enough away from the caravans and set up camp. I didn't forget to check our surroundings with my automap either. Our dinner that night was heavy on meat—not just to get back in her good graces, okay?—and Hikari's eyes seemed to shine as she watched me cook.

After I laid out the servings, Hikari stuffed her cheeks gleefully. I made sure to warn her to chew properly.

"Master, that was delicious. Ciel thinks so too."

Those were the words that made cooking worthwhile.

But Ciel… Don't just lie there like a puddle, okay? It looks like you're just lazing around…

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"Master, are you asleep yet?"

"No, I've got a little work to do first."

"What are you doing?"

"I was thinking about cooking."

Those words made Hikari bolt upright. "Cooking?"

"Yeah. Bacon." I hadn't fed any to Hikari yet, had I?

"Is that the name of a food?"

"Yeah, it is. It's delicious on its own, or between slices of bread with vegetables." Maybe I was overselling it a little bit.

"Have you ever had it, Ciel?" Hikari asked.

Ciel nodded proudly in response.

You're trying to look superior, but it's not like you made it yourself, remember? I thought disapprovingly.

"No fair. I want some." Still, Hikari looked genuinely envious.

I smiled wryly as I watched them. Despite the flatness of her affect, Hikari seemed much more expressive when Ciel was around. That had to be a good thing, but I also hoped she wouldn't take after Ciel too much. I didn't want another dependent who did nothing but eat and sleep. Fortunately Hikari was an obedient girl, but I worried about her taking after a bad role model.

I went about the work while explaining the process for making bacon. I wasn't sure if she was following at all, but she at least did as she was told.

"Now we just wait. We have some time, so maybe I'll get some soups ready. What do you want to do? You can sleep ahead of me if you like."

"No, I'll watch."

If this got Hikari interested in learning how to cook, it might be fun to enjoy cooking together. I couldn't help but remember the days I'd spent cooking with Rurika and Chris.

One soup used mushrooms I'd picked in the forest as a base, and another used tomatoes I'd bought in the city of Idoll. I also tried making wulf broth in the style of chicken broth, and some chicken broth as well. It was hard making both at once, but my Parallel Thinking and Cooking skills helped me out.

Moving from city to city wasn't easy. My skill soaked up most of the burden for me, but it was clearly hard on Hikari, so I at least wanted to prepare delicious things when we had time to rest. To do that, I had to prepare.

I skimmed off as much of the scum as I could while letting the soup simmer, and I heard the sounds of sleep while I was doing it. Hikari seemed to have fallen asleep sitting up. The exhaustion was probably catching up to her. I laid Hikari down on the tarp and Ciel snuggled up beside her.

I finished my cooking and packed it away in the Item Box. This meant that during future camps, we could eat delicious food without having to wait.

After dinner the next day, we had a small mock duel. I could use earth spells to set up camp in no time, and I'd prepared the majority of our meals in advance, so we had time to spare. Thus, I'd asked Hikari to help me so I didn't lose my instinct for fighting.

I hadn't fought anyone in a while, but Hikari's stats had gone down with the removal of the Slave Mask, and mine might have gone up a bit due to my level increasing. That meant I could keep up with her speed.

"Master, you're strong. No fair." She puffed out her cheeks in a cute, sulking manner.

After consoling her, I thought about that level I'd gained. When I walked, I leveled up my Walking skill, and my stats increased along with it. So how did people in this world typically improve? Did they gain experience points by defeating monsters, like in a game? Did their proficiencies increase through mock duels and other forms of training?

Would I just have to wait to get Appraise Person to a sufficient level to find out?

`[`**`Name:`**` Hikari / `**`Job:`**` Special Slave (Formerly Spy) / `**`Level:`**` 27 / `**`Race:`**` Human]`

From what I'd seen of the adventurers with the caravan, there were only a handful with levels over ten. And as for the merchants themselves, none of them were over Lv. 5. Was there a way to go to the adventurers' guild and find out if these values were high or low? But given the blessings of skills, level was probably not everything.

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One night, two days later...

I did my daily check of the automap before sleeping and noticed a lot of monster readings—about thirty of them. It looked like a pack of wulfs.

"Master, something's odd," said Hikari, who had been sleeping until then.

She sensed them from that far away? I mused. *She must have a high-level search skill...*

“It looks like monsters are stalking the caravan behind us,” I said aloud.

“Oh.” That was enough to get her to fall asleep again.

Even if I wanted to warn them, the wulfs would likely get there first. Besides, there seemed to be about twenty adventurers there—more than enough to handle them. Some could end up getting channeled our way, as well, but I’d already formed walls and a trench around our campsite.

I watched the battle unfold on my automap. It was an even match for a while, with both sides’ numbers holding strong. But after about an hour, the adventurers made a push, and the wulfs were scattered and took flight. Maybe because it was night, the adventurers didn’t try to chase them. *Prioritizing defense, perhaps?* I thought that failing to finish them off meant they might come back later, but maybe their clients had told them not to pursue.

Then, indeed, a few wulfs seemed to have broken off from the pack and were heading our way. I stood up quietly so as not to wake Hikari, drew my sword, and got ready. Thanks to my Night Vision skill, I could see well even without moonlight.

There were two of them. Perhaps because they were running so fast, they didn’t seem to be watching where they were going, so…

Ah, there goes one. It seemed to have fallen into the trench. When the other saw the first one fall, it panicked and tried to leap over, only to slam into the wall instead.

I quickly finished them both off, then studied my automap for a while. When I was sure there were no more incoming monsters, I went to sleep, though I obviously kept my guard up with Parallel Thinking.

“Master, is that food?”

Is that your first thought when you’re looking at exsanguinated wulfs? I wondered, but I explained. “They came our way last night, so I took them for myself. We’d been running out of wulf meat anyway.”

“Meat is important. But it doesn’t smell. Odd.”

“I used a wind spell to get rid of the aroma.”

“Spells are handy. Wish I could use them.”

“Why not look into it the next time we’re at a church?”

Hikari paused. “Probably won’t work.” She sounded regretful,

and I wondered if she had some history there…

“Once it’s bled out, would you like to break down the body with me?” I asked.

“I’ll leave that to me, but the cooking to you, master.”

She meant she’d break the wulf down in exchange for me cooking it. Hikari’s way of speaking was a bit peculiar, but I was starting to understand her.

In that case, I’ll try to put a little special effort into cooking… Or so I’d have liked to say, but I didn’t have the right ingredients to make anything really special. All I could do was make the portions a little more generous than usual, so I put wulf meat and vegetables on skewers and cooked them barbecue-style. For seasoning, I coated them with a special sauce (recipe still in progress) instead of salt and pepper. Hikari liked it, but I felt like I still had a long way to go.

Then I had to choose one of the soups I’d made two days before. I went with the tomato-based one at Hikari’s request.

“Master, done!” Hikari finished breaking down the wulf quickly, like an old hand. I wouldn’t have been able to do it nearly as well, and I probably wouldn’t have finished even one in the time it took her to do two.

I used my Cleanse spell on Hikari, then split up the wulf materials and packed them away in the Item Box. I usually sold the pelts off, but I was also starting to think about making them into a blanket. I could make do with my cloak for now, but if colder days came, I might need more.

I laid out the bread, soup, and skewers and began to eat. Hikari must have been savoring the flavor of the sauce, because she looked very cute as she chewed on the skewer meat. Ciel was also eating in her own particular way. In the past, she’d looked very sad when I’d taken the meat off the skewer for her, so I let her eat it off the skewer this time. She seemed to prefer it that way.

While enjoying their reactions, I slowly finished my own meal and then checked my automap. *The wulfs are back in the forest, then? And the caravan is still stuck in place…because of the raid last night?* But their numbers didn’t seem to have gone down, so at least no one was dead…

We soon arrived at the next city, Roille, as expected. The caravan on my automap still showed no signs of movement. Maybe they’d suffered more damage than I thought.

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“Taking a wagon?” Hikari asked.

“Yeah, I managed to get a reservation this time. We leave in two days, so let’s check out the city while we wait.”

“Let’s find tasty stuff.” Hikari seemed more enthusiastic than usual.

I didn’t need the wagon personally, but I’d decided to secure one this time for Hikari’s sake. It would also let me learn things from my fellow passengers, like I’d done the last time.

We got an inn first, then looked around the town. The stalls put out nice smells, but I told Hikari and Ciel they’d spoil their dinner, so we held off eating there. The hardest part was prying Ciel away, though. *C’mon, Ciel,* I urged her telepathically.

Still, we wouldn’t be able to eat together in the inn’s dining hall, so I bought a few things for Ciel to eat after we got back to our room. I also bought some unusual fruits and vegetables and kinds of meat. I hadn’t seen any fish for sale in the cities I’d been to before, and this Roille was no different.

“This one’s tasty too,” I heard Hikari say. She was joining Ciel in chowing down on the stall foods, even though we’d just had dinner in the inn’s dining hall. It wasn’t exactly a feast, but it was still enough that I was impressed that her tiny body could fit it all in. It was more than a simple growth spurt could account for.

The next day, I focused on buying things that I hadn’t gotten to eat the night before and that Ciel approved of. A lot of them were really delicious, enough that I’d have liked to take them on the road if I could. I had to get Dimension Spells to Lv. MAX as soon as possible. I was at Lv. 8 now, which meant my proficiency increases had slowed down, so my level didn’t seem likely to go up anytime soon. At my current level, things that would usually expire in a day now lasted fifteen days in the Item Box. For plausible deniability, I had a decoy crate that I’d stick food into before stashing it in my pocket dimension.

I also bought healing and mana herbs at a shop, whose owner seemed surprised by my ability to pick out all the best ones. But the quality of the herbs affected the quality of the potion, so I had to get the best ones I could. Not even the best alchemist could

make high-quality potions out of low-quality ingredients.

And so, having finished our preparations in Roille, we waited until it was time to set out.

There were three merchant wagons and two transports for a total of five. The caravans and the transport wagons seemed to be run by different companies, but they'd signed a contract to move together for various reasons.

The merchant wagons contained eight merchants (including three who were driving the wagons) and fifteen escorts. One of the merchants seemed better dressed than the others and was really throwing his weight around. The others seemed to defer to him, so…maybe he was their leader?

Meanwhile, the transport wagons each had one driver and three escorts, plus about ten passengers. Several of the passengers on the other transport wagon bowed and greeted the domineering merchant. *Oh, and something changed hands between them…*

The other passengers on our wagon were six girls about my age and three agreeable middle-aged men. Apparently there was one extra person on our wagon because there were so many women.

"Are you a merchant as well? That mask of yours made me think you were an adventurer."

This statement came from Litt, a middle-aged merchant. He had a kindly face and tended to stroke his beard as he talked. He and his two companions were merchants heading for the capital for business. Litt bragged to me that they didn't carry much luggage because they had a bag of holding…but, he added, they'd spent all their money on it, so they'd have to make up for it moving forward.

"What's your name?" one of the female passengers asked my companion.

"Hikari."

"Hikari? Would you like some of this?" With a doting expression, she offered her a treat. Incidentally, none of the girls had shown any reaction to my mask.

"Yes, please," Hikari said.

Hikari, it's okay to take it, but don't give any to Ciel, I told her

telepathically.

Ciel looked at me resentfully for a moment, but she finally looked back at Hikari and, perhaps accepting her lot in life, flew limply back to me.

By the way, I'd learned that Hikari could also hear my telepathy now. The slave contract must have connected our mana somehow. But Hikari couldn't communicate telepathically back, so it was a one-way thing. I'd also confirmed that I could communicate with them individually if I focused.

I'll make something tasty for you later on. Think about if there's anything you want, I added strictly to Ciel, feeling genuinely pained by her sad expression. Her ears perked up immediately and she started dancing around. It was enough to make me wonder if she'd been faking it a little bit.

One of the benefits of a transport wagon was that I could get information through conversations with the other passengers and also not have to worry about inns. The transport fee included lodging fees in the village of Tenns on the way as well as one night's lodging in the city of Wrent later. It would be hard to reserve rooms otherwise, presumably because so many people were traveling to the capital, Messa.

"Are you two traveling together?" asked a new face, a Rank B adventurer named Locke.

"Yes, I'm a new merchant," I responded. "I heard about the Advent Festival and thought it would be worth a look."

Locke was part of the escort, along with his party members Ginnie and Isaac. They didn't usually take these sorts of missions, but they'd agreed to guard this transport wagon as far as Wrent.

"Have you ever attended the Advent Festival, Mr. Locke?" I asked, keeping up my polite persona.

"Nah, it's my first time too. We heard it's bigger than usual this year, and our party was having a slow period anyway, so we decided to check it out."

"Don't lie, Locke! You wanna see the Saint everyone's talking about, right?" Isaac cut in.

Supposedly they were a three-person team for the escort quest, but Ginnie alone was working on the coachman's seat while Locke and Isaac were back with us, chatting away. I asked if it was all right for them both to be back there, but apparently that was

covered in their contract.

"We'll also defend the wagon if we get attacked," Locke added. "Ginnie's best suited to lookout duty. Someone who doesn't know what they're doing might miss an incoming enemy or wear themselves out mentally so they can't use their full strength later, and what's the point in that?"

It was a convincing explanation. The only thing that worried me was Ciel, who was listening in beside me and nodding along. Had the words resonated with her somehow? There was always a chance she was just blindly nodding along, though.

Travel in the wagon went smoothly, but I felt a little frustrated by all the walking I was missing out on. That meant I did a lot of wandering around when we were taking breaks or camping, which earned me a few odd looks from my companions. Once, I was warned not to stray too far away because they wouldn't be able to guard me.

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The first hiccup in the journey appeared as we neared the midway point to Wrent, the village of Tenns.

"Hey, you notice anything weird?" someone whispered.

The village ahead of us... It looked like the gate had been broken in.

The wagons stopped, and several of the adventurers got off and ran right into the village. Locke and his party got down off the wagon and looked around cautiously. Their expressions were serious, and they looked like true professionals.

I realized that my automap was open. I hadn't been on a transport wagon in a while, and being part of the group had made me let my guard down. I would have checked it before, but I'd gotten a bit lazy.

The village wasn't especially large, but there were still way too few people there.

"Master. Smells like blood," Hikari muttered.

I sensed several monster readings in the village as well. *They look like...orcs!* Was there an attack still going on? Suddenly, I heard a shout and a sharp clang of metal. I didn't know the exact situation, but my map showed a human and orc signal coming

into contact.

Just then, someone came out of the village. It wasn't an adventurer. *A villager, then?*

The adventurers walked up to the man and asked for the whole story. He was white as a sheet and trembling, yet nevertheless he seemed to be desperately trying to put words together. When they heard the explanation, several of the adventurers ran back to the merchants, and others disappeared into the village. Unfortunately, I could tell there was no one in the direction they'd run.

"What now, master?"

"Let's head into the village too. I think they're fighting something in there." I telepathically added to Hikari that they were orcs.

"Hey, buddy, don't risk your neck like that. Best to leave this to the professionals. We'd just get in the way if we went in there," one of Litt's comrades warned me as I was about to get off the wagon.

"Don't worry. I've got a tough escort." I patted Hikari on the head, and the other man looked at me like I was crazy. Understandable, of course, but we got down off the wagon anyway and headed into the village.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Isaac stopped me as I was going in. "There's fighting in there. It's not safe!"

"I realize that, sir, but she has a Detect Presence skill. She says she knows where the villagers are."

"Is that true?" he asked her.

Hikari nodded.

"Got it. Locke! Hold down the fort here. Sora, was it? Show us the way."

We ran farther into the village with Hikari taking the lead. We were running rather quickly, but Isaac kept pace easily even though he was wearing rather heavy equipment. *I guess that's a Rank B adventurer for you.*

"Do you know what the monsters are?" I asked.

"Orcs," Isaac replied hesitantly. The fact that he knew that and was still letting us come along suggested he was more than a match for them.

"Do you know how many?"

"I'm not sure, but don't worry. I can handle an orc or two."

"Will the other adventurers who ran in here be all right?"

“To be honest…I’m not sure.” He explained that they’d taken the quest at fairly last-minute notice, so they probably wouldn’t have much in the way of teamwork. That didn’t seem good.

“To the right! Then the left!”

We ran along, following Hikari’s directions, and came upon an orc just about to attack a villager. We were too far away for even Isaac to make it in time. I drew a knife from my belt and was about to throw it, but there was a knife already whizzing through the air. It was Hikari’s.

The knife flew straight at its target, but the orc managed to dodge just in time. Still, that moment’s delay sealed the deal. It saved the villager and gave Isaac just enough time to get in close and slay the distracted orc.

“Thanks for the help, mi— Ah, look out!” Isaac shouted as he turned back to us.

But I didn’t need his warning to tell me there was an orc there. I drew the sword from my belt and used Sword Slash to cut it down in one swing.

“Hey, are you kidding me?” Isaac said in surprise.

“Well, sir, a traveling merchant needs some degree of fighting skill. We travel to all kinds of places, after all,” I said. There was a reason I wanted to show him that I could fight. “Given that, would you mind if I looked around the village a little for myself? There might be other survivors.”

“All right,” he said after a moment’s thought. “I’ll take this person out of the village for now. With skills like yours, I think you’ll be fine. Just don’t do anything stupid.”

“What about the orc corpses? May I take them?”

“We can do that late— Wha?!”

Before Isaac could even reply, I’d fully packed away the two orcs. I’d done it so quickly he must have been wondering why I’d even bothered asking. I put them into my Item Box, too, so it would have looked to Isaac like I’d just stuffed them into a bag—this was the fake “bag of holding” I’d prepared in advance for just such an occasion.

It seemed there were skills and magic items that could be used to identify items’ properties and qualities, so I’d used my Disguise skill on this one.

NEW
[Disguise Lv. 1]

The skill caused an object to display false information when appraised. So if someone looked deeper into the fake bag of holding, the informational pop-up would say:

[Bag of Holding] Owner: Sora. Can only be used by owner. Quality: Poor.

I'd made it at the suggestion of someone at the merchants' guild. I wasn't sure if he was trying to be kind or if he was just talkative, but I was grateful to him for the valuable information.

"I see. I thought you seemed low on stock for a merchant, but that's a bag of holding, isn't it?" Isaac asked.

"Yes, but I'm afraid only I can use it."

Isaac nodded in understanding, and we split up again.

Hikari and I ended up taking down three orcs and saving four villagers. Unfortunately there were some people we didn't get to in time, and some of the adventurers who'd come into the town to investigate had lost their lives as well.

We cleared out the orcs in the village, and once things had calmed down a bit, we asked the survivors what had happened. They explained that an orc horde had attacked the village just after lunchtime, slaughtered the villagers, and kidnapped the women. Some of the orcs then left the village with the women, while others stayed behind to continue the massacre. Most of them had left the village, but even the few that stayed behind were too much for the village's remaining defenders to handle, and their fate seemed sealed.

"Most of the men were killed and most of the women got taken away in the initial raid. Those of us who survived got lucky. That's all," said a man. He'd been knocked unconscious in the original attack and just woke up to find he'd survived. It was Hikari and I who'd found him. "Who knows how monsters think? Maybe they just spared me on a whim," he added.

"My big sister ran out of the house to save me, and I couldn't do

anything. She told me to keep as quiet as I could…" another woman wept.

The whole scene was a swirl of distress, remorse, and other negative emotions.

After hearing the explanation, the head merchants, the wagons' drivers, and the escorting adventurers got together and talked about what to do next. While they did that, the remaining villagers worked to round up the corpses scattered through the town. Leaving them there could result in disease, so they had to be disposed of.

The adventurers who weren't standing watch split up to help bury the dead, and one of those doing the work was the woman who'd been doting on Hikari in the wagon. The corpses were a horrifying sight, yet she didn't avert her eyes or seem disturbed at all.

Is that because this is another world? I wondered, but I learned the answer that night at dinner.

"We're adventurers," the woman explained. "We came from Majorica."

I'd heard that name somewhere before… *Oh, right. It's a dungeon city in the Magic Nation of Eva.*

The woman's name was Layla. She was the leader of the Bloody Rose adventurer party which, shockingly, was Rank B. She and the other members of her party were students at the Magius Academy of Magic in Majorica.

There was a lot to take in. The Bloody Rose party had six members, and Layla introduced them one by one.

Layla, the leader, was an upperclassman at the school. Her shoulder-length golden hair was beautifully coiffed, and she looked more like a noblewoman than an adventurer. She was taller than me, though… *Sigh.*

Casey. She bowed politely when introduced, but she looked at me suspiciously. *What did I do wrong?* Her short hair was very becoming, though, and she was about my height.

Yor. Her silver hair was pulled up into a braided ponytail, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Apparently she hadn't slept much recently for various reasons.

Talia. She had medium-length hair that curled outward a bit at the bottom. *Flipped ends, was it called?* She had a sleepy cast to her

eyes that I really liked.

Luilui. She had dusky golden hair done up in a bun on the left side and a sporty, active air about her.

Tricia. Her long golden hair tumbled straight down her back, and she had a warm, kind smile. But her most noteworthy feature was her large chest, which I'd find my eyes drifting to when I wasn't careful. *Yeah, so I'd better be careful!*

Layla explained that they were heading for the capital to attend the Advent Festival. They were also escorting Yor, who had been born in Messa, for a homecoming.

"You went all the way to another kingdom to study?" I asked Yor. I realized that I hadn't heard a lot about educational institutions while in the Kingdom of Elesia. Were they rare?

"There are educational facilities in Messa, but they mainly involve the Goddess and holy spells. So if you want to learn magic, you have to do it in the Magic Nation!" Yor suddenly sounded so excited it took me aback a little bit.

Her manner made the members of Bloody Rose grimace. "Calm down, Yor. You're scaring everyone."

Layla's admonishment snapped Yor out of it. She realized she was standing and looked down again, blushing.

"Yor turns into a different person when she starts talking about magic," Talia said bluntly. The others nodded in agreement.

"It's just because she's so earnest," Layla continued. "She's one of the most serious students of magic at the school. The teachers all praise her for it."

"But a special instructor from the Fortuna Institute of Sorcery came recently, and they let us attend the lecture because of me," Tricia said happily.

Tricia seemed to be a user of holy spells, and that was another reason they'd decided to go to the Advent Festival. There was some money to be made as an adventurer, but it was difficult to travel between lands. Also, because they were students, they weren't allowed to take long breaks outside of preassigned holidays.

Apparently they'd managed to get permission for the trip through a combination of offering to write a report about the festival, attending special classes, and having Yor's father provide monetary assistance. He'd been so desperate to have her come

home that he said he'd pay for everything. She'd turned that down, of course, but had accepted a little help.

"Hey, Locke. How'd things go?" We looked up as Isaac spoke and saw Locke returning from the group discussion. The coachman he'd been talking to was looking pale and vaguely sick.

They'd been talking with the merchant group about how to proceed. There were several issues, but the biggest one was food. They'd originally stocked up with plenty to spare, but they'd also expected to restock in Tenns, so what they had wouldn't be enough for the rest of the journey.

The other issue was what to do with the surviving residents of Tenns. The merchants could transport them all if they threw out their stock, but that would just make the food issues worse and the escorts' jobs harder. Besides, people not used to long trips would be a nuisance no matter how you sliced it. The fact that some of the escorting adventurers had already been careless on entering the village and gotten themselves killed didn't make things any easier.

Incidentally, the passengers on the transport wagons, including me, hadn't been asked our opinions on the matter. Isaac said that he'd told them I could fight, but since he was the only one who'd seen it, they didn't put much stock into it. I was just a merchant, after all.

"We can't come to an agreement. They want to press on, we want to help the villagers, and nobody's budging. And that merchant group is..." Locke explained that the caravan accompanying us belonged to the Aurora Trading Company.

"Aurora Trading Company?" I asked in confusion.

Isaac seemed surprised by my reaction. Apparently Aurora was a large trading company with branches in multiple lands, famous enough that most people, especially in the Vossheil Empire and the Holy Kingdom of Frieren, should know about them. That went double for a merchant like me.

"Anyway, that's probably why they're being so bullheaded about it. I was actually surprised when they offered to start the discussion again in the morning."

One of the transport wagon coachmen, Heil, had wanted to help the villagers because he knew the people of Tenns from his

work. He'd been through this way many times before and had gotten to know the people here. However, several of the passengers had looked unhappy about the idea.

"The Aurora folks said they'd stand watch for tonight, so..."

We ended up moving to the inn, which had suffered relatively little damage in the attack. There was space there for the wagons, and rooms to rest in as well. And while reminders of the attack remained all around us, being indoors was a big relief. Locke pointed out that even if we were attacked, it would be easy to defend ourselves.

"Master, food?" Hikari asked.

"This is for Ciel. We have orc meat, but we can't eat it right away, so try to hold off for now," I said while patting Hikari's head. I'd actually rather have had Ciel hold back as well, but I'd seen her watching on hungrily while the rest of us ate dinner.

Ciel happily chowed down on the food I prepared for her, then, when she realized Hikari was watching her, started pointing her ear at the meat insistently.

"I can have some?" Hikari asked. Ciel nodded, and they began eating together.

"That's nice of her," I said.

"Yeah! Thanks, Ciel!"

It seemed they'd formed a powerful bond over food. It was a bit like the same way Ciel and I had bonded in the first place... Though in that sense, I must have made the worst possible first impression on Ciel, since I'd made her eat those awful rations.

"Master," Hikari said suddenly.

"Yeah, guess we have a visitor."

Right as I said it, a knock sounded on our room's door. I opened it and found a man whom I remembered from the caravan standing there.

"May we talk?" he asked.

"Of course, sir. How may I help you?" I said, switching back to my merchant's cadence.

"Do you think I might enter your room?" There was something about his face I didn't trust. He was smiling, but he gave off the vague impression of a man evaluating merchandise. Like he was taking my measure.

But I didn't want to start trouble, so I let him in. He sat down on

the bed, acknowledged Hikari, then began to speak. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Enrique of the Aurora Trading Company, and I’m the leader of the merchant caravan.”

“May I ask what you want with me?”

“Don’t be so cagey, now. You’re Sora, aren’t you? For a traveling merchant, you did a marvelous job of slaying those orcs.”

Locke said this guy didn’t believe him when he talked up my skills earlier. Where is this coming from? I wondered skeptically.

“You see,” Enrique continued. “In light of your skills, I was hoping we could hire you as our escort to the next town of Wrent. Of course, if you accept, we’ll ensure the safety of your girl as well. And we’ll see that you’re well compensated.”

In other words, he wanted to hire me. I asked what the pay was, and it was quite high. Higher than the price of the escort quest I’d taken back in Elesia’s capital.

“May I ask why you want me?” I inquired.

Enrique paused for a moment, then spoke. “I think of myself as having an eye for talent. The others didn’t believe it, but I think you’re quite skilled…at least as skilled as the escorts we’ve already hired thus far. And taking our quest would certainly put you on our company’s good side.”

It seemed like a pretty good deal, but… “I’m afraid I’ll have to turn you down. Your offer is very generous, but I don’t have the experience to serve as an escort. Fighting while protecting others isn’t something anyone can just jump in and do.” I pretended to think about it for a long time before turning him down.

“I see. A pity.” Enrique bowed to me, his smile still plastered to his face, then moved to take his leave. But just as he passed through the door, his demeanor broke, and I could hear him whisper, “You’ll regret this, brat.”

I had a feeling that it had just slipped out, and he hadn’t expected me to overhear it. Maybe it was my Enhance Physique skill in play. He’d probably thought he could easily convince a youngster like me.

“You sure, master?” Hikari asked.

“About the escort?”

“Yeah.”

“Well…it was an interesting offer, but a paid quest comes with quite a lot of responsibility. And in this particular situation…”

I thought of the caravan's current escorts. A few had already been taken out by orcs, and from what I'd seen of them in battle, they didn't seem very well trained. When I'd appraised them, their levels had been low as well.

"Yeah. They looked weak." When she heard my reasoning, Hikari gave a rather heartless assessment of her own.

I didn't know much about them, but if the Aurora Trading Company was such a big and famous organization, why were their bodyguards so low quality? Had they been stingy with their payment?

"Master, aren't you going to sleep?" asked Hikari, perhaps sensing that I was still awake even though we were both lying on the bed with Ciel. Ciel herself must have been fully off in dreamland, because she was perfectly still.

"I'll sleep in a bit. But you must be tired after today, so get a good night's rest."

After checking to make sure Hikari was asleep, I looked back at my automap. At the very least, it showed no signs of orcs. All I could see was the handful of watchmen who had been posted around the inn.

I called up my status window and checked my current values again.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Scout / **Race:** Otherworlder / **Level:** None
HP: 370/370 / **MP:** 370/370 / **SP:** 370/370 (+100)
Strength: 360 (+0) / **Stamina:** 360 (+0) / **Speed:** 360 (+0)
Magic: 360 (+0) / **Dexterity:** 360 (+0) / **Luck:** 360 (+0)
Skill: Walking Lv. 36
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 445079/550000
Skill Points: 2

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 3] [Enhance Physique Lv. 9] [Regulate Mana Lv. 9] [Lifestyle Spells Lv. 8] [Detect Presence Lv. MAX] [Sword Arts Lv. 8] [Dimension Spells Lv. 8] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 6] [Boost Recovery Lv. 7] [Hide Presence Lv. 5] [Alchemy Lv. 7] [Cooking Lv. 8] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 5] [Fire Spells Lv. 5] [Water Spells Lv. 4] [Telepathy Lv. 6] [Night Vision Lv. 7] [Sword Tech Lv. 3] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 4] [Earth Spells Lv. 3] [Wind Spells Lv. 2] [Disguise Lv. 2]

Advanced Skills
[Appraise Person Lv. 5] [Detect Mana Lv. 4]

Contract Skills
[Holy Spells Lv. 1]

Title
[Spirit Contractor]

I dismissed the panel, then used Parallel Thinking to scan the area outside our room while I slept.

Chapter 2

Sensing a presence outside our room, I snapped awake and sat up. Just as the door opened, my eyes met those of the person coming in.

Huh? Did I forget to lock the door last night?

The one barging in was Layla, who immediately pointed at me as she turned redder and redder.

Doesn't she know it isn't polite to point? Or is that not a thing here in this world?

"Wh-Wh-What are you doing?!" Layla spoke first, sounding absolutely scandalized. Her shouting startled Ciel, who woke up and started looking all around her in a panic.

Hikari, meanwhile, opened her eyes very calmly, looked at me, and said, "Master, be quiet," while rubbing her eyes.

Are you still half asleep or something? I'm not the one shouting...

Hikari probably wasn't panicked about the sudden intruder because she didn't mean any harm. If she did, Hikari would have sprung into combat-ready mode.

Incidentally, Hikari still had her arms around me. Ever since that day, it had become standard for her to hug me in her sleep. One time I'd turned her down and she'd looked at me so sorrowfully that I hadn't been able to do it again. But I'd told her not to do it when other people were watching, so recently she'd just been sleeping close by instead.

"Anyway, how can I help you?" I asked. "Even though you're the one who barged in without knocking..."

My words made Layla's eyes open wide, then she coughed, then spoke. Looking closely, I could see that her cheeks were bright scarlet. "Ah, of course. An issue seems to have come up. Would you mind joining me to check on it? Also, do you even sleep in your mask?"

I usually didn't think much about the mask, but I just happened to have fallen asleep in it last night. It was a little bit intrusive while I was trying to sleep... I might need to think up a better way to get around it later on.

Still, what could the issue be? I scanned the area with Detect Presence but couldn't sense any new monster readings. *Although...not enough humans either...?*

Layla led me outside where a large crowd of people had formed.

"What's going on here?!" One of the passengers was asking questions with great hostility. He was talking to Heil, who looked quite pale and out of sorts.

"May I ask what's happened?" I asked Locke, who seemed to know the situation, and he filled me in.

Ginnie was the one who'd discovered it—first, that one of the transport wagons had been sabotaged. He'd noticed that the wheels had been completely wrecked. He'd called Locke over quickly, and they'd looked around to find that all the caravan wagons were gone. They'd also learned that not only had the caravan team disappeared, but so had a group of passengers from the other transport wagon and all the escorts outside of Locke's team.

The vanished passengers happened to be the merchants who'd acted friendly with the Aurora Trading Company when we first set out. None of the people I'd seen greeting Enrique on that day seemed to be here with us now.

The other passenger was yelling at Heil because they blamed his disagreements with Aurora for this state of affairs. Given the situation, his emotions might have been understandable. But didn't he realize that their proposal was to abandon the surviving villagers? Wasn't it more unreasonable to resort to sabotage over a simple difference of opinion?

Enrique's words from last night suddenly replayed in my mind. *You'll regret this...*

So that was what he'd meant. Maybe the people who had gone with them had been given the same offer I had.

"They completely screwed us." Locke's angry words settled the chaotic scene down a bit.

"Wh-What should we do?" Heil asked, looking on the verge of tears.

Just as an oppressive silence fell back over the group, someone clapped their hands to get everyone's attention. It was Layla. "First, we need to figure out where we stand. Mr. Heil, you check the

wagons and... Litt the merchant, right? Work with the villagers to assess our food situation. Luilui, you handle recon. Talia, you support her." I found myself staring in admiration at the quick and precise way she gave orders.



I saw Luilui and Talia get weapons from Layla and wondered if she had a bag of holding too. I'd seen them all with their own bags yesterday, but they'd seemed a bit light for such a long journey.

"So, what should we do?" Layla asked Locke.

"It'll be harder than before to leave. The next transport won't be here for five days at the earliest," he muttered in response, his brow furrowed.

I thought back to the time when we'd just managed to get booked on the transport and remembered that the people who hadn't made it asked when the next wagon would come through. I felt like they'd been told five days later at the earliest.

"But if you ask me, they're the real fools here," Locke said. All eyes turned to him, including those of the passenger who had been so angry earlier. "From what the villagers have told us, there are a lot of orcs out there. If they were kidnapping villagers, there could be advanced subtypes or commanders in their ranks. I doubt a group like that would let them leave their territory without a fight…and the timing of their move might make the orcs think they're survivors trying to escape."

I heard someone gulp audibly. Locke was basically suggesting the caravan that had left town was going to be attacked. Some of those who grasped his meaning began trembling.

"I think I can fix the wagon, but it'll take a while. Until then, we'll need to search the town for things we can use," Heil said.

"I'm afraid we're running low on food. They ran off with our stores too," Litt added on.

Hearing that, one of the passengers fell limply to the ground. Another gritted their teeth in frustration.

"So they're just stealing," someone else growled.

It had been done in cold blood too. The Aurora people had probably been formulating the plan when they volunteered to stand watch. Had they destroyed our wagon to keep us here, thinking we'd make a useful decoy to keep the orcs away from them? If Locke was right, it might backfire, but maybe nobody in their party had thought that far ahead.

"I'm going to sue them!" someone said with open anger.

Litt scowled in response. He explained that trying to sue the Aurora Trading Company was a good way to get yourself disappeared. Such was the extent of their connections with people

in power.

"Either way," he added, "we can discuss that *if* we get out of this alive." Litt had done a fair bit of traveling as a merchant, and he knew better than most people the real threat the monsters posed. "Anyway, we'll have to split up and search for food. Ginnie, you're on lookout. Isaac, work with the villagers to find things we can use. And Sora, I'm sorry, but…"

He probably meant the orc meat. Isaac must have told him about it.

I nodded and produced the orc corpses I'd taken yesterday from the Item Box. I removed them so quickly that it summoned a shriek from one of the onlookers. *Whoops.*

"Girls, would you prefer to break down the bodies or search?" Locke asked Layla's group.

"Exsanguinating them has to come first, either way. That will take some time, so we'll help with the search until then."

Seeing everyone getting ready to act, I asked Locke a question to confirm. "Can I assume we're holing up here for now?"

"Yeah. We'll need to reinforce some of the walls, but this seems like the best place to do it. The building's tall, so it makes a good vantage point too."

The inn was three stories tall, quite a bit taller than other buildings around it. Most of the other buildings had been badly damaged, too, so there weren't a lot of choices to start with. Reinforcing it, though… *Should I try building a wall around the inn with earth magic?*

"There's something I'd like to try. May I?" I asked.

When I told him what I was going to do, he tilted his head at me. "I don't know anything about magic. Is it possible to do that?"

I said I wouldn't know until I tried, so he told me to go ahead.

"Master, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to use magic to—"

"Magic!" I was about to tell Hikari what I was going to do when Yor ran right up to me. The word "magic" seemed to have activated her. Her eyes were sparkling, and she waited with bated breath for my next words.

Having no other choice, I explained what I was going to do, and she immediately began peppering me with questions and comments. "Can you really do that? I've never heard of using earth

magic like that!" You know, that kind of thing.

It was a little hard for me to explain, too, so I decided to just show her. I'd been thinking lately that this did feel a little less like elemental magic and more like an advanced version of lifestyle spells. But I also knew that lifestyle spells alone couldn't get this kind of raw power. Maintaining the right temperature for cooking had also become a lot easier since I learned the Fire Spells skill.

I put both hands on the ground, imagined what I wanted, and charged the earth with mana. I visualized the earth piling up into the shape of a wall and forming a trench in its wake. Building a two-meter-high wall inevitably created a two-meter deep trench in front of it. I also made it about a meter thick, and by the time I'd completed the wall on the inn's north side, I was out of MP.

Yor was utterly gobsmacked by the sight, and other people came running to see what she was shouting about. "I-Incredible. What kind of magic is that?!" she demanded.

E-Excuse me, back off! Yor had run up to me, and she was now so close that I could feel her breath in my face. Her excitement seemed to have excised all sense of decorum.

I finally managed to calm her down, then explained a little bit about what I'd done while I rested up.

"I don't know all the details, but..." I ended up explaining my process. I told her that it was a kind of lifestyle spell and you needed a skill called Regulate Mana to use it like that. Regarding the fact that it was more effective than most lifestyle spells, I said that I knew earth spells, which allowed me to move earth around more freely.

"Regulate Mana? What kind of skill is that?"

I didn't know how to answer that one. It was just a sense of it. I tried to stay safe and just explain that it was a skill that let you feel the mana in your body. Actually, I was using it to project mana outside of my body.

"*Feel* mana?"

"Sorry, it's hard to explain. I can probably go into more detail when we have time later...but I have more work to do for now, so mind if I finish first?"

My MP had recovered while I was talking to Yor, so I got back to work. We were around the same age, so I'd dropped the merchant's cadence with her, and it was nice not having to stress

about it.

Maybe because my various skill levels had gone up, I could do more with fewer MP spent, making the process as a whole more efficient. Thanks to that, I managed to finish the job before lunchtime.

“What in the world?!” Isaac cried out when he returned. He gave a casual rap to the wall of earth and yelped in pain.

Well, what did you expect, man? Incidentally, it was harder than it would normally have been thanks to the mana I’d channeled into it.

Yor curiously scraped away at it with her staff and a knife, and I dearly wanted to ask her to please not destroy my work…though it would probably be fine.

Once that was done, I headed back to the inn and joined the others in the dining hall.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Ney, one of the surviving villagers, as I handed her some of my preprepared food. Inside a storage container, of course.

It would probably last longer in my Item Box, but I’d feel a little guilty if we ate it all by ourselves. I left a minimum for Ciel and handed the rest to Ney. “I’ll make some more later.”

“Yeah. It’s hard to be hungry.” Hikari understood the situation, and she didn’t begrudge me for giving up the food. Still, she couldn’t help staring at it the whole time.

“Let’s go over our situation again.” Locke called us over to review the current circumstances and discuss what to do next.

Aside from Locke, we were joined by Layla, Luilui, Heil, Litt, and a representative of the villagers named Elke—a young man with short hair and a body built up from farmwork—for a total of seven. Isaac and Ginnie had brought together the male passengers and villagers and were teaching them how to stand watch.

I understood why Luilui was here; she had to report on the results of her search. But why me? Because I’d made the walls?

“Could we first hear how your search turned out?” Locke asked.

Luilui responded. “I used my skill to look around. I can’t disclose how it works, but I did find that the orcs came from the forest to the north, as the villagers said.”

“Do they have a base in the forest?”

“No, just past the forest there’s a kind of rocky outcropping with a cave inside. There was an orc standing watch at the front, so I’m sure that’s their base.”

Her words genuinely surprised me—less because she’d found the orcs and more because her skill let her search such a wide area. Even with my automap at its widest setting, I didn’t think I could do that in my current state.

“So do you know what the orcs are doing now?”

“Yes, there’s two groups. One’s heading back to their cave, and the other’s moving through the forest. I only caught a glimpse of the forest group, so I’m not sure where exactly they’re headed, but I know it’s not here. And I can tell there’s at least one orc general.”

Was Locke right, then, that the caravan was the target?

“W-Won’t they be in danger? We have to warn them…” Heil looked over at me but, feeling the gaze of everyone else on him, he turned his eyes down. The meaning of his words had probably just dawned on him.

The fact that he still wanted to save the caravan even after what they’d done to us spoke to what a good person he was. But realistically speaking, there was no way to even catch up to them now. They’d just have to hope their escorts were skilled enough.

“Could we use your skill to warn them?” Locke asked Luilui.

“I’m afraid not. It only lets me see things. I can’t pass on messages.” As helpful as skills were, they weren’t almighty.

“Okay, so, options. One is to hole up in one place and wait for outside aid—there’ll be another transport coming by on the way to Messa in a few days, so we’d just have to survive until they get here. The other is…” Locke cast a glance at Elke.

Elke probably actually wanted us to save the captured villagers, but realistically speaking, he knew that it would be hard. I couldn’t exactly do much against a large band of orcs myself, especially when there was no way to know how powerful their advanced subtypes were.

Everyone stayed quiet. The mood around us had turned black. But just as the silence started feeling oppressive, Layla spoke up.

“Locke. If we decide to hole up, how long could we last against an invading force?”

“It depends on the size of the force, but we could probably hold out if it’s only ten or so. Sora’s given us an easy position to defend,

after all. But things might get rough if it lasts too long."

"What if we weren't here?"

"Are you saying you want to take your party to save the kidnapped people?"

"Yor and Tricia aren't suited to an ambush, so it'd just be the four of us. By the way, Yor can use attack magic, and Tricia can cast holy spells."

"Can any of the villagers fight?"

"I-I can kind of fight," Elke said. "The rest...probably not."

"How about you, Sora?"

I was pretty sure he'd already heard from Isaac but was probably asking just to make sure. *Except...*

"Miss Layla—" I started.

"Just Layla, please."

"Layla, can your party beat those orcs?" She was clearly aiming to save the hostages, but I wanted to know if she was sure they could succeed.

"We've fought an orc general before, so I think we'll be fine. The rest comes down to the layout of the cave and whether they use the hostages as shields. If things go wrong, I might need to pull out. I'm sorry, Mr. Elke, but the lives of my people have to come first."

"I was thinking we might go with you," I responded.

"'We'? You mean that little girl too?!" Locke asked.

"She's more resilient than she looks, so you don't have to worry about her. She's tougher than me in some ways."

Layla now joined Locke in looking surprised.

"Were you counting me as one of the defenders?" I continued.

"Because it looks like you can use magic, yeah," Locke said. "But we'll have another mage in your place, so it should be fine."

In the end, Locke accepted Layla's proposal to split up into two parties, one of raiders and the other of defenders.

Later, I managed to get him alone saying I wanted to discuss something. With a sigh, he told me why he'd supported the actions of Layla's party.

"The fact is, it'll be a big help to us if they can thin out the orcs. There seem to be at least twenty of them, so even with all the girls present on defense, defending a large group of mostly amateurs won't be easy, even for veterans like us." He swore me to secrecy

on that point, though. “So what was it you wanted to talk about?” he then prompted.

“You might recall there’s a trench in front of the wall. I wanted to ask if I should fill it with water.”

“Water? If you can do it, it might be best. It’d be deep enough to take out any orcs that might fall in. I think the trench by itself should earn us some time, though.”

I agreed, and Locke said he would tell the others what we had discussed, so we went our separate ways.

“You can really do anything, can’t you?” Isaac told me once I’d filled up the moat.

“I’m starting to wonder if I might have chosen the wrong profession myself,” I said, giving a half-hearted sort of agreement.

We chatted during our free time, and I mentioned that Enrique had invited me to join their escort.

“He didn’t make us that offer,” Isaac said.

Enrique had said he had an eye for people, so maybe he’d approached those he thought were more likely to go along with him. Did I look like someone who would be more easily taken in? Was it because I was young?

We’d finished our work and gone back into the building when we suddenly heard shouting.

“Are you serious? Those orcs could attack at any minute!”

“That’s right. If what you say is true, shouldn’t we just wait for the next transport you mentioned?”

The transport passengers were complaining to Locke, who remained calm throughout.

Hikari, realizing that I’d come in, jogged up to me with Ciel on her head. I’d been wondering where the spirit was, but she’d apparently been with Hikari. I felt a little neglected.

I took stock of the situation again and saw that the passengers were complaining while the villagers were looking pained. From the scraps of conversation I heard, it sounded like they’d learned about Layla’s plan to take a party to save the people kidnapped by orcs.

“Those women may be adventurers, but they’re under no obligation to protect *you*!” Locke’s words sent a shock through the complaining people. “The rest of us are fulfilling the obligations of

the escort quest we took. If you want *them* to stay here and protect you, too, you'd need to pay them for it."

Was that checkmate, then? He was basically telling the complaining passengers that they had to cooperate if they wanted to live. He also reminded them that the townspeople were kindly sharing their food with them as well, and that seemed to get them settled down.

"It benefits us, too, anyway. It splits the orcs up. If the women succeed and that whittles down their numbers, it makes us more likely to win here as well," Locke then added, picking the perfect time to add that in. *Ah, the wisdom of age!*

"Is all your business wrapped up?" Layla asked me then.

"Yeah," I responded. "When do we leave?"

"I was thinking of grabbing a quick nap, then heading out in the middle of the night. What do you think? And are you really planning to take Hikari with us?" Layla looked at Hikari with concern.

"Master, where are we going?" Hikari asked.

"To hunt orcs. Maybe it would be better if you stayed here, Hikari?"

"No, going with."

Seeing the way Hikari clung to me, Layla seemed to give up on talking her out of it. "Then let's split up for now and head out later tonight."

Taking her words to heart, we went to get some sleep.

◇◇◇

"Are you all ready?"

A knock on the door woke me up. I opened it and saw Layla standing there, ready to go. She'd probably remembered what had happened when she'd barged in before, and so this time she was waiting politely.

I left the inn and found members of Bloody Rose as well as Locke and Ginnie waiting outside.

"I should give you these as well," I said, handing pouches to Locke and Yor.

Yor looked inside hers, and her eyes opened wide in shock.

Ah, right, I'd heard my mana potions were of unusually high

quality. I guess getting ten of them would take anyone aback? "I made sure I had plenty in case I needed them. Please, feel free to use them if things start looking bad."

"Thanks, we'll definitely do that," Locke said. "But do you have enough for yourselves?"

"More than enough. Layla, if you guys need any, just let me know."

"I believe we have enough, but we'll gladly ask if we need anything." *Apparently Rank B adventurers tend to come prepared?* "Be careful," Layla then told Yor.

"You too, elder sister," Yor responded.

Locke and the others watched us go as Luilui and Talia led us out into the northern forest.

The moons were out, but the branches blocked most of the light, so it was hard to see where we were going. Nevertheless, the four of us moved as quickly as if it were daylight, maneuvering around tricky tree roots like they were nothing.

"Surprising. You have magic items too?" Talia asked. Her way of speaking really was unusual. It was similar to Hikari's—she seemed to converse with the bare minimum of words and had a rather flat affect as well.

"Talia's surprised that you can keep up with us," Layla clarified. "Do you have an item that lets you see in the dark too, Sora?"

I see. It's a magic item, then? I asked her to tell me more, and she explained that the lower dungeon levels were very dark, so they carried magic items that let them get around that. I was using a skill, of course, but for now I told her that it was indeed a magic item. The fact that Hikari also seemed to be effortlessly moving along without one was also very impressive, though.

"If you can move like that, you're wasted as a merchant! Hikari, you're amazing too." Luilui was extremely surprised as well.

However, although Hikari seemed completely unfazed, I was actually having a lot of trouble. All the running meant I was gradually starting to get tired. My improved stats from leveling up and Enhance Physique let me more or less keep up, but... *Ah, I wish we could walk.*

As if someone had heard my internal plea, we shifted from running to walking shortly afterward. Talia and Luilui were acting as our scouts, so they were now keeping a close eye out for signs

of the orcs' passage. Obviously I was checking my automap as well (I had the attention to spare now that we were walking), and Hikari also scanned for presences around us.

Layla must have had a little more presence of mind now that we were walking, too, because she started talking with Hikari. Was she worried about her, perhaps? Casey was watching her from behind in concern, but Hikari didn't seem to notice.

"Hikari, do you have search skills too?" Layla had figured that out just from watching Hikari. She really was sharp.

Hikari nodded. It wasn't like we had to hide that, so it was fine.

"That's why he let you come along. But can you fight orcs?" Layla asked her.

"No problem. I'll protect my master."

"Heh, you're very reliable. Just don't push yourself too hard," Layla said, apparently thinking that Hikari was joking.

When Luilui saw this, she said, "Elder sister is always like this. She's very concerned with looking after others."

To this, Casey responded, "Of course she is. She's our big sister," with a degree of pride.

They went on to explain that even at their school, Layla was always the first one to extend a helping hand to someone in need. This plan to attack the orcs, too, would allow us to deal the orcs a hard blow by dividing their forces, but at the heart of it, she'd really wanted to save the kidnapped people. We'd talked about retreating if things got too dangerous, but it was hard for me to imagine Layla just walking away. Maybe it was just in my head, though?

I also had a feeling she'd left Yor and Tricia behind to make sure everyone was in the place where they'd be best served. I couldn't see why she'd split up such a well-coordinated party otherwise.

On top of that, I suspected that her reason for wanting to rush through the forest like that early on was partly a test to see if we could move the way we needed to or not. If we'd failed to keep up, she'd probably have sent us back on the grounds that our abilities were insufficient.

Or was I overthinking it?

At last, we made it up to the cave that Luilui had discovered with her search skill. We'd been moving swiftly, but it had still

taken over a day, and everyone seemed pretty winded. Me? I was just fine. Even if it was on the fast side, we were still walking, after all.

"All right, there's the cave. Let's head back a little bit for now and get some rest." She seemed to want to time the ambush just right. "A daylight raid would be best for the prisoners, but we'll do it at night. Even monsters should sleep then, after all."

Layla was right that moving through the forest would be easiest for amateurs by day. But fewer orcs would be active at night, and killing them all would be even better than having to flee under any conditions. The plan was to kill as many orcs in their sleep as possible before others heard the commotion and woke up.

Of course, monsters weren't like humans in all ways, so there was no guarantee it would be that easy.

"Luilui, could you see what the other group's up to? And get a look inside the cave, if you could." She wanted to know if the other orc party was on the way back.

There was nothing really for me to do here, so I decided to make some food and prepare some ointments to help with exhaustion. Layla and the others had shared some of their rations on the way, but Hikari hadn't been happy about it and Ciel wouldn't even give them the time of day.

"Layla. It looks like we'll have some time before the ambush, so I'd like to do some cooking. Do you mind?"

Three of the girls looked at me like I was crazy, but they didn't tell me not to, so I got started. Luilui was the exception, but maybe she just hadn't heard me because she was using her skill?

I set up a space in our campground and started preparing food in my usual way. However, rather than doing any intricate cooking, I just heated one of my preprepared meals. *But I'm not just doing it to free up inventory space, okay?*

By the time it was ready, Luilui must have finished her search, because she was looking my way. I dished out soup with a lot of meat in it and handed out the bowls, but the girls seemed hesitant to dig in—that is, until I served Hikari, who wolfed it down hungrily. The sight of her finishing with a smile must have been what led the others to gradually tuck in. They voiced their approval of the meal right away, so I joined them as well.

I'd thought this one tasted pretty good, myself, but everyone

had different tastes, after all. And unlike the food I'd given to Ney, the stuff I kept in my Item Box now was more suited to the palates of the world I'd come from, so I'd been a little worried.

As for Hikari, she'd already eaten it a few times, and I'd picked out one I knew she liked, so there were no issues there.

"I had my doubts because the color and smell were unfamiliar, but it's quite good," Layla said.

"I have more. Would you like it?"

"Y-Yes, please," she responded, and the pot was soon emptied. It was the best compliment a cook could receive.

Once the meal was over, Luilui announced the results of her search. She suspected the other orc group would attack the caravan no later than tomorrow. Unfortunately, she had been unable to investigate the layout of the cave.

I tried to look with my automap, but no luck. That was odd, since it was within range in terms of distance.

"Regarding planning—before we start, Sora and Hikari, there's something I'd like to check with you." Layla wanted to know more about our fighting styles so she could adjust her plan to suit them.

I told her that I could use various sword techniques and throw knives. She asked about magic, and I told her I hadn't used much of it in combat.

"Understood," she replied. "Since we'll be in a cave, I'll ask you to keep casting to a minimum."

Hikari said she specialized in close-range combat, and Layla told her not to push herself too hard. She seemed slightly upset about being treated like a child, but honestly, I knew what she could do and I was still worried about her, so I couldn't blame Layla too much. Still, I told Layla and the others that Hikari's dagger had the power to paralyze whatever it cut into.

Layla and Casey also wielded swords, and Talia fought with a dagger like Hikari. Luilui was primarily an archer, and she could apparently use her bow even in close-range combat.

The most surprising thing was Layla's sword. The hilt had a simple yet refined design, and most notably of all, it was made of mithril.

Mithril...that old fantasy staple, I mused.

`[Mithril Sword] A sword made of refined mithril.`

Mana Channel Rate: Good.
Infusing it with mana increases its cutting ability.

Infusing it with mana? I thought as I read its description with Appraisal. *What does that mean?*

After working out a plan, we took turns watching the cave and resting as we waited quietly for nightfall.

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"Let's begin. Luilui, get to it."

"Yes, elder sister. I'll start."

Luilui moved into sniping range and immediately began preparing to attack. *She's at least a hundred meters away, though. Can she handle it?* I wondered. She held one arrow in her mouth and nocked another in her bow.

There were two orc lookouts, and she intended to take out both with successive shots. Talia had also sneaked up close to the cave entrance as a backup in case Luilui failed. We'd let her go alone to prevent us from hindering her somehow.

"Here we go." Luilui loosed the first arrow, immediately nocked the second, and fired again with a split second between the two shots.

Nevertheless, the arrows snapped right into the orcs' foreheads simultaneously.

"I rigged the fletching so that the second one would fly faster," Luilui told me when I expressed my surprise.

"All right, we're going in. Sora, retrieve the bodies," Layla directed me even as she headed for the cave. She already knew I could fit orc bodies into my bag of holding, after all. I quickly packed them away and followed after her.

"No sign of any more around the cave," Talia said as we arrived.

"Elder sister. I'm going to check again." Hearing Talia's words, Luilui offered to use her search skill once more.

As I caught up to them and entered the cave, I suddenly felt the presence of monsters. It was so abrupt that it took me aback at first, but I quickly recovered and called up my automap. For some reason, it now displayed the layout of the cave.

The inside and outside of the cave seemed to have some kind

of boundary between them, and the presence disappeared if I stepped outside. I didn't know why, but there must have been some kind of principle behind it.

I checked my automap again and saw a place that seemed blurred out. I tried Detect Presence and Detect Mana, but they seemed to be rebuffed as well. Ciel also seemed to sense something, and she retreated into my hood.

"What is it, Luilui?"

"I'm sorry. Something's interfering so it won't work right. But…"

"Luilui, you've done enough," Layla told her kindly.

The girl did seem to be sweating heavily, and she looked pale too. She drank one of the potions I'd given her, and her color came back.

"We don't have a choice. Talia, let's keep our guard up as we go on inside." Nevertheless, seeming to decide they shouldn't let her push it too hard, Layla and Talia chose to continue on in.

I stopped Talia before she could move, then asked Layla to let me try my own "search spell." Obviously I couldn't tell them about my automap, so instead, I came up with a decoy. I held up a hand and summoned a wind to wreath my body. After waiting a minute, I "unleashed" it down the corridor.

"The path keeps going for a while, then forks. In the chamber to the right are twenty orcs and…two humans. There are also several more humans a little ways beyond. Then there's a passage leading to another place, with…an orc at the end of it?"

I gave them an easy, businesslike accounting of what the automap had told me, but I tried to present it like I was actively in the process of searching.

The reason my last statement was more like a question was because I'd suddenly been able to see what was at the end of the passage, and the signal I detected there was giving off far more dangerous mana than the other orcs. But the reading definitely resembled an orc, so…an advanced subtype? And worst of all, there were two human life signs with it in the room.

"What's to the left of the fork?"

"It looks like…a storehouse? There's nobody there." *At the very least, nobody alive.* There were no signals, at least. Without any signals, I wouldn't know what was there until I looked.

Layla mulled that over. "Very well. Let's keep our guard up and

start moving.”

Talia nodded, and this time she began to walk forward. Hikari seemed unhappy that Layla was skeptical of my explanation, but Layla’s reaction was perfectly understandable. It would’ve been one thing if we knew each other’s powers and skills perfectly, but we were kind of an impromptu team.

Of course, I’d used Appraise Person to see their levels, so I could probably estimate their fighting prowess.

[**Name:** Layla / **Job:** Adventurer / **Level:** 34 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

Layla’s level was by far the highest of the four. Casey was Lv. 26, Luilui was Lv. 24, and Talia was Lv. 23. I’d assumed their levels would be a bit higher because they were Rank B, but it seemed I’d been wrong. “Status” had also been added to the list of things I could appraise since getting Appraise Person to Lv. 5.

Given that Hikari was about on the same level, we’d probably beat the orcs. Still, there were a lot of them, so it wouldn’t be a simple fight. The other point in question was whether the orcs would use the kidnapped people as hostages.

It was dark at the entrance, but it got lighter as we went further in. Were the walls glowing? I appraised one, and the pop-up read:

[Fluorescent Rock] Glows a little bit in the darkness. Quality: Average.

They were scattered roughly throughout the wall with no particular rhyme or reason, suggesting that they had probably always been there. They seemed to be of rather good quality, and the higher the quality, the brighter they shone.

As we walked on for a while, I heard a sound like screaming that echoed through the cave. It sounded human—and female, at that.

We picked up the pace, and as the screams got louder, we reached the fork in the path. The voice seemed to be coming from the right.

We moved along while keeping our footsteps quiet, biting back

the need to hurry. Just then, Talia stopped abruptly. I could see what lay ahead over her shoulder. It was a rather wide-open cave with what looked like a cell at the back. The orcs were sitting in a circle, eating as they laughed their vulgar laughs. *Guess it's not monster bedtime just yet…*

In the middle of the circle were an orc and a human woman, engaged in an act that made me want to cover my eyes. It wasn't just violating her; it was also hitting her now and then for its own enjoyment. With each dull slap, she let out a scream. Beside them lay another woman, silent and shivering.

"Abhorrent…" Layla reached for the hilt of her sword, but she seemed to hesitate. It wouldn't be good to just charge out in anger. First, we discussed our various roles and quickly came up with a plan. "Luilui, can you handle it?" she asked.

Luilui nodded and readied her bow. Then, when the orc was far enough from the woman, she loosed her arrow. That same instant, Layla and the others ran out, with me tagging along after them. Layla and Casey laid into the scrambling orcs, while Talia and I helped up the collapsed women and then ran for the cell. Any orcs that tried to come at us were quickly blocked off by shots from Luilui's bow.

Hikari was already in front of the cell crossing blades with an orc. Ciel watched on worriedly from behind Hikari, but once it became clear that Hikari was winning, she began swinging her ears to and fro. *Does she think she's boxing?*

Around the time I arrived at the cell, the orcs had managed to get organized. On guard for divide-and-conquer tactics, they formed ranks and seemed to be holding off on any further attacks; perhaps they'd gotten cautious.

While they were doing that, we were able to reunite with Layla and the others. Layla and Casey served as the vanguard, and Hikari and I ran support. Luilui manned her bow from the rear while Talia worked on unlocking the cell.

The reason the orcs didn't charge blindly after us was because we'd defeated over half of the ones in the cave during our first skirmish. That left only eight, one of which definitely seemed different from the orcs around it.

"It's an orc general. We could have beaten more of them if not for that one," Layla said, keeping her guard up.

[**Name:** — / **Job:** General / **Level:** 35 / **Race:** Orc / **Status:** Enraged]

I scanned the remaining orcs, and they were between Levels 15 and 22. There really was a big difference between individuals, then. The only thing that worried me was that the orc general's signal was weaker than the signal deeper in; by comparison to that other signal, the general wasn't too different from its fellow orcs.

"Is this everyone?" Talia asked the kidnapped people as she unlocked the cell.

"T-Two of us got taken to the back," one responded in a shaky voice. She was clearly afraid.

I looked around them and saw torn clothing, bruised cheeks, and limps. Not one of them was unharmed. I pulled some spare sheets from my Item Box and handed them over along with some potions. But I only had a few sheets, so I was stuck having to pick and choose who got them. As for the potions, the prisoners had to be able to walk for us to get them out of here, so I couldn't afford to be stingy with my stock.

When Layla heard that there were two others left, she looked at me, then turned her eyes forward again to focus on the enemies in front of her.

Just as we were about to shift our positions to make things easier for us to move, the general let out a war cry and swung down the sword in its hand, signaling for the orcs to take action. They moved with such coordination now that it was like that earlier skirmish hadn't even happened. The eight were moving like a single organism.

"Casey, you handle them," Layla commanded.

"Luilui, support!"

"Elder sister, get back! You're too far ahead!"

I held my breath as I watched. The orcs now had the coordination of a highly trained regiment, and instead of trying to overpower us with force alone, they used skill and planning to go after their desired result. Each covered for the others, fighting to avoid mortal wounds. When one was about to fall, another moved in to cover for it, buying time by prioritizing defense. In fact,

keeping the combat going seemed to be their priority; they'd come after the girls with a kind of one-two punch rhythm but never come too far after them.

They also occasionally broke formation to come down on us hard, but at times like that Luilui fired her arrows and Hikari and I used our throwing knives to keep them in check.

"This can't last. We need to help them." I could hear desperation in Talia's voice.

The battle had indeed been going for quite some time. We tried to join in, but the orcs seemed to anticipate that. They moved in perfect harmony, without any hesitation or openings. If the battle kept on too much longer, we'd definitely tire out first. There was a clear difference in stamina between the monsters and the girls.

We'd gotten lucky. If our ambush hadn't been successful, we would've been dead by now. That's how coordinated they were. We'd also probably miscalculated by not bringing Yor and Tricia along.

Should I make an opening? How? Even if I used a spell, a single blast might be blocked by the shield-wielder and negated entirely. *An area of effect spell, then? Power aside, it could help to make an opening, right?* But I hadn't used magic in actual combat before, and I didn't know what might happen.

Still, things were just getting worse at this rate. Chris hadn't said anything about magic being explosive, but if I wanted to maximize the damage to the enemy while minimizing damage to Layla's group, I should probably aim it behind the orcs.

My current highest-level spell class was fire, which might be dangerous to use in a cave. *What about earth magic, then?*

"Layla. I'm going to support you with a spell. I might mess up, though!" I called out quickly and channeled my mana. The name for a spell appeared in my mind. *I don't need much power. I only need to distract them,* I thought to myself, then glanced at Hikari, who cloaked her presence and went on the move.

"Stone Shower." Calling out the name should telegraph to Layla and the others what spell I was using.

Two of the orcs in back of the orc general were showered by stone fragments from behind. It was so sudden that the general was slow to react, and it created a momentary opening. Hikari, seeing the pause in orders being given out, flew out from their

blind spot and stabbed one, then a second. Naturally, the actual damage dealt wasn't great, but Hikari's dagger also inflicted the Paralysis status effect. Layla and the others knew that, too, and they could focus on the orcs that Hikari hadn't hit.

Layla and Casey worked together to take down an orc; another blocked Luilui's arrows, but it took the wind out of the sails of the one going after Casey. I also charged forward to attack an orc, and just like that, the stalemate was broken. The orc general fought hard to turn the tide back in its favor, but our momentum was too great at this point.

The orc general, now the last remaining foe, tossed its shield away and let out another war cry, louder this time. It was loud enough to shake the ground and echo throughout the whole cave, and it sent the captive women into a mild panic.

The orc general then took its sword in both hands and charged at Layla, probably having realized that she was our leader. But its reckless charge didn't stand a chance against Layla, who simply delivered one coolheaded strike. Their swords met as they passed each other, but the orc's form was sloppier, and…

"It's over," Layla said. She'd sliced off its head.

We'd managed to finish them off, but it had been a close call. Indeed, Layla, Casey, and Luilui all let out a sigh of relief when it was over, seemingly on the verge of collapse.

I was walking up to the three women when I suddenly remembered—there was one orc left. I'd forgotten about it in the fervor of the fight. I quickly used Detect Presence, and the signal's sensation, even stronger now than before, sent a chill up my spine.

My eyes drifted to the passage, where two crimson lights glowed in the darkness. As if noticing my demeanor, Layla and the others also turned their eyes to face it.

The figure that appeared from the darkness was an orc even bigger than the general. It had a swarthy complexion and bloodred eyes that blazed like fire. It looked around at our group and grinned.

"Hey, have you ever fought one of those?" I asked.

There was an expression of shock on Layla's face. The mithril sword in her hand seemed to quiver. "Yes, I have," she responded, her voice trembling.

“Chance of victory?”

She didn’t answer that one. She just stared hard at the enemy in front of her, as if trying to hold something down.

[**Name:** Loid / **Job:** Lord / **Level:** 63 / **Species:** Orc / **Status:** Excited]

Appraisal revealed it to be of a high level. It was also incredibly intimidating.

However...

Yes, however...

I didn’t fall into despair.

As tough as it was, this thing was nothing compared to Ignis, the demon I’d met in Elesia. Still, given the reaction of Layla, who’d fought the orc general without any hesitation, it was clearly a powerful being. *So, what to do?*

I used Parallel Thinking to its fullest trying to figure out what I could manage with the skills I had. In the worst-case scenario...I might have to consider taking down the cave. I wanted to save the people in the back, of course, but that might just not have been possible.

“Layla. I’ll hold this one off. Can you get the women out while I do?”

“You can’t handle it by yourself. We’re going to help you.”

“I’m not sure numbers will help against that thing.”

Layla paused. “Casey.”

“Yes, elder sister?”

“I’m going to stay here too. I’m leaving you in charge.”

Casey seemed at a loss for how to respond. She likely knew the orc lord’s strength as well. Normally she’d instantly do what Layla told her, but here she hesitated.

“Please,” Layla said firmly, reinforcing her command to the hesitant Casey. “Luilui, Talia, you help her out too.”

Despite her clear misgivings, Casey walked up to the kidnapped women. They seemed to argue about something for a minute—probably about the two remaining people in the back—but Talia said something harsh to them, and then they all began rushing toward the mouth of the cave together.

“Master. I’ll stay and fight,” Hikari told me.

“You help with them, Hikari.”

“But—”

“They’re going to have their hands full, so I’d feel better if you’re with them. And if they run into any orcs on the way, they’ll really need you. Besides, you know how strong I am, right?”

I wasn’t actually very confident in my chances, and the possibility of encountering any orcs outside seemed very low…but since I couldn’t see what was going on outside while I was here in the cave, I asked Hikari to look after the people out there.

At last, she responded. “Okay. Master, take care.”

Hikari left, but my animal companion remained.

Ciel. You’re not going to go with them? I asked her telepathically.

Ciel nodded heartily in response. Her mouth was drawn into a firm line, and she had an aura of decisiveness I’d never seen from her before. I knew there was no point in arguing with her at times like this, so I didn’t say anything else.

Not much time had passed, but the orc lord, Loid, had spent it watching us with amusement. It was as if he understood what we were saying.

“Well, did we keep you waiting?” I asked Loid, partly to test my theory.

The orc chuckled as it towered over us. “It’s all gonna end the same way. This is better. Trampling you two first’ll make the hunt more fun.”

Shockingly, he answered. I’d heard that some advanced subtypes of monsters were capable of speech, and that such monsters were also highly intelligent. Was that related somehow to the fact that this monster had had a name when I’d appraised him?

“So, how do we fight this thing?” I asked Layla, who had said she’d fought monsters like Loid before.

“I fought one in a dungeon once,” she replied. “But that was a joint quest between five parties, including some A-Rankers.”

A quest to hunt an orc army that spawned in a dungeon, huh? “Did you actually fight it yourself?”

Layla hesitated. “Unfortunately, no. We were mainly tasked with hunting the lesser orcs. But I watched the others fight it… I saw enough to know that I really don’t want to fight one myself.”

So she’d only been in the area; she didn’t really have experience

fighting one. *Maybe this really is a hopeless situation?* I thought. “Do the two of us stand a chance against him?” I asked out loud.

Layla paused again. “I’m afraid not.”

It was more serious than I’d thought, then. I stole a glance at Layla and saw that she seemed to be coming to terms with the grim fate that lay in store. *Why did she stay, then? To hold him off and save the rest of the party?* Maybe to let them get word out about the orc lord’s presence as well… This thing would be a menace if it was allowed to run free.

An unimaginably powerful enemy, then. This would be a new kind of challenge.

“You done talking? Then I’m gonna get killing!” Loid bared his fangs and slowly started to approach us—one step, then another. *A confident stride?* But even though he was only walking, he left no visible openings for me to mount an attack.

As Loid stepped closer, my gaze fell on the weapon he was carrying. It was a huge blade, about as long as Hikari was tall, and thirty centimeters wide. A normal adventurer would need two hands to wield it, yet he carried it in one.

I switched gears quickly. *Don’t act like you’re fighting an orc. Act like you’re fighting a human.* Then I ran forward and slashed.

Obviously this wasn’t just a straightforward attack. I added in a few feints and swung my sword with different levels of strength. Loid deflected each one easily, though—as easily as I would bat aside a paper ball. Normally I’d try to coordinate with Layla, but she’d seemed a little paralyzed, so I was partly trying to buy time for her while also seeing how effective I could be against him.

But now that I was in the fight, I found that just crossing blades with him made my arms hurt. I could practically feel my strength draining away; I’d end up physically exhausted in no time at this rate. Meanwhile, Loid hadn’t moved an inch from where he’d been standing.

“Boring, boring, boring, boring!” Loid cried with escalating hostility, then began dealing out strikes of his own. His power grew with each slash, causing an ache in my hands that gave in to numbness every time I blocked. With him pressing the attack, I had to focus so hard on defense that I couldn’t even think about mounting a counter. I could barely feel my own sword in my hands.

Just then, Loid raised his blade high, then swung the lethal implement down at me. Fortunately, the exaggerated gesture at least gave me time to dodge. I made a split-second decision not to parry and dove out of the way instead. The wind kicked up by the slash sent a chill up my spine, and the blade sent a tremor through the cave when it struck the ground.

Are you serious? I thought desperately. *Just how strong* is *this thing?* Moreover, even though striking the ground that hard should have hit him with a powerful recoil, Loid seemed completely unfazed. It was as if he hadn't felt anything at all.

"Y-You can't fight it alone. I'll join you." Layla spoke confidently, but her voice was still trembling. She knew our opponent's strength even better than I did, and she had more experience too. She must surely have thought it was a hopeless fight. And maybe it was, but…

Nevertheless, Layla steeled up her courage and walked up to stand beside me. She seemed ready to do what she needed to do.

Since Loid understood human speech, we couldn't strategize in front of him, but just having Layla there would give me a little more leeway. It freed me up to do a lot of things I wouldn't be able to do on my own.

As I thought that over, I focused my mana and got a spell ready. It was time to see how well the two of us together could resist this monster.

"Let's play," Loid said. Even the prospect of facing two of us at once didn't affect the confidence on the orc lord's face. In fact, his eyes seemed to gleam brighter, as if he were relishing the fact.

Layla struck first. I thought her swordplay was a little faster than mine—no, in terms of pure speed, I was faster, but the care and control she exercised over each strike made it seem otherwise. Loid must have sensed that, too, because I felt like he had to concentrate a bit more against her than he had when he'd fought me.

It was a difference enabled by her superior experience and training. That said, our weapons might have played a role in it as well. The reason he was more on guard around her…could it have been that he saw the mithril weapon as a threat?

But I wasn't about to be so easily dismissed. I sliced at Loid, timing my attacks to the gaps between Layla's so that I didn't get

in her way. Of course, I tried to keep my timing randomized as well. I was working hard to keep things unpredictable while also not giving Loid an opening to attack.

"Interesting. But it's not enough. It's far, far from enough..." the orc growled.

A warning so nice he said it twice? That was, embarrassingly, the first thought that sprang to mind, just as the speed of Loid's swordplay suddenly increased. This wasn't good—if he could keep up with our speed on top of his superior strength, we'd be at a decisive disadvantage.

My timed attacks had successfully kept him in check before, but that wouldn't work anymore. He forced Layla back little by little, until a sudden hard strike knocked her backward and off her balance.

I attacked again to keep Loid from striking her while she was vulnerable, but he effortlessly parried my attempt and knocked me back. He then readied his sword to swing at Layla, who moved to block the strike from her off-balance position.

I immediately sprang forward again, slicing at Loid, to insert myself in front of Layla. I didn't bother with feints this time—it was a straightforward charge.

Immediately sensing my charge, Loid turned, readied his sword, and swung at me contemptuously. Was it a trap? Was I gonna get cut in two?

No—that was when I unleashed the Fire Arrow I'd prepared in advance, right into his face, at close range.

Loid blocked it with a skillful flick of his sword. I could barely believe it. But my attack wasn't over yet—I used Sword Slash to slice at him. This one struck Loid in the arm, but it felt like my sword had hit steel. As for damage...basically nothing, except drawing a little blood?

Still, Loid seemed angry about being injured at all. He dropped all his previous composure and lashed out with his next attack in pure rage.

The strike was a sharp one. I swung my sword up to counter his downswing, and his sword hit mine with the most force I'd felt so far.

I'll be crushed at this rate. I gritted my teeth and pushed back as hard as I could.

Suddenly, the pressure against my arms faded. I looked over and saw an expression of surprise on Loid's face, then turned my eyes down.

The mithril blade was sticking out of his stomach. Layla had run him through in the moment when he'd surrendered to his emotions and left himself open.

"Y-You...!" Loid screamed the word.

He employed no technique this time, just a single swing with all his might. The flat of the sword struck Layla's body. Had it been the blade, she would have been dead for sure.

Layla released the sword just in the nick of time to leap back and dull the impact of the strike, but even then, Loid's strength was incredible. She went flying, hit the ground, rolled for a while, stopped, then tried to look up, but her eyes seemed unfocused. She must have been knocked into near unconsciousness.

Seemingly furious that he'd failed to finish her off, Loid began striding after Layla, ready to do just that this time. I used throwing knives and slashes from my sword to try to harry him, but he brushed me off like a mosquito and kept going. Even that light swipe from his sword threw me a fair distance back, leaving me even farther away than before.

In Loid's rage, he seemed to have forgotten I existed; his eyes were fixed entirely on Layla. She seemed to have realized that as well. Layla struggled desperately to stand, but her body seemed to defy her will, and even using her arms to help her, she couldn't hold herself up and collapsed again.

Seeing that, Loid slowed the pace of his approach, perhaps hoping to instill her with as much despair as possible—to terrify her in exchange for humiliating him. Seeing that, I began running toward Layla instead of trying another pointless attack.

Closer. Closer. Closer... Little by little, we both approached Layla.

Loid got there first. Seeing that she still couldn't stand, he looked down at her, snarled, then raised his sword, still moving slowly and drawing out every moment in order to inspire more fear. Then, perhaps intending to torture her rather than finish her with one blow, he brought the flat of the sword down on her.

I leaped in, hoping to pull Layla out of the way. But I couldn't fully get away, and the tip of the sword made contact with my back. Pain rushed through my body as if I'd been torn apart. If it

hadn’t been the flat of the sword, it would’ve cut me in half, and he also seemed to be holding back so he wouldn’t finish her off in one blow—in other words, I’d gotten lucky.

I looked down at Layla in my arms and saw her moaning in pain. The sight brought anger toward Loid welling up inside me. *You’ll pay for taunting her like this. You’ll pay for mocking her like this!*

At the same time, I felt angry at myself. I’d actually thought I could pull my punches against a beast like this. I’d been a fool.

I pulled my gun out of my Item Box. I wasn’t really a swordsman. I could use a sword, but a lot of my capability there came from my skills. I couldn’t beat a trained warrior in terms of proficiency and experience. If anything, I was a jack of all trades. I had to make up for my lack of real skill by using all the resources at my disposal.

I gripped my gun and set my eyes on Loid. The main question was just whether or not the bullets would penetrate that thick hide. *Should I aim for his eyes or his mouth instead?* I had my skill modifier, so a called shot like that was possible, but since he was capable of deflecting spells with his sword, too much caution on my part might lead to him blocking it. At the same time, I needed a plan B if the gun didn’t work. Maybe I should combine it with spellcasting?

Suddenly, the mithril sword caught my eye. It was still sticking out of his stomach, untouched. He’d had plenty of chances to pull it out, so why hadn’t he done it? I set my Parallel Thinking skill to the task as I slowly approached Loid.

The orc lord seemed to have regained his cool, because he didn’t rush out with another emotional attack. *That’ll make this tougher.* I kept creeping closer, staying on my guard. The sword in my hand was just a decoy. I wouldn’t use it to attack. Ideally I’d take a shot at him first and just see how much damage the gun could really do. At the same time, hitting him with the first shot might put him on guard for a second. *I should try to finish him off with the first, then.*

Racked with indecision, I failed to mount an actual attack. But Loid wasn’t going to let the stalemate stand. He must have decided my passive stance was a way of buying time—especially since Layla was gradually recovering behind me.

All of a sudden, Loid began his attacks. I dodged and deflected,

being as careful as I could not to get drawn into a full-on clash. Especially since I was one-handed now, there was no way I could meaningfully block one of his blows.

I dodged a full-force swing, acquired a momentary opening, drew my gun, and pulled the trigger. I fired two quick shots, aimed at his center mass and the hand holding his weapon.

The first shot bounced off his weapon, but the second one landed. It didn't come out the other end, but Loid still grimaced in pain. The bullet must have pierced his skin but stopped inside his body; either his muscles were tougher than his skin, or the bullet lacked the necessary momentum to go all the way through. Still, being able to deal damage at all was a promising sign.

Loid moved backward for the first time, putting space between us. "What...is that?"

Clearly, the gun was an unusual weapon in this world. I didn't know how many otherworlders had been called here in the past, so I'd thought someone might have told him about it. *No,* I told myself. *It would be strange for monsters to know about human things anyway, despite what his ability to speak might indicate.*

But...watching Loid now got me thinking once more. Why didn't he remove the sword sticking out of his gut? Was he trying to prevent it from ending up back in his opponent's hands, or to avoid the blood loss that would come from removing it? It was such a surreal, wrong-feeling sight. Yet somehow, the orc lord seemed completely unbothered by it.

"What would it matter if I told you? You're going to die here anyway," I taunted him, brandishing the gun.

Loid ground his teeth in frustration—no, in caution for the weapon that could actually hurt him...

"All right. Let's finish this," I said, trying to keep his attention on me. My goal was simple: Do whatever it took to hit him with a bullet. Normally I'd want to keep far away, but instead I brought my long-distance weapon in close to pull the trigger. Obviously, I had to stay out of Loid's attack range, though.

This was the fourth gun I'd made, so while it was more durable than the previous ones—and had plenty of spare clips for ammo—it could break if I used it for too long. I had to make sure every shot counted.

I harried him with gunshots, then drew back. If Loid retreated,

I'd charge him and pile more shots on. I hit him again and again, past the point where any human would have keeled over, but Loid stayed upright. A major part of this seemed to be that somehow—instinctively, perhaps—he was avoiding shots that would deal lethal damage. But given that his wounds were bleeding, I would now have the advantage in the long run.

The reason it was taking so long was that he'd easily dodge if I aimed for his head at close range. It seemed my Throwing/Shooting skill wasn't doing its job. Soon, though, a new wrench entered into the gears of my current strategy.

Are his wounds healing?

Loid's wounds had stopped bleeding over time, and in fact, the bullet holes seemed to be healing over. *Does he have a skill similar to my Boost Recovery? Or is it a race-specific attribute?* If that were the case, he could just pull out the mithril sword, but he'd never shown any desire to do so.

I had learned one thing, though—I needed a new plan. I couldn't count on him slowing down from blood loss. I had to kill him outright.

I emptied the chamber and reloaded. I was going to use a function only available on this, my fourth attempt at making a gun—the full automatic system. Using it would definitely destroy the gun, but it should deal far more damage than firing one shot at a time.

I steeled myself and ran at Loid. He met me with his sword, but I fired a shot to hinder his attack. Then I moved in close and fired a two-round burst at his weapon hand to knock the sword away, as well as a Fire Arrow to keep him off-balance. This attack did its job, and I didn't miss my moment. I let loose on full automatic, aiming right at his chest—the place I assumed his magistone would be.

Gunfire echoed throughout the cave. The bullets hit Loid in the chest and pushed his body back. But he seemed to realize what I was doing and entered a defensive stance, snapping his weapon hand back into position and using the flat of his blade as a shield.

I almost stopped firing, but I forced myself to keep going instead. The heat in my palm was telling me that if I stopped now, this gun would never fire again. The bullets collided with his sword, forged a crack, then broke through.

The sword snapped in half and Loid's chest was exposed, but

the bullets had stopped. I'd run out, and the gun was broken. *I guess I got lucky that it didn't explode?*

Loid, seeing that my attacks had ended, let out a howl of joy mixed with a war cry and lifted his broken sword high. He was about to bring it down, but it stopped in midair.

I'd used the shield from my dimension spell, Barrier, which I'd learned when my level got high enough, to hold his arms in place. Looking confused, Loid strained against the invisible restraints. He was incredibly strong, and I knew it couldn't last long. But with that moment freed up, I could take a step forward.

My target was the mithril sword—my plan B if the gun didn't work out. I grabbed it and infused it with mana. It hadn't budged once despite all of Loid's movement, but channeling mana into it let me push it in further, smoothly.

Loid cried out and began straining more violently against my barrier. At last, it shattered with an audible *ping*. Loid brought his arms down, face twisted in rage. I couldn't avoid it, so instead I took a half step forward and pressed myself against Loid. I was going to get hurt, but that was unavoidable. I just wanted to stay close enough to reduce the momentum of his swings. He probably couldn't actually use his sword on me when I was this close either.

I felt pain race through my body, but it was all just punches. And because I was so close, he couldn't focus too much power into them, though they definitely did still hurt. I tried to swing the sword to the side while it was infused with mana, but I couldn't. It moved a little, but it felt like it was hitting something hard and wouldn't budge any further.

I couldn't beat Loid like this. I thought for a moment about what to do, then remembered the lifestyle spell, Ignite. I changed the kind of mana I was channeling.

His skin is tough. His muscles are tough. Blades and impact don't do much damage. So instead…

I shifted the properties of my mana to fire. "Burn," I intoned, imagining roast orc. For an instant, the image of Hikari pouting at me ran through my mind, but I dismissed it. I channeled fire into the sword to burn Loid from the inside out.

The orc's resistance grew more fierce. I didn't feel the individual blows anymore; it was like my body was just a single mass of pain. His arms pounded my body, slapped at my crown. The impacts

knocked my head around and left me dizzy. I thought about using my barrier again to reduce the pain, but I abandoned that idea.

Instead, I gritted my teeth and channeled in more mana. This was a battle of endurance. I was burning HP from the hits and MP from the mana channeling. I could feel my MP draining away and my body going limp at the same time. That listless feeling was probably the result of my mana running out.

That instant, something welled up inside me.

It felt like the mana was being forced out of my body, and then I seemed to be wreathed with holy power. I felt like Loid's movements were gradually weakening, but the impacts against me were still there. Then I lost all sensation. My consciousness sank into darkness. I lacked the strength to hold myself up.

I felt my body topple over, and then the whole world went black.



◇◇◇

There was a feeling of floating, and my consciousness returned. I opened my eyes and saw Layla in front of me. Her usual steely determination was gone, replaced by an expression racked with concern.

Our eyes met, and a deep blush suddenly filled her cheeks. I wasn't sure what it was, but I felt something soft against my head. Given the position of my body…

Might be a dream. Let's enjoy it. I closed my eyes and relaxed into it. Then suddenly, I was shaken and forced awake.

"Are you all right?" came her voice, trembling with fear.

Guess it's not a dream after all. Let's not do anything foolish, then. "Yeah, what happened next?" I asked, trying obediently to sit up instead, but pain shot through my body in response.

I looked at my stats and saw my HP in the danger zone—though my MP had recovered quite a lot for some reason. My SP was also low, but it seemed to be ticking steadily back up thanks to Boost Recovery.

"We defeated the orc lord." Layla's face was contorted in pain. It looked like her hands were burned.

"Your hands…"

"A badge of honor," she replied.

I appraised Layla and saw that her level had gone up by ten. Maybe that meant she'd struck the finishing blow? She must have used the mithril sword to do it, which explained why her hands were burned.

She explained what had happened after I blacked out. She had indeed slain the orc lord. While Loid was in a state of half-consciousness, she'd pulled the sword out of him and lopped off his head with it.

"Th-That aside," she continued, "I was surprised… I thought you wore the mask because of an injury, b-but…you look…f-fine."

What was she talking about? The way she stammered was cute, though…

Wait, huh? My mask? I put a hand to my face and found the mask was gone. It must have come off when Loid had hit me!

"A-And what was that sparkling flame that suddenly changed

from red to white? It had an almost holy aura to it…"

A white flame? A holy aura? What's she talking about? "I was pretty out of it at the time, so I don't know what you mean about a white flame," I said aloud. "And…I feel like my dark hair and eyes make me stand out, so I'd appreciate it if you kept the mask thing between us." It was the best excuse I could come up with.

"I guess they do… Oh, but Hikari's hair and eyes are the same color. Are you related? Th-That explains why you were so comfortable together in bed, then…"

Hikari's hair and eyes were the same color as mine? *Huh? Now that I think about it, how many people have I met here with dark hair and dark eyes?* Except for the otherworlders who'd been summoned with me, Hikari was the only one I could think of. *Just a coincidence?* I wondered.

"We're not related," I explained. "I just took her in because she didn't have anyone else. Anyway…I'd appreciate it if you didn't ask any more questions about my mask," I said, then thanked her and picked myself up.

The mask was lying on the ground next to Loid's body, and his severed head lay nearby. Its face was heavily burned, contorted into a monstrous expression. It was a sickening sight.

I picked up my mask and put it on. I should have felt relieved, but I had bigger things to focus on… The mithril sword was there, too, still radiating heat. I picked it up, wondering if it might burn me as well, but though it felt a bit warm, I didn't feel any pain.

Because it's my own mana, maybe? Still, Layla wouldn't be able to use it like this. I channeled more mana into it, imagining it cooling down as I did. *That should do it.* I appraised it on a whim and saw that it was now labeled "Mithril Sword Lv. 2."

Level 2? Gonna pretend I never saw that…

"Don't push yourself too hard," Layla said. "I really thought I'd lost you for a minute there…"

"Really? Does that mean you nursed me back to health?"

At this, Layla turned a bit pink. I wondered why.

"It's all right," I assured her. "Oh, do you have any more of those potions?"

"Yes, I haven't used them all yet," she replied.

There were only…five potions left in her pouch, all of poor quality. I took one out and poured it over her hands, which healed

the burn. “How do you feel now?” I asked.

“I-I’m fine. Thank you.”

I handed the mithril sword back to Layla. She took it nervously, probably remembering the burns.

“So, what should we do with the orc?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Do we take it back with us?”

“Will it fit in your bag of holding? I left my pouch with Yor.”

“I’ve got room, yeah.” I walked up to the orc lord and put it in my bag of holding…or rather, my Item Box. Hikari would probably be overjoyed, but I’d really have to consider how to split it. It seemed like orc meat fetched a pretty high price.

I already had twenty-one bodies in there, but I could still fit more since I’d handed out so many potions to the others.

Ciel, are you okay? While I was storing the orc body, I realized that Ciel wasn’t there. I’d thought she’d come to me first thing after the battle was over, but I didn’t see her anywhere nearby. I looked around again, but there was still no sign of her.

“Let’s head back, then,” Layla said. “I’m worried about Casey and the others.”

“Wait a minute. I want to check the back.” I pointed deeper into the cave, down the passage Loid had come from. I was worried about Ciel, but I had to check there first. Besides, thanks to our contract, Ciel could always find me if she had to.

I thought back to the moment we made that contract. Maybe I’d survived back there because Ciel had helped me out? But doing so had used all her power, so she couldn’t maintain her current form? But that was a chilling thought, so I decided to focus on checking the back first.

Detect Presence picked up two human readings, although they were faint.

“That’s right. You said there were two more here,” Layla said as she walked up to join me.

We walked along in silence. I’d never been a great talker. It felt awkward. Layla was fidgeting too. I opened my mouth to say something but thought better of it and closed it. *Bet I look like kind of a creep.*

The awkwardness lasted until we reached our destination, but what we saw when we arrived blew away all such thoughts.

The scene before us was a gruesome sight, decked with crimson blood. I gasped and couldn't find words right away.

"A-Are you all right?" Layla called out, snapping out of her shock before I did. I then shook off my initial surprise to follow her.

Two women lay there, their faces pale, struggling even to breathe. Ciel was there too. She sat between them, eyes clenched shut and trembling. Was it just my imagination, or was she emitting light?

Ciel... I thought to her in a whisper, attracting her attention for the first time since my arrival. She quickly flew up to me, then got around behind me, pushing against my back as if to hurry me on. I could tell she wanted me to act fast.

Seeing them up close, I could tell the women's bodies were covered in blood and bruises. One of them even had a crushed eye, the result of a violent attack of some kind. Layla had already walked up to them, but she stopped when she saw this, hesitant to reach out.

"Layla, let me through." I took the potions out of my Item Box and applied one to each of the women, but it barely had any effect. It healed some of their wounds, but only slightly. It didn't change their overall condition.

[**Name:** Frederika / **Job:** Villager / **Level:** 2 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** Weak/Critical]

I had two potions left, but they were the same quality, so using them probably wouldn't change much.

A sad expression appeared on Ciel's face. Her eyes seemed to ask me, *Isn't there anything we can do?* I searched through my Item Box but turned up no more potions and no herbs to make any new ones. I was about to tell Ciel that it was hopeless, when I remembered—

There was something else I could try. Ironically, because nobody here used magic, I had plenty of mana potions left. I drank one down and replenished my MP to full.

"Heal." Frederika's wounds began to close when I spoke the words, but one go wouldn't fully restore her health. My level was low, which had probably contributed to the lack of effectiveness.

I continued to cast Heal, alternating between the two women. I

ended up having to drink two more mana potions, but I managed to fully close the wounds on their bodies. Still, I could tell with Appraisal that I wasn't finished yet. The women were still unconscious.

[**Name:** Frederika / **Job:** Villager / **Level:** 2 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** Anemic/Critical]

It looked like they were low on blood. If the blood splattered around the room all belonged to these women, then they probably had lost a lot. I'd patched their wounds with Heal, but I couldn't restore their lost blood that way.

What should I do? I looked at Layla and saw that she had her hands clasped in prayer and tears streaming from her eyes. Their breathing didn't stabilize, and it grew gradually weaker.

In response, I…

I took a long pause, and then…

I called up my Alchemy list.

I scanned it, searching for something, and… *There it is!*

I pulled two of the orc bodies from my Item Box. Layla was surprised by my sudden action and seemed about to say something, but I ignored her and got to work. I cut into their bodies and retrieved their magistones.

The materials I needed were magistones, blood, and potions. My potions were low quality, but the orc magistones were high quality, so it would likely balance out. I wasn't sure if our blood types were compatible, but this was supposed to be a universal hematopoietic, meaning it would probably be fine regardless. I didn't know the blood types of people in this world anyway.

I put a few drops of my own blood on the magistones, infused them with mana, and combined them with the potions.

"Have her drink this." I handed one bottle to Layla while I held up Frederika and poured the contents of the other one into her mouth. I did it slowly, careful to make sure that she didn't choke on it.

By the time the hematopoietic in the bottle was half gone, some color had returned to her face. I kept going, little by little, until I'd managed to get her to drink it all. By that time, Layla had finished with the other girl as well.

I checked with Appraisal and saw the result:

[**Name:** Frederika / **Job:** Villager / **Level:** 2 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

That meant she should pull through.

“Wh-What was that just now?!” Layla shouted.

Hey, keep it down! The girls are trying to rest! “What was what?” I asked innocently.

“Well, the way you made that potion-like thing… Not to mention your magic too! You can use wind magic, earth magic, *and* holy magic? Just who are you?!”

“I’m a traveling merchant,” I said after a pause. “As for why I know all that magic, I just happened to find a bunch of scrolls and learned them for self-defense purposes… Anyway, we should get out of here. Hikari and the others will get worried.” I dodged Layla’s questions and changed the subject. I couldn’t afford to have her probing too deeply.

“Th-That’s right! I’m worried the orcs might already be on the way back…” Suddenly reminded how urgent the situation was, Layla began to panic. I’d successfully distracted her for the moment, it seemed.

“We should get the girls outside, at least. Can we wake them?”

“Probably not. They’re fast asleep,” Layla said.

“We’ll carry them, then. I wish we could take it slow, but there’s no telling when the other orc party might return.”

Layla nodded in response. We each took one girl on our back and headed out of the cave. I didn’t see any orcs on the automap once we got out, and the other team seemed to be intact.

“Can you seal the cave, Sora?” Layla asked me. It would cut the other orcs off from their home base, and since monsters had a tendency to make their lairs in caves, it could be dangerous to leave it standing in any case.

I carefully used my earth magic to bring down the entrance. From there, we walked in the direction of the village for about an hour.

“Are you all right?” I asked Layla.

“I-I’m fine,” she responded.

She certainly didn’t look fine. Carrying a person on your back

was exhausting even for someone at the peak of health. Plus, walking through a forest was trying at the best of times, and without Talia and Luilui to act as scouts, Layla seemed constantly on the alert. I used my search magic and told her we were safe, but I couldn't fully put her fears to rest. She was probably still rattled from the battle as well.

"Let's stop here for today. You're tired too, right? I don't want you pushing yourself too hard and collapsing." I used my earth magic to even out the ground and make us a campsite.

Layla stared at me skeptically, but I ignored her.

I spread out a tarp and laid the girls down on it, then made a simple soup in a pot over the fire I'd already set. Well, actually, I was just heating up a soup I'd prepared beforehand. "We really should eat something. Then we can rest and get walking again later."

"All right, but we need to take turns keeping watch." Layla had probably reached the limits of her stamina, so she'd done as I'd told her, but she was most likely nervous about possible monster attacks here in the forest.

"I've got a monster ward, so I'll use that. You can rest for now." I was still tired from the battle, too, and I'd lost a lot of blood, so I just wanted to get some food in me and rest for tomorrow. Ironically, I was fine as long as I was walking; it was only when we sat down to rest that I felt tired.

I decided to activate Parallel Thinking when it was time to sleep, but first, I channeled some mana into my automap to expand my viewing area. *Ah, I can see the orcs.* They seemed to be closer to the wagons than the last time I'd looked. They hadn't made contact yet, but they were probably planning on a nighttime ambush.

Hikari's group wasn't moving at the moment either. It was probably slow going with so many people.

While I was thinking that over, I heard the sounds of sleep from nearby. Layla had been on such high alert all this time that she went out like a light the moment she'd relaxed.

After checking that everyone was asleep, I put some food in a bowl. I was hoping the noise wouldn't wake Layla up, and it seemed like I didn't have to worry about that.

Ciel looked around her to check for watching eyes, then dove face-first into the dish. *Was she that hungry?* I wondered, before

reminding myself that spirits didn't actually get hungry. I watched for a while with a shake of my head, but I couldn't deny that seeing Ciel look so satisfied at the end brought a smile to my face.

I decided to check my skills before sleeping.

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Learned Skills
[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 3]
[Enhance Physique Lv. 9] [Regulate Mana Lv. MAX]
[Lifestyle Spells Lv. 9] [Detect Presence Lv. MAX]
[Sword Arts Lv. 9] [Dimension Spells Lv. 8]
[Parallel Thinking Lv. 7] [Boost Recovery Lv. 8]
[Hide Presence Lv. 5] [Alchemy Lv. 8] [Cooking Lv.
8] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 6] [Fire Spells Lv. 5]
[Water Spells Lv. 4] [Telepathy Lv. 6] [Night Vision
Lv. 7] [Sword Tech Lv. 3] [Resist Status Effects Lv.
4] [Earth Spells Lv. 4] [Wind Spells Lv. 2]
[Disguise Lv. 3]

Advanced Skills
[Appraise Person Lv. 5] [Detect Mana Lv. 4]

Contract Skills
[Holy Spells Lv. 3]
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I'd maxed out Regulate Mana. I'd had a lot of chances to use spells lately, after all. I'd been hoping it might unlock an advanced skill, but I didn't see one available. *Too bad.*

Several other skills had gone up, but Holy Spells had advanced the most. All my uses of Heal had skyrocketed it two levels at once. Not that I was about to complain about that.

After that, I waited for Layla to wake up, then got some rest of my own. The other girls would probably be shocked if they woke up to see an unfamiliar man nearby, so when it was time for me to sleep I wrapped myself up in a sheet a little ways away from the rest.

◇Layla's Perspective

Just who is he?

I'd met a lot of people in my time, but never someone so multitalented as he. He'd made it clear he was sensitive about it, of course, so I hadn't probed any further.

It's not as if I don't have a few things to hide, things I don't feel obligated to tell others about. Everyone has a secret or two.

But why am I so curious about him?

I looked at Sora, wrapped in his sheet, and thought back on everything that had happened.

First he uses a kind of magic we never learned about in school while we're in Tenns Village, then he uses wind magic in the cave as a kind of search spell? It's like he's self-taught, but is that even possible?

And it wasn't just magic. He was also proficient with a sword. I'd never known a merchant who could fight so well. He seemed more like an adventurer.

And then, during the battle with the orc lord…I couldn't move right away, but Sora could.

He used a weapon I'd never seen before too. He'd said it was a magic item handed down in his family, but it broke when he was using it. It was a bit like a…tube? One that exploded from the tip…

And what was that at the end?

Sora had caused flames to shoot from the mithril sword. And although they were red at first, they'd then turned white. In addition to the color, there was an almost holy aura to it.

In the end, both Sora and the orc lord had fallen, but the orc lord had still been alive, and I'd used the mithril sword to land the killing blow. But when I'd first grabbed the hilt, I'd wanted to cry out from the pain.

Sora was unconscious at that point, so I'd quickly used a healing potion on him, but it didn't seem to be what he needed. I then decided to give him a mana potion as well, but…

Well, really, I didn't have a choice. It didn't count, anyway. I just did it to help him, really…

Unlike healing potions, mana potions needed to be taken internally. But I couldn't get him to drink it while he was unconscious, so…I'd been forced to use a kiss instead.

Just thinking back on it made my body feel hot all over, so I pushed it aside.

And yet, even after that, Sora's deeds continued to defy my

understanding. One minute he was using the holy spell Heal to get the girls off of death's door, then the next minute he used a different kind of spell... It looked a bit like alchemy.

Just who are you? I wanted to ask. But... "Ahh, stop that, now," I whispered to myself.

I'm supposed to be thinking about Talia, Yor, and the others.

Why is Sora the only one I'm thinking about?

What's happening to me?

◇Yor's Perspective

It was morning.

We made it safely to morning, then.

Luilui had said that the other orc group was heading toward the caravan, so I'd thought that we probably would make it through the night. Elder sister had estimated that the most dangerous time would be coming up today, from about noon to sunset.

Tricia had also awakened, so our first action was to get an early start on preparing breakfast together. After all, if we left it to the men, who knew what we might end up with? Though it was actually Tricia who did most of the cooking, while I just helped. The women of the village also lent a hand, which made the task quite easy.

After making breakfast, we split into groups to stand watch and reinforce the wall around the inn, then got to work. We took shifts, since the most important thing was that we get enough rest.

The Rank B adventurer, Locke, doled out efficient instructions and had everyone working quickly. Nobody complained. Devoting oneself to a task was a good way to forget one's fears.

It really might have been safer to head back to the city we'd come from last, but our party members' choice to rescue the kidnapped people had made that impossible. I was sure the thought of doing anything else had never even entered elder sister's mind.

Some of the people from the other transport wagon had been against it, forcefully arguing that they should go back to the city. But as elder sister and Locke had made the choice to stay, they seemed to have resigned themselves to their fate.

Even when some had complained, Locke had simply told them

they'd have to go back on their own, and that had silenced them.

Today, the skies were clear, the weather was fair, and the only sound that could be heard was the hammering of wood. A truly peaceful day. I hoped it would remain that way.

My hopes were shattered just before noon.

The current watchman, Elke, let out a cry that led Ginnie, a member of Locke's party, to rush to the lookout point. I paused in the middle of preparing lunch to move to the second floor and look out the window.

Is that a cloud of dust? I squinted a bit and made out a wagon rushing our way, its canvas in tatters. *Ah, and now it's stopped…*

The bed had tipped over. It looked like one of the wheels had broken. People crowded out of the wagon bed and began to run. *Ah, one of them tripped and fell…* But nobody helped them.

The rest were running straight for the village. As they came near the inn, they seemed surprised to see the new wall there. Then, a scream rang out.

I looked toward the sound of the scream, and saw that it was coming from the person who had tripped and fallen before. He was still lying there. *What is he looking at?* I followed his gaze and saw a dark mass, growing larger as it came closer—a cluster of orcs.

The group that had run ahead also saw this and panicked.

What should I do? Should I call out? If we didn't help them, they ran away, and the orcs kept chasing them, the rest of us might be spared. *I don't know. What should I do?* I asked myself again.

Inside of the inn, everything was quiet. No one made a sound. It was as if we were all holding our breath.

One member of the group started running away, heading out of the village, and the others ran after them. They were just about to get clear when someone noticed us inside. They then changed course back toward the inn.

The group looked up at the building surrounded by the wall, came up to the one gate entrance, and began pounding on it. The dull thumping echoed through the inn, accompanied by shouted words that I couldn't quite make out.

Locke climbed up a ladder by the wall to speak to the people outside of the gate. I could hear them shouting abuse back at him.

It's almost impressive, in a way. Do they even understand the position they're in?

Locke then called to Isaac and Ginnie, who ran up to him. It looked like they were going to open the gate. Once they had, the people outside shoved at each other, each fighting to be the first one in. I understood that they were desperate, but it was still an awful way to act. Some of them continued to berate Locke for not letting them in earlier.

Once they were all inside, the gate was closed once more. Fifteen people had now joined us. Isaac and Ginnie immediately restrained the two men who had hurled abuse at them, but they resisted. *Ah, Locke hit one.* The sound of the strike was so loud I could hear it even from here.

Locke was saying something now, and the others were listening obediently. The two rowdier figures had been tied up and left to lie just inside the gate, while Ginnie took the remaining thirteen into the building.

A scream rang out.

It was then that I remembered the group of orcs from before. I looked and saw that they'd caught up to the person who'd fallen earlier, and now they were beating him—absolutely thrashing him, in fact.

At last, the orcs stopped and the person fell still. The sight filled me with fear. I felt paralyzed by a sense of indescribable unease.

Why? You've fought orcs in dungeons plenty of times before, I reminded myself. *You can surely handle these.* And yet, the fear remained.

Why? I asked myself again. *That's right. Elder sister isn't here. Our comrades aren't here. That's why I'm afraid.*

Why didn't I go with elder sister? I asked myself. But I knew why—because she was worried about the people here in the village. Locke, Isaac, and Ginnie couldn't cast spells, so that was why I'd remained. She'd asked Tricia to stay here for the same reason, in case there were any injuries.

You simply have to trust that they will return, and protect this village with your life until then.

I thought those words, in part, to convince myself. And then...

“Fire Arrow.” I unleashed a spell at the orcs heading our way.

◇Luilui’s Perspective

“What happened?” A little while after we made it out of the forest, Hikari suddenly stopped.

“Hear something,” she said.

I couldn’t hear anything myself. I looked over at Talia, who shook her head. But I didn’t think Hikari would say that for no reason.

I told Casey I’d use my Attunement skill, then closed my eyes and searched. I was hoping I might find a bird in the area, but there was no guarantee of it.

Ah, there it is.

I attuned my consciousness to the bird’s, and a moment later, I found myself seeing through its eyes. By further deepening the link between us, I then took over the bird’s will. Now I could move it where I wanted it to be.

The main issue with Attunement was that I was defenseless while I was using it, and the farther away I was from the target, the more mana it consumed to maintain. If it got too far out of my effective range, it would drain all my mana at once. If I ran out of mana, I’d then be forced out of tune, and it would make me a bit sick in the process.

I flew the bird to the village, where I heard the sound of raucous voices. *It’s…orcs?*

They were fighting orcs—five of them. Yor was working hard with her magic attacks but not quite managing to slay any of them. Locke and his party were focused on defense rather than trying to force a kill. They were probably hoping they could just drive them off.

When I looked closer at the inn, I could see that the treacherous merchants were there too. It was easy to infer what had happened—they’d been attacked on the road, escaped back to the village, and brought the orcs with them.

Unfortunately, we wouldn’t be able to help them. We could’ve done it if it were just the four of us, but the presence of the village women we’d saved made that impossible.

I checked to see if there were any other orcs nearby and found

another group of them just outside of the village. I looked farther down the main road and saw the remains of a wagon, with gobs of human flesh scattered around it. The sight made me nauseous, but I kept hold of my senses and managed not to vomit. It seemed they had ignored the food inside the wagon to slaughter the humans instead.

We really might need to come to their aid quickly.

I severed my Attunement.

"What did you see?" Talia asked me. She sounded worried.

"They're under attack. Five orcs… I don't think their defenses will fall anytime soon, but that might change in the long run. There's another group of fifteen nearby."

They were holding up fine for now, but that was sure to get harder against a much larger group. There were a lot of ordinary civilians in the inn, and the stressful situation could easily turn into a powder keg.

"I'm going." Hikari suddenly nominated herself to go to their aid.

I was certainly in favor of someone going, but would Hikari be okay by herself?

"I'm going too," Talia said then. "Casey, Luilui, stay here. If orcs come, protect them."

I objected to this plan, though. "Casey, you go with them. I'll stand guard here. And it would probably be best if you go quickly."

Casey seemed worried about the idea of leaving me behind for a moment, but she eventually agreed. It would be a difficult task, to be sure, but between my sword and my bow, I could probably hold off any attackers. "If you beat the orcs, signal to us," I said.

"One of us will come back to let you know," Talia countered. "Better not to use a flare. It could draw attention."

I certainly wouldn't want one of the wagons heading for Tenns Village to see the beacon and turn back assuming something was wrong.

The three others checked their equipment and ran off. *They really are fast.* I was confident in my speed as well, but I couldn't compete with those two.

Casey, you give it your best too, I silently encouraged her, then whispered to no one in particular, "I hope elder sister catches up with us soon…"

This drew concerned looks from the other women, who had just been silently watching up to this point. I just had to pray that they'd gotten out safely. Maybe Sora could use his magic to seal the entrance? At the very least, it would be impossible to fight such a thing head-on.

The orc lord—it was considered a calamity-class monster. We'd encountered one in a dungeon, and just watching the others fight it had me frozen in fear. Three parties of Rank A adventurers had just barely managed to beat it. Nobody had died, but many had been wounded. Just thinking back on it revived a sense of terror in me.

I shook off my unease, picked up my bow, and looked back at the village. I was ready to deal with any orcs the moment they arrived.

A long time passed before I sensed a presence from the forest behind us. I didn't have the same search skills as Talia, but I could still sense approaching presences.

"It's...elder sister!" I cried.

Indeed, it was Elder Sister Layla who appeared out from the trees. She was followed by two young girls, with Sora bringing up the rear.

"I'm so glad you're all safe." Elder sister was smiling that familiar smile. She was happy for us. I could have said the same thing to her—I was so glad she was safe.

But...who are those two girls?

"Elder sister, those two..." I began, when one of the rescued women in my party suddenly ran up and hugged them. Tears flowed from her eyes, and she hugged them so tightly I thought she might never let go. Her shoulders heaved with silent sobs.

"We found them in the back of the cave," my elder sister said, seeming just as delighted by the sight as I was. "They were in poor shape at the time, but they've managed to regain consciousness."

I didn't realize there were more kidnapped people in the cave. No—I remembered now. When we were first running away, someone had said something about others still being there.

"Elder sister. What happened to the orc lord?" Had they been able to give it the slip after all?

"There's no need to worry. We managed to defeat it."

Er... What did she just say? Did she really just say they defeated *it?* I looked at her, and then at Sora. I couldn't imagine what might have happened.

I had even more questions now, but elder sister apparently had questions for me too. "I also don't see Talia and the others. What happened?" she asked.

Just then, something sped past me.

"Master, welcome back." Hikari had run up to Sora and thrown her arms around him.

◇◇◇

We had just met up with the escaped villagers when Hikari ran through the group and approached me at frightening speed. Ignoring all onlookers, she ran up and locked me in an embrace. The smell of blood washed over me as she did.

"So, can I assume you beat up some orcs?" I gagged.

"Yes, master. Beat them."

"I see. Well done."

I patted her on the head, and she smiled happily in response. That didn't make things any less awkward for me, of course.

I'd seen on the automap that they had engaged the orcs, so we'd moved toward them in a hurry. It looked like the battle was already over, though.

"None of that now, all right?" Layla said, pulling Hikari off me. "Now, could you please tell us more about what happened?"

"Orcs attacked the village. Went and beat them," Hikari declared proudly.

"So there are no more orcs left in the area?" she prompted her.

"No, none."

"We should proceed to the village, then. We'll rendezvous with the others and figure out our next move."

The two girls with us had already been forced to walk all this way without much rest, but they'd just have to walk a little farther. They didn't seem to mind, though; they were just as worried about the others as we were. And so we formed a single party and walked back together, with Layla in the lead and me and Hikari bringing up the rear.

Hikari looked quite pleased with herself as she walked along

beside me. She seemed to have a lot she wanted to say, but she read the mood and held off. *She's really matured, huh?*

Ciel also seemed happy that Hikari was all right, as she was flying around her merrily.

We arrived in the village before sundown.

When we reached the inn, we saw cracks in the wall I'd built, but it didn't seem to have been breached. The front gate seemed to have taken the worst of it, and I could see clear traces of the attacks against it. I'd infused it with mana to strengthen it, but it was still just made of wood, after all.

"Elder sister. You're safe?" Talia asked when we arrived.

"Talia! Yes, I'm all right. I'm sorry I worried you."

"Just glad you're not hurt. I'll open the gate. Hold on."

We passed through the gate and reentered the familiar inn. Two people lay bound on the floor in a corner, one of them dressed up in clothing that was very fine, though quite tattered now.

Enrique? I realized. His face had been so dirty that I hadn't recognized him at first.

"We've returned, Locke. I'm glad to see you're also well," Layla said.

"Yeah, and it looks like your mission was successful. I'd love to hear the whole story later. Of course, we only made it through thanks to these ladies here. They showed up and attacked the orcs from behind."

Now fully reunited, all the villagers in the inn—sweethearts, spouses, and siblings—started embracing each other. Of course it wasn't an entirely joyous occasion. There were tears of sorrow among the happy ones. Nevertheless, everyone felt grateful to still be alive.

The women were taken to rooms so they could get some rest, while the rest of us remained outside talking.

"We'll start," Locke began. "About twenty orcs attacked us. One was a general. We managed to defeat them, thanks to the ladies." They were currently exsanguinating the defeated orcs, which would help alleviate the food issues. "Oh, and about fifteen members of the other group came to join us then. We left those two on the ground there as examples to the others—of what

happens if you act like an ungrateful idiot," he snorted.

Enrique's group had apparently demanded that they save them. Pretty outrageous behavior.

"What do you think we should do with them? They really are a waste of space, so maybe we should get rid of them here and now," Locke then added, loud enough that he probably intended to be heard.

The two men immediately went pale.

"Don't," Hikari argued.

Hope entered the duo's eyes again.

She continued, "Use them as bait."

"Decoys in case of another attack, you mean?"

"Yes."

And there went the hope. Still, my automap said the wagon from Roille was getting closer, so the two men would just have to endure their treatment until then. Judging by its current distance, I calculated it should arrive the next day.

"We do have a problem, though," Layla went on. "I'm glad we managed to save the women, but we're running kind of low on space."

"Agreed," Locke said. "At least we have the orc meat to help with the food situation, but it's a long way to either city from here. I'm not sure if we should just wait for the next wagon or what."

"Waiting should be fine. There's a wagon from Roille heading our way right now," I told them.

Locke was shocked to hear that I knew that. I remembered that he hadn't known about my search skills. "They'll just have to hold out one night, then?" he mused. "No... Even if the wagon's heading for Wrent, they'll want to spend a night here, so departure will be in two days."

"Whichever way it's going, we'll need to decide what to do with them in advance. We wouldn't want to risk them trying anything. I think we should leave them tied up and just throw them into the wagon," Layla said.

When he heard this, Enrique suddenly purpled and started hurling insults at her right away. Layla immediately shut him up with a glare. There was a wide smile on her face but no mirth in her eyes whatsoever.

After that, we talked with Heil the coachman, Litt (as

representative of the merchants), and Elke (as representative of the villagers) about what to do next. Nobody had any positive feelings about Enrique, and the consensus seemed to be that we should do whatever would get him out of the village the fastest.

The final decision was to send the fifteen runaways to be turned in to the guards of whichever city the next wagon was bound for. There were even a few calls for vigilante justice, but they were shot down; city guards were kind of like police in my world, and they'd surely charge us with murder.

"Y-You won't get away with this!" Enrique spat at us with a baleful glare when Locke told him of the decision.

The people who arrived in the transport wagon the next day were shocked by the state of Tenns Village and even more surprised to learn what Enrique and his cohort had done. They didn't seem to want to have much to do with them, but they agreed to take them along to Wrent.

All in all, the people moving on immediately to Wrent would be Heil, Locke's party of three, and the group of fifteen runaways, Enrique included. The villagers were sending the runaways away partly because they didn't have enough people to keep them in line, but mostly because they just didn't want to be around them.

As the runaways were loaded into the wagon, some apologized and asked for mercy, while others simply complied, pale and trembling. They seemed to understand how awful their actions had been.

By contrast, the two bound men—Enrique and the head of his caravan's escort—stayed unrepentant to the end.

◇◇◇

The day before Locke's team would depart, I received a request.

Elke introduced me to an old man named Mahatt, who was the headman of Tenns Village. Mahatt had been in poor health, having been injured defending his wife during the original orc raid, but he was finally feeling better.

"May I ask what you wish to speak to me about?" I asked him, shifting to my obsequious merchant's tone.

"Well, we know that you built the wall around the inn, so I was

wondering if I might ask for something similar…" Mahatt said hesitantly. He then explained that he hoped I could build a proper wall around the whole village.

Although the village had been badly damaged in the raid, he apparently hoped to restore it if at all possible. The bigwigs outranking him would decide what ultimately happened to it, but as the location was an important midway point between Roille and Wrent, he seemed to think they would probably want to keep it.

Most of all, though, he seemed to doubt that the people who'd dwelled in this village all their lives would really be able to live anywhere else.

Since I would be staying a bit longer anyway, it wouldn't be impossible for me to do it, but there had actually been something else I'd wanted to focus on…

Mahatt's shoulders sank as he watched me, seemingly interpreting my reaction as an inclination to decline. "We may not have much, but we'll pay you for your efforts, of course. Is it too much to ask?"

The money he was offering definitely wasn't much, but the idea of building the wall was actually appealing on its own, since it would boost my skill proficiency. My actual concern lay elsewhere. "The truth is, I'd been hoping to gather herbs here," I admitted. "Miss Ney and the others said there was a high-quality patch in the forest nearby."

"I-I see…"

"Is anyone in the village in condition to gather herbs? I don't mind taking herbs as payment to build your wall."

Mahatt fell silent. He was probably hesitant to send his people into the forest after all the orc attacks.

"Master. No forest?" Hikari asked me.

"Not for a while, if I take this job."

"I see," Hikari said after a moment, looking a little disappointed. The forest was nature's storehouse, after all, and she'd been excited to scavenge cooking ingredients with Ciel while I was gathering herbs.

"I'll discuss it with the villagers," Mahatt told me eventually. "Let's check in again tomorrow morning."

The next morning, we watched Locke and the others leave,

then broke up into groups to embark on our various tasks. One group went into the forest, with Hikari joining those searching for cooking ingredients as planned. Part of this group would go to look for the herbs that would serve as my payment for building the wall. They were accompanied by Talia and Luilui, who'd heard the story and were worried about them.

I ended up having Yor near me while I worked on the wall. Someone had apparently told her about Mahatt's request, and she'd begged me to let her watch.

Mahatt gave me a general explanation for what he wanted, and then I got to work. Since my Regulate Mana level had gone up, I'd expected the job to go more smoothly this time, but following specific requests about the wall's height and depth would increase the difficulty as well.

My first reaction to his requests was incredulity—he was basically asking me to make him a fortress. But then, it was understandable. They had just been through a great tragedy, after all.

"Once this is done, they won't be able to call it a village anymore," I mused. I hadn't even gotten halfway through one side before I'd already run out of mana. Part of the problem was that the wall was quite thick, but I also had to infuse it with a lot of mana to harden it up, which cost even more mana.

I'd changed my job to Mage to help make the building process easier, and it had given me big bonuses to MP and mana, but it was a drop in the bucket in the end.

"It is mysterious, though," Yor said. "I wish I had your mana regulation skill."

I wasn't sure what to tell her, but I decided to ask her now about something I'd been wondering for a while. "Yor, when you cast a spell, how do you do it?"

"I say a chant and speak the name of the spell, as usual."

"Okay...so let's say you're shooting a fire arrow. Can you adjust its power?"

"Adjust its power? I don't believe so...but I guess I've never really thought about it."

"I think what I do is similar to that."

To test my theory, I cast Stone Bullet and fired it at the wall twice. I did it normally the first time, and the second time I infused

it with mana.

Yor's jaw dropped at the sight. It wasn't a flattering expression for a girl her age.

"A-Amazing. How did you do that? How can *I* do that? Does the mana consumption of each shot differ?" She immediately started peppering me with questions.

She really does become a different person when she's talking about magic, huh? "My Regulate Mana skill makes it easy, so I'm not really sure, but…can you cast lifestyle spells, Yor?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

Not really a specialty of hers, huh? "Can you call up some fire, then?" I invoked the flame I used when I cast my Ignite lifestyle spell as an example, and Yor did the same. My flame was stable, but hers was unsteady and eventually went out on its own. "Well, I got the idea, so don't worry," I told her.

Yor flushed red in embarrassment.

"But okay, I see. Take that flame just now, and try to focus on making it stronger and weaker." I showed her that I could make the flame larger or smaller and also change its heat level by infusing it with more mana. "This might be the best way to practice. I think it'll get you better at your lifestyle spells too. What do you think?"

The words were barely out of my mouth before Yor immediately started practicing. *She really does love magic, huh?*

While Yor applied herself to the task, I got back to my own work. Soon, I started thinking. Half a day had passed already, and I'd honestly established only a very short span of wall. It could take days to build the wall around the entire village at this rate.

We weren't exactly in a hurry, but I had hoped to see the Advent Festival, so we didn't have weeks to spend here. How could I speed up the process?

I looked at my stat panel and saw I had two skill points available. I'd been hoping to leave some in case I needed them, but…

I looked around the village and saw the people there hard at work, tearing down houses that were beyond repair, searching for anything salvageable… They were all working so hard just trying to survive.

In honor of their hard work, then, maybe it wouldn't be so bad

to learn a new skill just for them.

NEW
[Engineering/Construction Lv. 1]

This skill gave me knowledge of construction and engineering, and it really increased my efficiency. When I told myself I wanted to quickly make a wall, something like a set of blueprints flashed in my head. It was only there for a moment, but it clarified a lot about the best way to handle it. And, perhaps because I was planning to do the building with magic, it also told me how best to use that magic.

I'd been making the walls using earth magic, but now, instead of simply infusing them with more mana to harden them, I weaved fire magic into the process. That would also make the walls more heat-resistant. Doing things this way seemed to increase the efficiency of my mana usage, and I'd likely complete the remaining section with MP to spare.

I began to work a lot faster now, and I managed to complete one whole side by sunset.

Everyone was surprised when they saw the final result, including Mahatt. Of course, the biggest fuss was made by Yor, even though she'd been there the whole time.

"I want to learn how to do it like you, instructor."

I guess she's calling me "instructor" now...

That night, I picked up the herbs from Elke, got some mushrooms from Hikari, and slipped out of the inn to cook, saying I wanted to enjoy the night air.

"Hikari, you haven't eaten yet?"

"Yeah. Food tastes better with everyone."

It was a noble sentiment, but Ciel probably hadn't heard her, considering how her eyes were locked on those frying mushrooms.

"Ciel, you want some soup?"

Ah, now that got a response. Based on the way her eyes shone, I definitely had to make some for her. *Oh? And Hikari too?*

That day was the first in a while that we got to enjoy a leisurely meal, just the three of us.

The next day, my efficiency improved even further, and I ended up managing to build the whole wall in just two and a half days.

"Mahatt. Do you mind if I discuss something with you?"

Walking around the village the last few days had gotten me thinking about houses. Nearly four out of five houses were now unusable, with the worst damage being to the ones nearest the forest the orcs had attacked from. Incidentally, the inn had remained mostly unscathed because it was farther away from the forest.

"What is it?" Mahatt responded.

"I'm not entirely sure how possible this might be, but I'd like to try using my skill to make houses. Could you please tell me any recommendations you might have regarding their layout?"

Mahatt was too stunned to answer for a moment. It was understandable, but I was dead serious.

I was feeling pretty sure that I could make houses with my skill. When I tried calling up my magic with the idea of building a house, blueprints flashed through my mind as they'd done when I was making the wall.

The problem was that I didn't know much about the way houses looked in this world—I'd only ever stayed in inns for the most part, after all—so I was hoping Mahatt could teach me.

"Er, we don't have any way to pay you for building houses..." Mahatt began apologetically, but I told him I didn't need payment for it.

He'd already gotten me a lot of herbs, after all. Some were of better quality than others, but they'd even managed to scrounge up some mana and vigor herbs. I'd made the bad ones into potions and given a few to Mahatt. He'd been extremely apologetic about that, too, but I was still keeping the high-quality ones for myself, so it wasn't a problem for me. I wasn't even giving him all my low-quality ones anyway—I was keeping the rest to sell.

After that conversation with Mahatt, I started building houses, taking into account the villagers' opinions about what they should look like. I was nervous on the first day when people gathered around to watch me do it, but thankfully, I had no trouble building a house with magic. One by one, villagers passing by would let out a shout of surprise and have to come inside to see.

Ciel also seemed happy with the inside as she reclined on the

bed. *But we're not actually living here, okay?* I told her telepathically. I'd actually made some wooden furniture separately and produced it from the Item Box.

"This looks amazing. I'd love you to remake my house," said one of the people.

And so I continued my work, listening to the requests of each individual, and I ended up being able to build six houses a day. My construction spree would only end when the wagon from Wrent arrived and I would bid them farewell.

Chapter 3

About ten days after Locke's team left, two wagons arrived in Tenns Village.

One held a proxy for the local lord, who'd heard the news and come to check out the state of the village. He was certainly shocked by what he saw. He'd heard it was in shambles after the orc attack, but there was almost no trace of that now. Fortunately, the proxy was acquainted with Mahatt and knew what the village originally looked like, and he seemed to accept the explanation he was given.

Naturally, he still seemed to have his doubts regarding the part about making houses with magic, so I gave him a demonstration and he relented. Then he passionately tried to hire me, but I politely turned him down.

The other wagon came from the merchants' guild. This group gave an awful first impression, barking orders at us and almost treating us like criminals. Their leader was the worst of all, and the rest of the delegation seemed to find him annoying, but no one tried to stop him.

From what I heard while I was in the wagon, the leader was hopelessly self-centered, and none of the men liked him. But his father was an influential man, and he was close friends with the guild master of the merchants' guild in Wrent, so they all just had to grin and bear it.

When the lord's proxy had finished his business and we'd said our goodbyes to the villagers, we were all but ordered to join them in the merchants' guild wagon. And so Hikari and I, the members of Bloody Rose, and the merchants like Litt ended up riding with them to Wrent Village.

I was bored in the wagon with nothing to do, so I mainly talked to Litt's merchant faction. They seemed to be traveling merchants as well, and they were going around to various towns. They were currently on their way to the holy capital to sell their wares, knowing a lot of people would be attending the Advent Festival.

We arrived in Wrent three days later. The trip would've normally taken five days, but they'd prioritized speed in this case.

Upon our arrival, we were taken straight to the merchants' guild, where we got an earful from the guild master, Steit. He seemed angry about "unjust treatment" to which members of his guild had been subjected, but I didn't know what he was talking about. I asked what had happened to Locke and the others, who had come ahead of us to report about that, and they were brought to us in chains.

"What's going on?" I asked him as he walked by us. He said that he'd made his report and the merchants had arrested him on the spot. When he'd resisted, the merchants' guild guards had surrounded him, so he'd decided to wait until we arrived and have us brought here to vouch for them.

"Just what is the meaning of this?" Layla demanded with an outraged expression. "Not only have you treated Locke's party unjustly, you're effectively acting like we're criminals as well!"

"Quiet, girl. Your mistreatment of our guild members is clear. We're even filing suit with the adventurers' guild for damages. And you, there..." He looked at me and Litt's group. "You're merchants' guild members, aren't you? You'll need to pay a penalty or be expelled!"

Whew, good thing I'm holding Hikari's hand. She's utterly furious. I could feel the hostility pouring off of her in waves. Litt also showed a momentary flash of anger, but he quelled it quickly. He seemed good at suppressing his feelings.

The guild master didn't seem to notice Hikari's reaction at all, and he just kept listing off our offenses. *So this is all about Enrique?* I thought. *He must have gotten to him first...*

"They sabotaged our wagon and left without us. They stole our food as well," Layla said.

"That's right," Litt put in. "And it's true we tied them up, but they led monsters to the village. I understand that they were trying to get away, but they still put us in danger. It's natural that we would restrain them."

"Yes, and some of the others involved seemed to have breached their contracts. Because of a bribe, perhaps?" Layla added.

But despite their best arguments, the man refused to listen and just barked at them, accusing them of lying.

The guild master's behavior was all too suspicious. This went beyond simply hearing the wrong side of the story first—it seemed like Steit knew what had happened and was actively trying to suppress the truth. *Is he in on it, then?*

While we went back and forth, Enrique's group finally arrived. Several of them were wearing smug, irritating smiles. I met Enrique's eyes for a moment, and his smile morphed momentarily into a sneer. He seemed like the type to hold a grudge.

Was it about the way Locke and Layla had treated him after he'd come running back? And the fact that I'd refused to escort his group? I remembered the line he'd spat at me then. And had Litt and his group just been dragged into his revenge, or were they trying to eliminate the people in the merchants' guild who knew the truth? Or had he taken it personally that they hadn't tried to save them?

Either way, it's unbelievably petty, I thought, as he displayed perfect obsequiousness to the guild master.

"No sign of regret," Steit said. "Very well. I think we should turn them over to the guards, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Steit. You truly are wise." Enrique simpered and flattered.

But just as the guild master was about to give the order, Yor stepped forward. *Is it just me, or is she even angrier than Hikari somehow?*

"Kindly refrain from treating elder sister that way," she said. There was a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"What is it, girl? You have something to say?" The blustering of the guild master, the widening smiles of Enrique and his coterie—

"You, there." Yor ignored it all as she addressed the guild employee at the counter. "Go to the church and summon the Arbiter of Truth."

The guild master blanched at these words, but he quickly regained his bluster and started shouting again. "How dare you! Don't listen to her. What authority does a mere girl like you have?!"

The employee winced at this and ended up shrinking back.

"Be quiet, would you?" Yor said calmly, not rattled in the slightest, making the guild master turn a bright shade of pink. "Yor Apostel wishes to speak to the Arbiter of Truth," she continued. "Contact the church at once."

What was it about her words that seemed to turn the whole room cold? At least, the guild master, Enrique, and the guild employee all froze. Layla and the others appeared to understand but didn't seem affected, while Locke's party and mine had no context at all for why the atmosphere had changed so drastically. I could hear Litt whisper "I thought so" under his breath.

"What's taking so long? Go!" Yor spoke in a tone so forceful as to leave no room for argument. The guild employee took off like a shot.

"U-Um..." The guild master tried to speak, his manner suddenly as meek as could be. Yor silenced him with a single look. It was a shocking one-eighty from a few moments ago.

"Hey, what's this all about?" I asked Layla, who seemed to be somewhat in the know.

"Oh, Yor's from a very important family," she whispered back.

An important family? Like nobility or something? I asked for more details, and Layla explained that Yor's father was a high-ranking man in the church's bureaucracy, a cardinal just below the pope.

My only experience with Yor so far had been as kind of a magic...geek, I guess? Someone very curious and passionate when it came to magic. So it was hard to picture her as a girl from a prominent family, and she also had such an amiable personality that her sudden turn for the authoritative almost came off like a split personality situation.

Hikari had been surprised by the sight as well. Ciel...must have just been bored of the whole thing, as she was now fast asleep.

Some time later, the guild employee returned, out of breath and sweating. Behind her came a man dressed in priestlike robes. He wore an even-tempered expression, with not a hair out of place. Was this the Arbiter of Truth? Several white-clad guards followed in his wake.

"This is somewhat out of turn. You should go through the proper channels to petition us," the Arbiter of Truth said. When his eyes then fell on Yor, he said, with a small sigh, "Are you the first daughter of House Apostel, then? The one who summoned me?"

He could tell that at a glance? Was it possible the Arbiter of Truth had some kind of Appraise Person skill?

"Forgive me, but I simply couldn't overlook the absolute

injustice I've been witness to," Yor said.

Well, she had a point there. But wasn't her reasoning a little less than honest? It wasn't the injustice she was mad about; it was the disrespect they'd shown to Layla.

"And what do you wish to see?" the Arbiter asked her.

"The truth." Yor explained why she had petitioned the Arbiter of Truth. The guild master and Enrique, listening in, both turned pale very quickly.

"Cacus, the Arbiter of Truth, will ask you questions now. Please respond to all questions with 'yes.'"

"You are Steit, the guild master of this merchants' guild branch?"

"You are Enrique, a merchant of the Aurora Trading Company?"

"Did you investigate the veracity of the merchant Enrique's report?"

"Do you always guide your merchant teams to take righteous actions?"

"Do you…"

"Do you…"

"Do you…"

He seemed to be asking the questions in several different ways. I wondered how it would lead him to the truth, but the questioning ended after about three minutes, and Cacus gave an order to his guards.

"Arrest them," he said bluntly.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know," Layla replied. Apparently the Arbiter of Truth was a position exclusive to the Holy Kingdom of Frieren.

"Adventurer Locke and companions, your honor is restored. I will punish these others accordingly," the Arbiter declared.

"W-Wait a minute. I was just going by what they told me—" the guild master said, trying to make excuses, but Cacus ignored him. After all, he'd asked them if any money had changed hands between them—in other words, if they'd been bribed. Still, because they'd only answered "Yes" to each question, I couldn't be sure if that was what it was about.

In the end, the guild master and the others would be further interrogated, the full truth would come out, and several other

illegal dealings from their past would come to light. Enrique and his men would be turned into crime slaves, and the Aurora Trading Company would take a hefty blow to its reputation and be forced to pay penalties.

Not that any of that was our business, though we did get a little bit of compensation ourselves.

"We may contact you later," the Arbiter said. "Where can we expect to find you?"

"Please contact the adventurers' guild if you need anything else," said Locke. "We're planning to enjoy the Advent Festival. Depending on when the wagons leave, we might not be in town anymore."

"Understood. Please wait about two days, then. I'll see that you get a wagon to Messa." Cacus spoke to the merchants' guild employee after casting a glance at Yor, apparently pressuring the merchants' guild to prepare us a wagon and an inn.

"Elder sister, what should we do?" Yor asked Layla.

"Let's go to the adventurers' guild first. We have a lot to report in about, after all. Will you join us, Locke?"

They apparently needed me along too, since I had the orc carcasses. But Litt and the others seemed to have some more business at the merchants' guild, so we agreed to meet up at the inn later.

"Is this your first time in an adventurers' guild, Sora?"

"I've been in a few times to see what kinds of quests they have and check out the process for giving them out." I wasn't going to bring up that I'd been an adventurer before, though my specialties then had been running basic errands and gathering materials.

As we entered the adventurers' guild, the sight of our unfamiliar group attracted a lot of attention. It was probably because of the girls—lady adventurers did tend to draw the eye.

Locke took point on checking in with the receptionist. Then his party went with Layla up to a second-floor room, while the rest of us were sent through to the warehouse used for breaking down materials.

"I hear you hunted some orcs?" asked the guild member assigned to break things down. The guild hadn't put out any orc-hunting quests lately, so he seemed a bit dubious.

"Where do you think I might put them?" I asked, reverting to my

polite speech.

"Over here, in this open space," he said, noting that I was empty-handed and eyeing me suspiciously.

I let the implication roll off my back and just put the orcs in the indicated spot. I produced about thirty, then told him I was out of space for the rest.

"Hang on, there's more?!" the man asked incredulously. I'd gone through a few for cooking already, but I still had more, including the lord and the generals. When I told him that, he showed me to another warehouse. "Put the rest here, then," he said.

I started unloading the last of the orcs, and when I produced the lord and the generals, the staff member began panicking.

"H-Hey, where'd you hunt these?!" he exclaimed, his voice shaking.

Hearing that, other staff members came to look at the three advanced subtypes, and each went wide-eyed at the sight. The lord in particular got several different reactions, with some looking shocked just by its presence and others disappointed that the state it was in would lower its value as materials.

"Hey, someone call the guild master." The man must have been pretty excited, since his voice echoed loudly through the warehouse.

Ciel, who had been inside my hood, suddenly flew out and looked around to see what was happening. *Were you sleeping all this time? Is that why you've been so quiet?* I wondered.

The call to summon the guild master started the staff members racing around in a panic. Soon after, the man himself arrived and explained the situation to the staff. Layla and Locke were standing behind him, having apparently filled him in already.

Locke's group looked shocked, perhaps because this was their first time seeing the thing. And I'd been keeping the lord's body in my Item Box the whole time, after all.

We discussed what to leave behind, and I asked for a few of the orcs' magistones as well as some meat from the basic orcs, the generals, and the lord. Hikari and Ciel nodded in satisfaction. This request would reduce some of the monetary reward, but that was the price of doing business.

Incidentally, I had some of the general and lord meat sent to the inn where I'd be staying that night to be prepared for our

dinner. Separate from the portion I took for myself, of course.

"The lord's magistone is cut in half. What should we do with it?" That reduced the price, but apparently it would still fetch quite a hefty sum.

I used Appraisal and asked for Layla to have half of it. I'd initially offered to give it all to her, but she'd said it was too much and turned me down. She didn't have enough money to buy it off me and didn't like the idea of getting in so much debt. *Nothing more frightening than free, after all.*

"Still, if you have the skill to take out an orc lord…why not give up on being a merchant and join the adventurers' guild?"

"I'll have to decline, I'm afraid. I only managed to fight the lord because of my family heirloom magic item, and that was destroyed in the battle. I don't think I can fix it at the moment either." At the very least, I hadn't seen anything like my gun in this world so far. Layla had said she'd never seen one before either.

I'd told Layla the gun was a family heirloom handed down through generations and asked her to keep it a secret. I'd been quite firm with her that it could put me in danger if the word got out. And it was true that if the rumors spread and other people who knew about guns—namely, the ones who had been summoned with me—heard about it, it could cause real trouble for me. Layla had seemed to find it frightening for other reasons, anyway, and so it looked like she'd keep my secret.

The orcs ended up selling for…quite a lot of money.

Locke's party had previously declined a share of the pot for the orcs we'd hunted in the cave, but we ended up splitting it evenly. We'd asked them to defend the village, after all, and they'd managed to do it.

We got a lot of meat for the lord and the generals (slightly less for the lord because it was burnt), and it came to about thirty golds apiece—sixty for our party since Hikari got a share too. On top of that, I was given two orcs' worth of meat as a transport fee, as well as part of the general and lord meat gratis. We would've gotten more if the lord's body had been in better condition, but there was no point in kicking myself about it. It wasn't like I'd had time to think about it.

Once we were done at the adventurers' guild, we were shown

to the inn where rooms had been reserved for us. There was still time before dinner, so we decided to head out shopping. Hikari and I ran into Layla and the girls just outside the room, and we then set out together.

First, we did my main priority—food shopping. There were lots of spices I'd never seen before, and I was grateful that Yor knew a lot about them. There was also a kind of bean a bit like soybeans, and I bought a lot of those. They seemed to think I was odd for that, but ah well. I wanted to use them to research whether I could use magic and alchemy to make things along the lines of soy sauce and miso.

I held off on visits to weapons and armor shops as I'd been told the holy capital would have a better selection. I wouldn't need to buy consumables like potions, either, since I'd gotten plenty of herbs as a reward for building houses in the village. I had yet to actually use alchemy to make my own, though.

We finished our shopping and returned to the inn. It seemed dinner was finally ready, so we decided to eat with Locke's party. We also met up with Litt's party, who were shocked to hear where the meat we were served had come from.

"You're sure we can have this?" He sounded very grateful. It did seem like it cost a pretty penny when you bought it at a shop.

We had a fun time eating and chatting. Hikari watched Locke and the others chug down their booze and said she wanted to have some too, so I worked hard to get her off that idea. The general and lord meat was more tender and delicious than the kind from regular orcs. It was so good, it could spoil you for other kinds of meat. The chef's skill surely played a role as well, but even the steaks seasoned with nothing but basic salt and pepper were delicious, so it had to be the quality of the meat.

My animal companion was already drooling and seemed to be about to jump on the meat, so I issued a telepathic warning. *Try to hang in there, Ciel.* In response, she glared at me with a look of betrayal, but there was nothing I could do to change the situation. *Don't give me those puppy-dog eyes, okay?*

That night was basically a party, and I had real fun for the first time in a long while. I also kept some meat just for Ciel so I could cheer her up with it once we got up to our room.

Incidentally, the pendant that Yor wore apparently had an

insignia that proved her lineage, which was how the Arbiter of Truth had ascertained her identity.

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We started off for Holy Capital Messa in swift wagons arranged for us by the merchants' guild. Such wagons shortened travel time significantly, but they came at a high price, so only people in a great hurry or with a lot of money to burn ever tended to use them. Of course, this was my first time in one.

The three wagons raced along. They seemed to have been built in a specialized manner that smoothed out most of the bumps of travel—at least, in comparison to a standard wagon. I wished I knew how they did it. *Maybe I'll ask later... Probably a trade secret, though.*

The first wagon carried Locke's party, the merchants including Litt, and the cooks and escorts the merchants' guild had arranged. The second wagon contained me, Hikari, and Layla's party. I'd offered to ride in the front wagon, but they'd rejected that idea for some reason.

The third wagon contained Steit, Enrique, and the other wicked merchants, along with their escorts. This was a prison wagon, and since they were prisoners, their treatment was appropriately poor. That wagon also held a coachman and a local soldier riding beside him. It looked like they were having a pretty bumpy ride.

The fast wagons would shorten what would have been a seven-day trip to just three. We had plenty of time until the Advent Festival, so I hadn't thought we'd need to rush, but it seemed they'd also wanted to get the prisoners to the merchants' guild in the capital quickly. Incidentally, the escort for the transport that had abandoned us had been adventurers who had taken the job as a quest, so they had apparently been taken to the Wrent adventurers' guild for their punishment.

I looked at the prison wagon and saw its occupants looking quite ill. Not that I cared to sympathize.

Our trip, meanwhile, was quite luxurious, and the cooks they sent along prepared amazing food for us. I'd known that magical cooking implements existed, but this was my first time seeing one in action. But since they consumed magistones for fuel and they

weren't yet mass-produced, they were quite expensive to buy.

Inside the wagon, I mainly listened to Layla and the others talk. At one point, though, Yor asked me if there was a way to practice mana regulation, so I gave some thought to that. It would be dangerous to practice with an open flame inside a wagon, so I'd have to think of something you could do indoors. Layla must have been a bit curious about an alternate method as well, as she asked me if there was a way that anyone could do it. She couldn't even use lifestyle spells, after all.

Layla's interest must have stemmed from her knowledge that her mithril sword grew sharper when mana was channeled into it. I'd never actually told her I'd channeled mana into it while using it, but a smart person could probably figure it out when they saw the flames that had come from the blade. And I had time to kill in the wagon, after all, so coming up with an item to practice mana channeling on wouldn't be a bad way to spend it.

I'd been thinking a bit about this since I first used the mithril sword, though it was more for Hikari's sake than for Yor and the others'. I'd tried after that to channel mana into my own sword, and it had basically worked. It was harder to maintain than in the mithril sword, though, so it required quite a lot of practice.

That's when I'd started wondering if even Hikari, who couldn't use magic, could channel mana into her weapons. Hikari's diminutive stature, combined with the fact that she used a dagger, made me wonder if we might end up running into monsters she didn't have the power to deal damage to. If the ability to channel mana made that easier, it could be an ace in the hole for us. And since Hikari's dagger inflicted paralysis into wounds, the benefits could be immeasurable.

So, while I was in the town of Wrent, I'd ended up buying magistones already spent from use in magic items. Once mana was drained out of a magistone it lost its color and turned clear, and they were frequently crushed or used in accessories, so it was easy to buy them. In fact, you could channel mana into these used-up magistones. The trouble was that the mana wouldn't stay inside them, so channeling it in briefly was all you could do.

My issue was that, at least for me, mana was colorless, so I couldn't tell visually when my mana was flowing into something. I could only perceive the flow of mana thanks to my Regulate Mana

and Detect Mana skills. Therefore, my plan was to repurpose the used-up magistones to provide a visual indicator of when I was channeling mana into something.

If I had the right materials, I could also probably get the mana to stick, but that wouldn't be necessary right now.

"Instructor, what are you doing?" Yor asked when she noticed me pulling out my tools in the wagon.

"I was thinking of making a device to practice mana regulation."

I had a mental image of the complete project: a bit like the kind of magic wand that young children would play with. You'd channel mana into the handle, and the magistone at the tip would change color when it reached it. It felt like it would be much easier with mithril materials, but I didn't have any, so I used magic ore. Then I used alchemy to combine it with the used-up magistones and certain dyes, and it was finished. *Whew, that was exhausting.*

"I-Instructor, what did you do? And what did you make?"

I explained the device to Yor while teaching her how to use it: If you held it by the hilt and channeled mana into it, the magistone at the tip would light up. Simple. I then gave a demonstration, channeling my mana in and making the magistone light up. I designed it not to be too bright, to be easy on the eyes.

"You give it a try, Yor. Once you get the knack, can you show the others how it works? I'm sure you'll explain it to them better than I could." Since I'd used my skills to do it, all my explanations stemmed very much from intuition. By contrast, Yor seemed to think a lot of things over and go with trial and error, so she'd probably make a better teacher. "I'd like it if you could teach Hikari too," I added. I'd tried to think up alternatives in case it wouldn't work, but I didn't have any other great ideas at the moment.

Setting me aside, then, Yor rejoined the other girls and quickly began to practice. She started by playing teacher, then gave a demonstration while channeling her mana, but unfortunately the magistone didn't react. Layla, who couldn't help but laugh about how Yor's face had turned red, walked over to me.

Ah, right. I guess you want another. I'll make it now, okay?

I ended up making four more wands. *Not enough? Too bad, because that's all the materials I've got!*

After that, the rest of the trip proceeded smoothly, and we

arrived in Messa right on schedule. The city had a large church at the center, with other churches in the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast corners as well. These were a little smaller than the central church, but they were still quite large.

Major avenues led from the central church to the four other ones as well as to the main gate, as if the city had been built with the church in mind. I tended to associate churches with white, and that did seem to be the major color of all the buildings in the city. It wasn't that there was no color at all, though—flower beds around the city made things quite bright and lively. But there was none of the hustle and bustle of other towns I'd been to, giving the place a rather sleepy impression.

According to Yor, though, things would perk up as the festival approached.

"But why are there five churches in one city?" I asked. The central church had a dome-shaped ceiling while the other four had spires, so they at least looked different. But did they still need that many?

"Ah, the city is rather quiet right now, but more people will show up as the Advent Festival approaches, which means the believers will need more locations in which to worship." Yor explained the answer to my question like a true guide. Others in our party seemed to have the same question I did, and they nodded with interest as they heard the response.

"We plan to stay in this town until the Advent Festival is over too. Contact us at the adventurers' guild if you need anything."



And so we split up with Locke's party at the gate, as they said they were going to meet up with friends. They didn't seem to linger in saying goodbye, which was very much what I'd come to expect of adventurers.

Litt, too, just said "Come buy from us sometime" and then quickly disappeared into the city, leaving me behind with Layla's group. The girls were apparently going to stay at Yor's house, so Hikari and I would have to find an inn.

"Um, would you like to stay at my house?" Yor offered abruptly as I was about to say my goodbyes. "It might be hard to get a room at an inn at this time of year, and we have lots of space, so it should be fine."

I was a little hesitant, but I ended up taking her up on the offer. There were still fifteen days until the festival, after all.

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"Mistress, welcome home."

Yor's home turned out to be extremely large, and we were greeted by butlers and maids as we entered. It wasn't overly showy, but it was quite pristine, and it had an easygoing, comfortable atmosphere.

I would have expected a cardinal's home to seem a bit more nouveau riche, but there was no sense of that at all. There weren't even any expensive-looking vases around. But it did feel a bit odd for a holy man's household to have maids and butlers... *Or is that just my bias speaking?*

It was the other girls' first time here too, but they entered the house without any particular show of nervousness. The same went for Hikari. Meanwhile, Ciel couldn't stop goggling— *Ah, a kindred spirit!*

Me? Well, I was just a small-town kid, so it was all pretty new to me. I'd technically walked around in the castle before, but I didn't remember much about it. I was also visiting a girl's house, you know? So even though I was in a group, it was still nerve-racking.

"Big sis!" As we entered the sitting room, a girl came up to us and threw her arms around Yor.

"Yuri! It's been so long. You've grown so much."

"Big sis. You never come home," the girl said sulkily, pouting.

Apparently this was Yor's first time coming home since she entered the Magic Academy. She frequently wrote to them, but Yuri said she hadn't come home at all, even on long holidays. Yor was very focused on her magic studies, but it seemed her adventurer activities kept her quite busy as well.

"Allow me to introduce my little sister, Yuri. Yuri, this is my senior from school, Elder Sister Layla, and my classmates Tricia, Casey, Luilui, and Talia. And this is my instructor Sora and his friend Hikari."

We all exchanged greetings. Apparently she was still calling me her "instructor."

When Yor first introduced me, Yuri stared hard at my face...more specifically, at my mask. Her expression stiffened a bit in surprise. *Yeah, that's the reaction you'd expect, right?*

But she quickly snapped out of it and greeted me. "A pleasure to meet you," she said. "I'm sorry for all the trouble my sister must have caused you. I'm her little sister, Yuri Apostel."

It was a very proper greeting, and Yuri's mannerisms were all very refined. Yor hadn't given that impression when we were first introduced; was it because she'd spent so long as an adventurer?

"A-And..." Yuri continued. "May I inquire as to your relationship to my sister?"

Was she asking because Yor had introduced me as her instructor? "We met while we were traveling, and she helped me a lot. We came to the capital not knowing anything about the Advent Festival, and she said we might not be able to get an inn, so she invited Hikari and me to stay here. I think she's calling me 'instructor' because she appreciates that I can use rare magic?"

"Yeah, we got invited. So we're staying." Hikari, meanwhile, didn't change her behavior for anyone. Completely unfazed.

"U-Um, really? You weren't in her letter, so that's surprising," Yuri said.

"It's all true," Yor insisted. "Instructor is amazing. He knows more than my teachers at school about how to manipulate mana. I wish he could be my instructor forever!"

"If Sora volunteered to serve as your home tutor, would you stay home forever?" Yuri asked, looking at Yor with hopeful eyes.

"Ah? Well..." Yor seemed to be genuinely considering it. *So this would be pretty typical of Yor, right?*

“That’s just like you, Yor,” Layla confirmed with a wince.

“Yor, going to quit school?” Talia whispered sadly. She probably thought it seemed plausible for her too.

“D-Don’t worry,” Yor assured her. “There’s a lot I have left to learn at school. And if Hikari comes to school with us, instructor will come too, so it’ll all work out.”

Huh? I saw you guys talking a lot in the wagon. Is that what you were discussing? Hikari was looking at me expectantly too. *Wait, she looked disappointed before that she couldn’t use magic. Is that something she wants?*

“Well, I thought I heard some noise in here. You’re back now, Yor?” While we were talking, a new person appeared. It was an older woman who resembled both girls. The spitting image, even.

I remembered hearing about servants going out early to get the word out. Did the fact that this lady hadn’t noticed us until now mean she’d only just returned?

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m sure my daughter’s been causing you a lot of trouble. I’m her mother, Roux Apostel. Are you staying for the Advent Festival? Please, make yourselves at home.”

Why do they all assume that Yor’s been causing us trouble?

“And you brought a boy, at that. I wish you’d mentioned that in advance. To your father, especially.”

You’re laughing like it’s really funny, but seriously, I’m no one special…

“I have a lot of questions for you, but I’m sure you must be tired from your journey,” Roux continued. “Show them to their rooms first.” She gave out orders to the maids who were standing in the corners of the room. She seemed like a very considerate person.

“Would you like to stay with me, Hikari?” Layla asked.

“No, wanna be with master.”

There had been a little bit of a quarrel over the room assignments, with Layla getting miffed about that result as usual.

The bed in the room I eventually got was the most comfortable one I’d stayed in so far. Lying down in it made me feel like I was being encased in softness, and I found my whole body going limp. But there was also a nice bit of supportive resistance against my back. I could have stayed like that forever. Ciel seemed shocked by it at first, but she was bouncing up and down happily on the bed the next moment.

“Master, wanna go right to sleep,” Hikari said.

“I feel the same way, but it’s still daylight out.” It was a nice suggestion, but we couldn’t sleep just yet.

Just as I fought my way out of bed, I heard some noise outside the room. The walls seemed designed to be somewhat soundproof, but I could still hear faint sounds and voices.

I opened the door to check it out and was quickly overwhelmed by the sound of a male voice shouting, extremely agitated and emotional, loud enough to practically shake the entire mansion.

Ciel came flying up to me and looked toward the sound in annoyance. I saw Layla looking out the door of her room next to mine, her face screwed up in a way I assumed was unconscious.

Soon after, I heard a dull thump, and then everything went quiet. Yor came up to us with an exhausted expression on her face and told us to join her in the drawing room, so we did.

In the drawing room, we found a defeated-looking man sitting on the sofa. He wore a loose-fitting robe that was primarily white, with not-too-flashy but still striking ornamentation.

Yor approached and gave him a smack on the back. *That was pretty loud... Is he okay?* I wondered. But the old man opened his eyes right away, like a switch had flipped on.

“My father, Dan Apostel,” Yor said. “I don’t think he’ll be at home much, so you don’t have to remember him.”

“Hey, Yor, don’t introduce me like that. Can’t you show a little more kindness when you’re introducing your papa?”

Yor seemed far less than enthused about this suggestion.

Dan greeted Layla and the others with a smile, but when he noticed me, his face turned creakily toward Yor, then back to me, with the most incredible expression I’d seen. “Oh? And who might you be? I can’t just have you entering my house uninvited... And why the mask? Only criminals would need to hide their face indoors. Lond, take him away.”

“Sir, he is the mistress’s guest.” A kindly-looking older man snappily dressed in a butler’s outfit spoke to soothe the agitated Dan.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous! I don’t believe it! You need to go, do you understand me? I could have you thrown into prison for breaking and entering, you know!”

His smile was terrifying, but it was not reflected in his eyes.

Suddenly, I heard a dull thump. Dan's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed.

"I'm sorry about my idiot of a father," Yor said apologetically, appearing behind him.

Layla gave a strained smile at the sight. Maybe her own father was like this?

Yor apologized to me strenuously afterward. Was that a normal reaction from a father who hadn't seen his daughter in years, only to have her finally bring a strange man home?

Incidentally, Dan was led away by a priest from the church soon after that. They'd been in the middle of preparing for the Advent Festival, and he'd apparently gone AWOL when he'd heard about Yor's return.

Isn't cardinal a pretty important position? Is it really okay for him to be running off like that? I wondered.

But Dan didn't come back that day, even after night fell. I decided to be grateful we could at least have some peace and quiet.

The next day, we walked around the capital together with Yor—or rather, Yuri—acting as tour guide. At first she stuck close to her sister, but she also seemed to have hit it off with Hikari, who was closer to her age.

I was worried at first because Hikari tended to keep her emotions close to the chest and could be rather curt, but Yuri seemed to enjoy talking to her, so it was probably fine. We'd have to leave this town behind eventually, but I hoped they'd get along while we were here. If they became friends, could they write to each other? No, probably not; it wasn't like we'd be able to settle down anywhere. *And can Hikari even write?*

Our first destinations were weapon and armor shops, where we bought new equipment. It cost a few golds, but it was a small price to pay for safety. Layla and the others didn't hesitate to buy the best available either.

After that, we headed for the clothing shop. I didn't mind either way, but I thought that Hikari might like dressing up now and then, since she was a little girl herself. The other girls agreed that it wasn't good to wear the same thing every day.

Yuri took the lead in picking clothes for Hikari, and so I bought

some clothes for Yuri as thanks. Somehow, this turned into me buying outfits for the rest of the girls as well. I wasn't quite sure how it had happened, but perhaps being surrounded by dressed-up women was my reward? I'd heard that shopping with women could be hard, and maybe this was why. The price I paid was looking like kind of a preppie surrounded by beautiful women, with the eyes of the men around me boring holes into my head. But I'd just have to accept it.

Still, retreating into fantasy wouldn't do me any good, so I returned to reality. Hikari looked much prettier dressed up, and she seemed somehow happier as well. Ciel had originally appeared to be excited about it as well, but now her expression seemed very put out. She wasn't getting to eat the delicious sweets, after all.

That's right. We were now at a popular sweets shop in the capital—the kind that people had to line up to get into. I was staring down at a table packed with sweets and cakes and sweets and cakes and sweets of all kinds. (I believe the repetition is important to capture the magnitude of it.)

While I was taking delicate bites, the girls around me were all chatting and scarfing it down in delight. Hikari also seemed to like it a lot, because she was emptying plates at an alarming rate. I had to wonder where she put it all, as small as she was. She did tend to have a big appetite, but it seemed even bigger today.

I had to admit it really was delicious, and I was impressed by how good it was. I hadn't had cake in a long time now, after all. Even so, I couldn't eat as much as her.

The population of the shop was overwhelmingly female, but there were a few men there. They'd probably been dragged along to pay. *You're wincing, you know,* I thought at a few of them, but then, maybe I looked the same way. *Comrades, I cannot talk to you of my sympathies now, but let us all be strong.*

Still, the girls didn't seem to be hiding that they were on cloud nine. Perhaps the money was a small price to pay for a front-row seat to a rare sight like that.



“Hikari, is it good?”

“Yeah!” Hikari, who didn’t usually express much emotion, openly beamed at me.

She bought some cake to take home as well. I thought she wanted more for herself, but she said it was for Roux and the maids. Layla paid for it, of course.

Oh, and I bought some cake to take home on the sly too. For Ciel, of course.

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The next day, Hikari and I paid a visit to the Howler Slave Company’s Messa branch. Well, Ciel was there too, of course. Eating the cake had instantly cured her bad mood. Today was also our first time going out in the city with just our little group, and she seemed a bit happy about that too.

I’d already scouted the location. It was apparently on the outskirts of the city, just like in all the other towns, but while the quarters that housed slave traders were frequently in the more dimly lit parts of town, that wasn’t the case here in Messa.

“Master. Hope we find them.”

Hikari, that’s a jinx, I thought nervously. Incidentally, Hikari knew why I was visiting the slave trader. But I’d done my tithing yesterday in the form of clothing and sweets for the girls, so I should get good karma today (I hoped).

“Well, well, sir. Who might you be looking for today?”

The person who spoke to me in a low-profile way was a man with a stooped posture smiling a guarded smile. His name was Dredd, and he said he was the older brother of the slave trader I’d talked to at the Howler Slave Company in Idoll. He didn’t look much like him, though.

“Ah, Drake sent you?” he replied when I told him. “I’ll give you a good discount, then.”

That would be nice if it were true, I thought wryly. Aloud, I said in my merchant’s cadence, “We’ve been traveling between various locales, a bit like traveling merchants. Things have been rather dangerous lately, so we were hoping to find a slave for protection. Would you have any promising candidates, perchance?”

“Let me see… I’ll prepare a sampling. Wait just a minute.”

He offered us seats, so I sat down and Hikari quietly took a spot next to me. Ciel plopped down on Hikari's head and sat still.

Eight people were brought before us in all. Most of them were men; many were former adventurers, and some were former guards or soldiers. I wondered how someone with a job and reliable income could have been brought so low, but some had apparently ruined themselves with gambling, while others had gotten hurt and couldn't pay for treatment, along with other things.

I also used Appraise Person and saw that their levels weren't especially high, not even halfway to Hikari's level 33.

"Do you have any others? I've heard that beastfolk and elves are good fighters."

"Ah, well. We do have one, but there's a few inherent issues there..." He thought for a minute, then led me into a room. "She came here about ten days ago through a connection of mine. I wouldn't say we bought her. It's more that she was forced on us by an acquaintance. She was apparently quite a handful, and she caused more than a few problems at her former location."

She was being held in a room with such high security that you could basically call it a cell. It contained a bare minimum of furniture, but it didn't look especially comfortable. At least it was clean.

As I walked up to the room, the figure on the bed glared up at me intensely. Every move she made came with the jangling of chains, and she displayed an intensity far beyond that of the other slaves.

Suddenly, Hikari grabbed my hand. Ciel also dove into my hood, as if to run and hide.

We looked for a while, then returned to the initial room. Hikari seemed a little bit scared, but something had caught my attention that overpowered my fear...

Cat ears! I'd always thought I was more of a dog guy, but I was realizing that cats had their appeal too.

No, okay, that wasn't the thing—it was that I'd seen my first beastfolk. *They really do exist, then?* Now this really felt like a fantasy setting. *Maybe I'll get to see an elf or a dwarf soon!* I hadn't even heard of dwarves existing in this world yet, though.

Still, though I'd been here a long time now, I realized this was

my first actual sighting of a beastfolk. Of course, while fantasy stories generally involved magic, monsters, and demons, beastfolk weren't always part of the mix.

"Well, you saw the situation," Dredd said to me. "She seems to harbor quite a deep hatred of humans like us."

"What happened to make her hate us?"

"Ah, well... My knowledge is only thirdhand, but apparently she was originally used as a war slave in the Black Forest."

"The Black Forest?" I asked.

The Black Forest was a place where savage monsters lived, and deep within it lay the Demon King's castle. I'd heard there had been many casualties caused by monsters coming out of the Black Forest, especially in the early days of the Demon King's revival.

"Yes, I'm told she was forced to fight for years as a slave and survived. On top of that, it's said that no one who paired up with her ever came back alive. That happened again and again, and people naturally started finding it rather unsettling...but simply surviving in the Black Forest would put her skills on par with those of a Rank A adventurer, if not greater."

"If she's that strong, why didn't they give her more favorable treatment?"

"Well...normally they might, but because all their allies were wiped out, people started calling her 'Jinx,' and between that and the fact that she was living in the Empire, it seems her treatment was especially poor."

That's the country that practices human supremacy, right? I mused. It looked like the persecution hadn't ended with the signing of the truce.

"In the end, the noble who acted as her slavemaster didn't appreciate this fact and began hurting her in the name of 'discipline,' but she wound up retaliating. But it's against the rules for a slavemaster to harm their slave maliciously in the first place, so it was ruled that he had it coming, but..."

"It ended up being a scandal?"

"Yes, it seems it was an issue for a time. But the Eld Republic wouldn't stand for her being executed for that reason. That may be why she was sent out of the Empire to avoid issues...and now she's here in the Holy Kingdom."

Was there a reason she couldn't just be sent back to the Republic? It

seems like that would have solved the problem... I mused. “I see. How much would it cost to buy her?”

“Let me see... She’s something of a handful, but she’s quite capable. Let’s say five hundred golds, sir.”

“Five hundred golds?” That was quite high...but an appraisal revealed her to be level 66. That was higher than that orc lord Loid, and the highest I’d ever seen using Appraise Person. And that wasn’t the only reason I wanted her. “I don’t have that much on me now,” I told him. “Is there any way to reserve a slave, or say ‘I’ll have the money by this day, so please don’t sell them until then’?”

“Let me see... If you’ll pay her room and board until then, I wouldn’t mind holding her. I don’t usually allow for such things, but Drake did introduce you, after all.”

I had managed to scrape together about three hundred golds so far. Would it be difficult to scrounge up the remaining two hundred before the Advent Festival ended? What if I gathered herbs to mass-produce potions? I ended up paying for twenty days of her room and board, with the agreement that she wouldn’t be sold until then. Then I said I wanted to talk to her one last time, and I was allowed to do so without Dredd in the room.

“My name’s Sora. Can we talk for a bit?”

The beastfolk said nothing.

“I’m something like a traveling merchant. I’ve been looking for someone who could serve as a bodyguard, and I heard you were strong and thought maybe you could do the job.”

“Better find someone else. There’s gotta be other slaves who can fight decent here.”

“They did show me quite a few, but I don’t think they’re as strong as you. I want someone who’s at least strong enough to fight an advanced subtype and get away.”

“An advanced subtype? You said you wanted an escort. Are you trying to become an adventurer to make money instead?”

“No way. But I’ve heard rumors of advanced subtypes in the area at least twice since I came here, and I actually ran into one myself. Just traveling seems pretty dangerous on its own right now. So it’s natural to want to employ someone strong, right?”

She went silent at my words. She seemed to be thinking about something, but she didn’t answer me.

“I’m also planning to travel between lands selling my wares. If I get a chance, I might go to the Eld Republic too.”

She looked up in shock at this, and for the first time I saw an emotion other than anger in her eyes. I didn’t know exactly what it was, though.

“That’s right. Just remember that it’s a possibility if I buy you. The only issue is that I need to earn a little more money to do it.”

“Get the money first, then.” She was still cold, but her tone was less biting than it had been at first.

It was probably just a sign of how special the Eld Republic was to her…or how strong her feelings about Rurika and the others were.

“I’ll do my best to meet your expectations. See you soon, Sera.” And with those last words, I went back to Dredd.

I was about to get busy, mainly with making money. *Whew. I wonder if there’s a way to make a lot of it quick…*

My first priority would be to get back and talk to the girls about it.

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“Five hundred golds? What kind of slave are you trying to buy?” Layla asked.

“A beastfolk one. I need to make the money to afford her, so I was hoping you’d take me to the adventurers’ guild.”

“Are you planning on becoming an adventurer?”

“Of course not. I mainly just want information on where to find herb patches and what kind of monsters I might run into there.”

The mention of herbs sparked understanding in Layla. *That’s right, I plan to make money with potions.*

We entered the adventurers’ guild together and found it relatively empty. Maybe because it was later in the day? It seemed that in any adventurers’ guild, you had to come early in the morning to get the good quests.

The main quests available seemed to involve security. I’d been told things could get dicey with so many visitors to the Advent Festival, so it seemed like people would decide the official guards weren’t enough and seek out personal protection from adventurers.

“No hunting quests that look appealing either…” Layla murmured. “Ah, quite a few gathering quests, though.”

The reward for those was pretty average. I’d make better money gathering for myself and making potions, then. *Ah,* I reminded myself. *But as a merchant, I can’t take quests from the adventurers’ guild, anyway…*

Still, it didn’t seem like there were many transport quests and other such errands in Messa.

“Sorry, but could you ask what to look out for regarding the gathering locations?”

“All right.” Layla walked up to the receptionist while I looked at the quests a bit longer.

Most of the hunting quests were for goblins and wulfs. There was also a tiger wulf hunt available for high-ranked adventurers; apparently they’d been seen on roads heading to the Republic. *Yeah, that might be a little too much for Layla’s group to handle…*

There was also a killer bee hunt and honey retrieval. Honey was very popular because it could be used for a variety of things. Apparently the city used it for their sweets as well.

The biggest reward available was for…dragon hunting? *Yeah, total fantasy stuff there. So dragons do exist?* The dragons hadn’t been causing any particular trouble; the guild just wanted their materials. The quest had come from the alchemists’ guild, who were offering five platinums per dragon.

“What are you looking at?” Layla asked, peeking suddenly over my shoulder. *Yeesh, too close!*

“I saw a dragon hunting quest,” I responded simply.

“Oh, that? All the big adventurers’ guilds have that quest up, but anyone who actually hunts dragons is more likely to put them up for auction.”

“Really?”

“Yes. With a reward like that, you might be able to make a profit on mini or quasi dragons, but it’s not nearly enough for a full-grown adult.”

“I see. Have you ever seen a dragon, Layla?”

“I haven’t, but I’ve read records of them being seen on the lower dungeon levels. I don’t know if they’re true, though.”

Dragons in dungeons, then? Are there dragon floors or something? It sounded like hell. But heaven for those who were strong enough

to hunt them, I supposed.

“Anyway, I asked them about the herb quest. It might cause problems for us to talk about it here, so let’s go back to Yor’s home.”

It might indeed look bad if they saw that Layla was asking on behalf of a non-adventurer. I went back with her.

“What are you going to do until the Advent Festival, Sora?”

“I think I’ll gather some herbs to make potions and sell them. Then I was wondering if you could indulge me in some training?”

“Training?”

“Yeah, I want to learn a little more about sword fighting. And you’re pretty good with one, you know, Layla?”

“I’m not good enough to be a teacher, but I’d be happy to spar with you. You’d probably learn more fighting the others as well. And fighting someone outside our party would be good experience for us, too, so we’d welcome the chance.”

“Then I’ll ask you for that when you get some free time. Gotta do your homework, right?”

“Indeed, though I wish I didn’t.”

Apparently, because they’d taken such a long period of leave, they’d been given a few assignments from school. *School was hard. Yes, it certainly was!* But considering that, they didn’t seem to be doing much of their schoolwork while they were traveling in the wagons and so on… Maybe they did a lot of it while staying at inns?

We had a light mock battle that afternoon, and a study meeting that evening. Hikari and Yuri joined us for the latter. They both seemed interested in magic, and they were studying the basics while Yor taught them happily. I listened in for a bit as well and found her teaching methods clear and concise.

Ciel, you don’t have to console me, okay? Oh, never mind, you’re asking for food…

The next day, I got my camping gear sorted out and headed on my gathering trip expecting to spend the night. Hikari said she’d come with me, but I turned her down since she was getting along with Yuri so well. She’d pouted at first, but when I’d given her the job of scouting out tasty-looking stalls and unusual spices, she’d agreed.

Ciel would be coming with me this time. I'd asked her to confirm that she wanted to come along, and she'd acted like she did. Leaving town meant she could eat fresh warm food, after all.

The closest herb patch was about a half day's walk from the city, but since I didn't need to rest while walking, I could probably get there even sooner.

First thing in the morning I walked out of the gate and found people already lined up to enter the city, probably ones who'd timed their travel poorly and couldn't get in yesterday evening. Seeing the sheer number of people here conveyed the importance of the Advent Festival. It was apparently especially important to believers in the Goddess, as many among the crowd seemed to fit the bill.

I glanced at those people as I headed into the forest where the herb patches were located. Apparently there were a few of them inside the forest, but even though it seemed to be a popular site for gathering I didn't see anyone around.

I thought back to the quest notices pasted up in the adventurers' guild. The rewards for herb gathering weren't especially high, but you could make quite a bit if you collected a lot. Of course, *if* was the key word there. Given that fact, and the fact that you could get good money for guard work while staying inside the city, maybe more people took those jobs.

I entered the forest, called up my automap, and used Detect Presence. I'd heard there weren't many monsters in this area, and indeed, I saw no signs of them on the automap.

"Is that one an animal signal?" I mused. As long as it wasn't dangerous, I could probably ignore it. "Okay, I'm going to head for the herb patch. What'll you do, Ciel?" I'd learned about the different locations from Layla at the adventurers' guild, so I was planning to get right down to it.

Ciel looked like she wanted to stick with me, but... Oh, right, it was almost time for lunch. I went around to two different patches and then served up the long-awaited meal. I was getting to work on cooking, and Ciel watched curiously as I prepared multiple pots.

"I thought I might make some food just for you, for when we're inside the city." We still had over fifteen days left to spend in the city, so I didn't need to prep meals. It wouldn't all stay fresh inside

my Item Box over that time. But I couldn't ask Yor's family to make extra portions for Ciel, so I had to create some things in advance to treat her once we were back in my room.

Once the various soups were almost done, I started cooking up the meat to serve as the main dish.

"Don't tell Hikari, okay?" I pulled out the orc general meat. Of course, I only had regular orc meat for myself. *Huh? You want some of this too? Okay, no need to nod* that *hard...*

After eating, we got moving again right away. Ciel might have overeaten because she was resting in my hood, but she barely weighed anything, so it didn't get in the way of my work. She was nestled in there pretty tightly, too, so I shouldn't have to hold back on my zeal.

I would cross through the herb patches and hunt any harmful animals I might see nearby. Even dangerous animals were nothing compared to monsters. They'd charge at me, I'd step out of the way, then I'd finish them with a single strike as they passed.

After I'd spent some time herb gathering, Ciel must have woken up, because she climbed out and started tapping at me with her ear.

"Huh? What is it?" I looked over at Ciel, and then I noticed that I could see the moons. The fact that they were visible through the trees suggested they must be pretty high by now.

I dropped my Night Vision skill and the world around me went dark. I'd apparently been so focused on my work that I'd failed to notice the passage of time.

"Wow, I didn't notice. Thanks for letting me know." She'd probably actually been asking for food, but I still had to rest even with my skill, so having the reminder was a big help.

I whipped something up fast and presented Ciel with a dish full of food. I looked at my stat panel while I cooked and saw that my Walking level had just barely gone up by one. The XP needed to gain levels really had increased.

Taking wagons certainly shortened my travel time, but it took away chances to gain experience. There hadn't been much trouble in the capital since I'd gotten there...but was I somehow jinxing myself by thinking that? *Okay, I'd better do some walking to earn experience while I look for a place to sleep.*

Having built quite a few houses in Tenns Village, I decided to

search for a place where I could put that knowledge to use. If it was possible, it would definitely change the way I camped out from now on. The issue was that the houses stood out, so I assumed I would have to get pretty far away from the roads to do it. I'd also have to make sure it wouldn't break in the face of monster attacks.

"Hmm, how about here?" The issue with being in a forest was that it was hard to find flat, open land. I'd located an almost decent spot, but there were a few trees growing in awkward places, so I harvested those, used wind magic to chop them into sticks, and then put them in my Item Box. I'd use them as firewood later.

Once I'd cleared space, I made myself a simple hut. I'd be cooking outside, so I really just needed a place to sleep. There were no monsters around right now, but because it was my first time I made the walls thick to prioritize sturdiness, and it ended up being pretty large.

I spread out my tarp and lay down on it. *Maybe I could make some kind of portable bed?* While I was thinking about that, I was about to set my head down when I heard a distant howling. If I couldn't check locations on my automap, I'd probably have spent the whole night jumping at shadows. The sound of the wind rustling tree branches could be scary when you were in the forest by yourself. Having trees towering all around you was very intimidating and inspired a sense of fear that was hard to articulate.

I'd once ended up walking along a quiet dirt trail back when I was in Japan, and the sound of the leaves crunching under my feet with every step I took had set me on edge. It was a pleasant memory now, though. Now that I was used to the sound, it was actually rather lovely. I'd become a lot more used to traveling, and I'd been inside forests many times before.

I checked my surroundings on the automap one more time, then put the day behind me and slept.

The next day, after breakfast, I headed back to town on a different path, doing more gathering along the way. I skipped a proper lunch and just ate while I walked. *Would Layla and the others call this bad manners?* No, probably not. As adventurers, they probably did plenty of eating on the go.

I served Ciel a skewer I'd made that morning, holding it out while she munched away.

I didn't encounter any monsters during my time outside. No signs of them on the automap either. I had to wait in a long line to enter the city, but I managed to make it inside.

The next day, I made all kinds of potions with Alchemy: three hundred healing ones, two hundred mana ones, three hundred stamina ones, and a hundred each of poison and paralysis cures. This all seemed to go more smoothly than before, maybe because I'd changed jobs to Alchemist.

Given how much I had to make, I decided to do some studying and mock battles with Layla and the girls while I waited for my MP to recover between sessions. I'd make potions, study, recover, make some more, do a mock duel, and on and on. It ended up taking me a full day, but thanks to that, my Alchemy level was now topped out with the word "MAX" displaying next to the skill name.

This caused a new name to appear in the list of skills I could learn: "Enchant." Apparently, this allowed you to infuse different objects with spells you knew, as well as some skills. This one seemed useful for raising your baseline in combat, and a potential golden goose as well.

If I could infuse bullets with elemental properties—for instance, a fire spell to make them explode—I could make extremely lethal rounds similar to shotgun shells. However, this would ruin the materials obtained from monsters, so I'd have to be careful how I used them. As for making money, if I could enchant an ordinary bag with the Storage dimension spell, I might make a bag of holding and sell it for a tidy sum. Maybe I'd try that out sometime.

I had some points to spare, so I decided to learn it.

NEW
[Enchant Lv. 1]

I was out of skill points again, but I could always get more by walking around, so it shouldn't be an issue. That was what I assured myself, at least.

In the mock battles, the Bloody Rose's frontline combatants gave me a good fight. Luilui specialized in archery, but she was

handy with a sword as well, and she was great at getting up in your face and not giving up the initiative.

Layla was especially strong, although at first I had the upper hand because her movements seemed a bit uncoordinated. She had gained ten levels from fighting the orc lord, and her improved abilities had been a bit more than she could handle at first, but she gradually adjusted and was beating me handily by the end. "It's like my body isn't my own," she'd said, sounding the most surprised of all of us.

Roux and Yuri came to watch the mock battles as well, and the latter joined in at the very end. With her it was more like self-defense training than a mock duel; Yor really had taught her a lot.

"Master, where are we going?" As promised, I set out with Hikari after breakfast.

"How about a stroll around the capital? Roux says we're seeing more stalls now. I'd also like to look around item shops, if you don't mind." Hikari and Ciel were very interested by the talk about stalls. *But it's not necessarily just eateries, guys. We'll have to go around and see what's there.*

"Right. Let me give you this first. You can use your own money to buy what you like." I handed Hikari a few coppers. She might want to go off on her own again sometime, and she'd need practice in spending her own money.

There were more people around than there'd been the last time I walked around this area, with more stalls on either side of the street. That meant the roads had become even narrower, which made the place even more crowded than it might have been otherwise. That was one reason I took Hikari's hand as we walked.

There seemed to be even more of a skip in Hikari's step than usual. "Master, that looks good." "Master, what is that shop?" "That stall stinks." She talked a lot and seemed much more excited than usual. Many of the stalls served things that you could eat while walking, but there were also scattered places to sit and eat.

Hikari rushed over to one stall, paid some money for a meat skewer, and quickly wolfed it down, even though she'd just eaten breakfast. *Yeah, Ciel, I know you want some too. You can't have any now, though, so wait until later.* I let Hikari lead me around while having telepathic exchanges like that with Ciel.

We were now heading toward a place that featured bread shaped a little different than the usual. Bread in this world was generally puffed up like a ball, but the stuff at this stall used a thinner kind containing a slit into which meat and vegetables were inserted. *A little bit like a pita pocket, I guess?* Hikari stared at it with great interest, but she'd never seen anything like it before, so she was hesitant. Part of her reticence likely stemmed from the fact that she had to spend her own money now. It did look a little more expensive than the bread sold at other stalls.

I ordered one and took a bite. There was a lot of filling relative to the bread, so it was quite a substantial treat. The seasoning was pretty rich, but the bread balanced it out wonderfully, and I quickly downed the whole thing.

I was about to take a second bite when I noticed Hikari staring at the bread in my hand. I held it up to her, and she took a big bite. She chewed on it for a while before an expression of surprise popped up on her face.

Got it. You want some too, huh? I said to Ciel telepathically. She did a little dance in response.

"Huh? What's that?" Among the lines of stalls, one in particular drew my eye. They didn't sell food, but various goods all in white. There were ribbon accessories, eye masks, and more.

"Oh, how can I help you, sir?" the merchant called. "I see you've got a mask already, but we have some better ones!"

"What do you use them for?"

"There are no specific rules about them. There's just been a kind of tradition of wearing white to the Advent Festival—to create a sense of unity, I guess. That's why I'm selling white sundries. For the girl there...I think these wristbands might be nice."

Wouldn't a ribbon have been more standard for a girl? Or maybe he was making that suggestion based on the skewer in her hand and the sauce around her mouth?

I looked around and indeed saw a lot of people wearing at least one spot of white. In the spirit of "when in Rome," I bought one item for each of us too: a mask for me and a ribbon for Hikari.

"But what are the masks for?" I asked. The shopkeeper explained that some members of the priesthood wore them, so people followed their example. I found that claim a little dubious, though.

After that, I stopped in at a few item shops. After getting my errands done, I went back to wandering the stalls and looked over some spices in a grocery shop along the way.

"Are you okay with spicy, Hikari?"

"Nothing too spicy!"

Ciel, you don't like spice, right? I asked her telepathically, and she nodded firmly back.

Should I buy some for myself, then? I bought a little bright red powder, and Ciel's eyes opened wide as she looked at me. It wasn't like I was buying it to make her suffer, though. It was for my own personal use.

"Want to take a break and have lunch? We've bought a bunch of things already, but were there any other foods that caught your eye?" Hikari's expression brightened at this suggestion, and she started pulling me by the hand.

She eventually led me to a shop that was frying up hunks of meat so thick you could use them as a weapon. *Um, they aren't* actually *clubs, right?*

"Master, I want to try one of these." It was the kind of thing you might call "manga meat." It did look tasty, but wasn't it a bit much? It looked expensive too. Maybe the reason Hikari hadn't bought any before was because she didn't have enough money.

They seemed to be cooking slowly at a low temperature, and the smell of the dripping juices stimulated the appetite. Many of the people buying them were on the big, burly side. *Adventurers, perhaps?*

Our group also bought three (I picked a slightly smaller one for my own)—as well as some vegetable soup, in the interest of a balanced diet—and started walking. We needed to find an isolated spot to eat together with Ciel, after all.

Ciel, is there someplace nearby without a lot of people? I asked. She flew up high into the sky, looked around, then came back down.

We followed her lead to a place sort of like a park, decked out in flowers of all kinds of colors, and very relaxing. I suspected it was usually a place of quiet reflection for the people of the holy capital, but it was currently deserted due to the festival.

Still, there was no guarantee that nobody would come by, so we moved to a place a bit deeper in, sat down, and had lunch. Hikari

dug into the meat with a beaming smile, while Ciel started chewing on a piece about as big as she was. I had to wonder where she stored it all, but she stayed on the meat until she finished it, as if she couldn't stop herself after taking her first bite.

"Master, that was delicious," Hikari said.

Ah, you've got gravy all over your mouth. I used my Cleanse spell to take care of it. I wasn't sure if the magic would work on Ciel, but the parts of her that had been discolored with juice became pristine again when I used it. Ciel was happy to see it, while I was just surprised that it had worked on her.

"Well? Want to walk around a little more?" I asked Hikari after our break was over.

We'd been to quite a number of stalls, but it was still only a portion of the city as a whole. There must have been a lot of visitors after all, though, or a lot of unusual goods on sale, because all the stalls seemed mobbed as we passed by. There were a lot of those stalls selling white goods, and I just caught sight of a couple buying white masks. There were also girls tying their hair with white ribbons.

Hikari and Ciel seemed to take a different perspective as we walked around, ignoring the goods shops to home in on the food stalls. But of course, they'd already eaten so much that anything we bought just ended up in my Item Box. The girls looked at me with pleading eyes, but I hardened my heart and made them hold off. I didn't want them eating so much they made themselves sick.

When I told them that, Hikari nodded obediently. The realization that a stomachache might make it that much harder for her to eat in the future seemed to have done the trick. Ciel acted like she was willing to take that risk, but if she started eating then Hikari would want to eat, so I turned her down.

We walked around a little longer in that spirit, and the next thing I knew, we'd come to an area that seemed largely abandoned. We'd passed through a kind of back-alley route thinking it might be a shortcut back to the action, but apparently I was wrong.

"This is an odd place. Should we go back to where we were?" When you were lost, the best course of action was to stop and return to a place you knew.

We were about to turn back when Hikari suddenly stopped. I was about to ask why when suddenly I heard running footsteps, and a person sprang out from a side street, followed a bit later by several others.

The leading figure was dressed in a flowing robe with their face hidden behind a hood. When they noticed us they paused, then ran up and shouted desperately, “I’m being chased. Help me!”

They then got around behind me. *Using me as a shield?* The hood was pulled down so low that I couldn’t tell their gender, but the voice sounded female.

I glanced behind me and then turned my eyes to the group in front of me. Their matching robes were a very light gray, almost white, with similar necklaces.



[**Name:** Regulus / **Job:** Priest / **Level:** 11 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

I appraised their apparent leader and discovered that he was a Priest.

“Would you mind please giving her back to us?” he asked harshly.

I turned back and appraised the woman behind me.

[**Name:** Mia / **Job:** Saint / **Level:** 6 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

Saint? Wouldn’t that be the woman who first received the Goddess’s prophecies? I thought I might have misread it at first, so I appraised her again, but I got the same result. This was definitely the Saint standing in front of me.

A saint being chased by priests… Was it that old trope? When a high-ranking person slips out on their duties and causes trouble for the people in their orbit? I’d thought that was just a thing in fiction, but maybe it could happen in real life too.

I had a feeling that getting involved in this could leave me mixed up in something unpleasant, so…

“Go on and take her.” I held up my hands to show I wouldn’t put up a fight.

“How can you say that? They’re villains!” the woman shouted at me. *Could you please not yell in my ears? It really hurts…*

Perhaps surprised that I’d just done as he told me, the pursuing figure seemed to hesitate for a moment. Hikari appeared completely uninterested, while Ciel was looking back and forth, seeming anxious for some reason.

I looked back, then stepped behind the girl—Mia—and nudged her forward. She stumbled two steps out and began to pitch over. Regulus panicked as he saw it, ran out, and reached out to catch her, but Mia managed to stop herself on the third step and pushed him violently away instead.

Regulus was slammed back into the crowd of robed men behind him. He took down a few others on the way, and the ones who avoided the collateral damage just looked on, stunned.

“Wh-What are you doing? You can’t just shove an innocent woman! You beast, you fool, you unfeeling wretch!” Mia screamed back at me. Her face under her hood had turned bright red; perhaps she was agitated.

But responding in kind would be a losing battle. I just didn’t want to be drawn into any more nonsense. My plate was already full. Meanwhile, Regulus seemed shocked that she’d pushed him like that when he was just trying to help her.

“Master, want to go?” Hikari asked me, seeming to pick up on my feelings.

“Yeah, let’s pretend we didn’t see this. Just an uneventful detour,” I agreed.

“W-Wait just a minute!” I saw Mia coming back at me out of the corner of my eye.

Just then, Hikari let out a hurried cry. “Master!”

Something whizzed through the air at us. I turned around and stepped forward, throwing out a hand to push Mia behind me. My hand met something soft as I did. *I-It wasn’t on purpose, okay?*

Mia went flying back at Regulus and the others, while a shock of pain flew up my arm. I almost screamed, but I gritted my teeth and held it in.

I turned my gaze to the source of the pain and saw an arrow sticking out of my arm. Enduring the pain, I checked my automap with Detect Presence and Detect Mana; they showed me a signal quickly moving away. Since their ambush had failed, they must have decided to withdraw without firing a second shot.

Both Mia and her pursuers were shocked by what they’d just seen.

“Are you all right, master?” Hikari looked at me, worried.

Hearing those words, Mia sprang into action. “L-Let me see it!” She reached out to touch the arrow, but I stopped her with my other hand.

“Wait, it might be poisoned. It’s dangerous, so don’t touch it,” I shouted, bearing up under the pain. *Dannnng, that hurts!*

Hikari was looking at me worriedly, so I stayed calm. I moved my right arm to make it easier to take the arrow out with my left. I knew through Appraisal that the arrowhead was coated in poison. I severed it with wind magic, steeled myself, then pulled out the arrow’s shaft.

Ah, it's bleeding now. I felt strangely detached as I watched it, but I would definitely be losing a lot of blood at this rate. I was just thinking I'd need some healing magic when suddenly I heard the word "Heal" from beside me.

The healing spell had been cast by Mia. As the wound on my arm closed, she said, "Recovery," then went limp and collapsed.

Recovery—that was a spell Tricia had mentioned. It could cure status effects. I didn't need it because I had total poison resistance anyway, but of course Mia hadn't known that.

Mia's face, peeking out from beneath the hood, had gone pale. I moved instinctively to catch her and found her body strangely heavy for her petite size. She must really have been out cold. At the same time, I felt like I'd seen this somewhere before. It looked like she'd spent all her MP.

Do holy spells consume a lot more MP than other kinds? Her level seems low, though. Maybe that's why? Giving her a mana potion might wake her up, but the only way to administer one when the other person was unconscious was... *Huh? Actually, didn't I recover awfully fast that one time it knocked me unconscious?* I realized.

It was Regulus who broke me out of my thoughts. "What are you going to do with her?" he asked.

I wasn't actually sure, to be honest. That arrow before had definitely been targeting Mia. Regulus and the others still seemed eager to take her into custody, but the arrow had changed things. Mia had actively tried to help someone who had treated her so roughly just moments earlier. She'd given off a selfish image, but maybe she wasn't as bad as she seemed.

I'd made a hasty choice earlier because I didn't want to get dragged into someone else's business, but maybe I should give it greater thought now. Still, I had nothing to base a decision on. Maybe I should talk to someone trustworthy who worked with the church?

"Master, what do we do?" Hikari asked.

"When you don't know something, ask someone who does."

"What? Where are you going?!" Regulus asked.

"Just be quiet and follow me. I'm not even sure if I can trust you people or not."

"D-Don't be ridiculous!" he protested. He seemed overly angry at my words, but maybe that was only natural. I'd just changed my

position completely, after all.

I picked up the arrow, taking great care with the head, and then started walking. The men talked among themselves for a moment, and Regulus seemed to make the decision to follow me. They must have realized that I wasn't out to harm Mia.

Obviously I didn't go to a church, but headed straight back to the Apostel household.

Being members of the church body, the men seemed to recognize it, and they froze up with shocked expressions as it came into view. I left them to their own devices and called to the doorman, who summoned the butler, Lond.

"Welcome back, sir. And who might these people be?" Lond asked, looking first at the girl in my arms and then at the group gathered behind me.

"I seem to have gotten mixed up in some trouble. If possible...I was hoping you might call Mr. Dan in?"

"Yes, sir. Please come right this way. I'll prepare a room for her to rest in."

I left the girl with a maid, and ended up waiting in the drawing room for the moment.

"You have some gall calling me out at a time like this. I'm a busy man, you know!"

That's the first thing out of your mouth? I'm not exactly happy about all this myself... And are you even sure you want to act like this? Your older daughter is glaring at you like you're trash. And even though you say you're busy, didn't you ditch your work just the other day?

"So..." Dan switched gears, seemingly noticing for the first time that I wasn't the only one there. *Do you not even see your daughter?* He looked at the group standing a little ways away and frowned.

"It's been some time, Your Eminence. I am Regulus, head attendant to our illustrious Saint."

"Ah? And what is her head attendant doing in my house?" Dan asked.

Regulus hesitated and glanced over at me. Maybe he couldn't speak too openly about it.

"I can see we're in the way, so we'll take our leave now," I offered.

“Master, no more outing?”

“Not today. We’ll go out another time.”

We could always hit up the guild the next day, and I could leave the complicated business to the adults. So Hikari, Yor, and I all stood up and left the room.

“What will you do next, instructor?” Yor asked me.

“Master, if we’re not going out again, I want to study magic,” Hikari said.

“Well, you heard her,” I replied. *She wants to study, huh?* I definitely hadn’t expected that. I’d hated studying when I was her age, and I’d always just crammed the bare minimum before the test before forgetting it all. The purity of Hikari’s enthusiasm was nearly blinding. *Ah, but if I could’ve learned magic, maybe I would’ve liked studying too…*

“Then I’ll tell the others right away,” Yor agreed. “I’m going to get the hang of mana regulation at last!”

And here’s another eager learner. Maybe this was a phenomenon exclusive to the study of magic.

After that, we got together in our study room and continued our lessons about infusing things with mana. Hikari couldn’t cast spells, but she was getting the hang of infusing a magistone with mana. However, it would take some time to use it in combat, so it might not be practically useful just yet.

Yor and Layla also seemed to be figuring it out. Detect Mana let me perceive even the smallest movements of mana, so it was helpful for them to have me watching too.

“Mistress, is Master Sora with you?” There was a polite knock, and then a maid entered with a question for me. “The master of the house wishes to speak with you. Would you be willing to return to the drawing room?”

I tensed up when I heard that Dan wanted to speak to me again, but I didn’t want to make trouble for the maid by refusing, so I nodded. “Be back soon.”

I returned to the room in question and saw the men sitting across from each other, wearing troubled expressions.

“I heard you wanted to speak to me?” I prompted.

“Yes, Regulus here filled me in. It seems that you saved the Saint’s life, so I’d like to offer my gratitude on behalf of the Church. Thank you.”

“May I ask…are you saying that that girl is the Saint, then?” I’d seen that with Appraisal, but I wanted to be sure.

“That’s correct. She is the…current Saint.”

“But I’m sure you didn’t call me here just to thank me, right?” If that were all, he wouldn’t have needed Regulus there.

“That’s right.” Dan cast a glance at Regulus and perhaps saw a nod of agreement, because he then said, “We’ll be housing the Saint here for a few days.”

“Isn’t that up to the Church? I don’t see why you’d need to talk about it with me.”

“That’s true. But Regulus was hoping you’d look after her during her stay.”

“I hate to admit it, but when Her Holiness was attacked, none of us could do anything to help her,” Regulus said. “Meanwhile, you protected her immediately. We’re asking this in deference to your skills.”

“Still…it was just kind of a coincidence that I was in a position to do that,” I countered. “And if someone’s trying to kill her, wouldn’t it be best to just not let her out?” I wouldn’t want them blaming me if something did go wrong. I really didn’t want any trouble.

“There are quite a few factors in play, you see. Saint Mia also seems to be cracking a bit under the pressures she’s been experiencing, so I was hoping this could serve as a bit of a breather as well.” Regulus seemed to mean the words earnestly.

“Obviously we’ll leave some guards here to help keep her safe. But we have no skilled person about the same age as Saint Mia…so we might draw attention if we were to stay with her, which I’d like to avoid. His Eminence told us that his daughter’s classmates were staying at his home at present, so I was hoping she could go around with other girls her age.”

His logic made sense. I was getting the impression that Mia lived a stifling, cloistered life. People of a certain status were typically held to rigid expectations, and I assumed that was the case here too. That said, Mia also seemed to have a rebellious streak that didn’t match the idea of a princess in a walled garden.

“Well,” I said finally, “you should probably tell Layla and the others about the situation and get their approval, not just mine. Having her around might carry some kind of risk. You should also decide if she’s allowed to leave the house or not.”

It wasn't like we were going to spend all our time indoors. At the very least, the girls, especially Tricia, were looking forward to the Advent Festival. They'd probably want to go out and see all kinds of things. It wasn't like they could just come to this city every day.

Hikari and I also had lots of stuff we needed to do. We'd seen a lot in the holy capital today, but there were many little things we hadn't yet experienced. And we'd been told that more stalls would appear as the Advent Festival grew closer.

"Good point. Lond, would you please call the others in?"

Once the whole group was present, Dan explained the situation. Ah, but would accepting this compromise my ability to make money? That would be a problem. I needed money to buy Sera...

"I understand the situation. But we have things we want to do, too, so I don't think we can be with her all the time. And what should we do if she wants to go out again?" Layla asked.

"Try to do what she asks to the degree that you can."

"We also have plans to leave town and sightsee. What should we do if she wants to join us there?"

"If you set up a plan in advance, we don't mind," he said after thinking for a moment. "We'll prepare an ID for her."

I wasn't sure whether Dan's momentary pause was him considering Mia's personality, or realizing that leaving town might give them a chance to catch the ones who were targeting her. Either way, he'd probably be sending top-of-the-line guards out to minimize the danger.

And though it wasn't technically an escort fee, he said he'd give us some compensation. I wondered whether this was because he'd read my mind or because he had intentions of his own, but the furrows in Dan's brow told me nothing.

◇Mia's Perspective 1

"Where am I?"

I awoke to the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling. I tried to sit up, but I found it hard to move.

I've felt this way before. I can't remember when. It was when I was little, I think. Just once.

I liked things better back then. We may have been poor, but my family and I were so happy. Mom was there, and dad, and the newborn Shiro.

Shiro was our pet dog. I'm pretty sure I was the one who named him. Thinking back, it might have been a bit simplistic, but at the time I thought it was the best name ever.

Yes, that was the feeling—when Shiro got badly injured, and I cried and prayed and cried, and then I felt something seem to float out of my body and fell unconscious. This was how I felt when I woke up afterward.

Perhaps that was the moment when my life changed.

Moving only my head, I looked around the room. At the very least, this wasn't my room, and it wasn't inside the church. It gave a rather austere impression, but at the same time, it was strangely calming. Was it the mild color scheme that did it?

After lying still for a while, I felt like my strength was finally returning, and I took my time sitting up at last. I was a little tired and thirsty too. There was a pitcher of water on the table, so I poured some into a cup and drank. I couldn't stop myself. *Ah, how refreshing!* I felt my strength coming back to me.

Just then I heard a knock, and the door opened. I looked over and saw several unfamiliar girls coming in. I looked at each of them in turn, then noticed the boy who came in behind them and remembered.

The mask was different, but there was no mistaking that distinctive black hair. I'd asked him for help and he'd pushed me away. *Ah...and in the heat of the moment, I ended up pushing Regulus. I'll definitely get a lecture for that one!*

No, that wasn't the important part. That wasn't...

I felt a sudden spark of rage inside me. *Ugh, that sensation!* I remembered now.

"Y-You awful pervert!" I found myself shouting. My face felt hot, and I wondered if it was bright red.

I don't know where I found the strength, but suddenly I was standing spread-legged on the bed. I was pointing in the direction of the girls, but obviously, I meant to aim at the boy.

One of the girls—tall, slim, and mature-looking—turned back to me and smiled. Her smile was bright and friendly, yet it still sent a chill up my spine. *Brr!*

“Where did that come from?” she inquired. “Such a rude thing to say.”

I suppose I had shouted out a little abruptly. I was a total stranger, while the two of them probably knew each other. She would surely be inclined to believe him over me.

But I couldn’t back down now. *Th-This is about m-my…*

A-Anyway, I just can’t let it stand!

“Th-That boy touched my ch-chest,” I stammered. “He touched it!” I cried out my heart’s truth, undeterred by that terrifying smile. I was truly proud of myself.

Ah, her smile disappeared. In its place, waves of anger began to rise off of her body. She spun around, tromped up to the boy, and started arguing with him. No… It was more like she was one-sidedly berating him.

Then my exhaustion reasserted itself, and I sat back down on the bed. *Ugh, now I’m embarrassed about standing up like that…*

“Um, Saint Mia. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m the eldest daughter of the Apostel family, Yor Apostel.”

Apostel… I believe that’s the name of one of the cardinals, I remembered. “I’m Mia. Um, may I ask what I’m doing here?” I’d forgotten—the most important thing at the moment was finding out what had happened to me.

“Er, you don’t remember?” she asked. “I’ve only heard the story secondhand myself, so I don’t know everything, but I was told that someone tried to kill you and my instructor saved you. He got hurt in the process, and you healed him.”

The blood drained from my face. I’d been so distracted by the touch against my breast that I’d forgotten. The arrow had flown at me, and then…

That’s right. He was saving me. He didn’t touch me on purpose. It must have been an accident. I’d been so mortified that my emotions had taken over, and I’d lashed out at him in ignorance.

“I-I just remembered that. So if you could…please stop them?” I looked and saw the boy looking completely deflated, while the angry girl seemed even angrier than before.

Yor heard my request, gave me a strained smile, and walked over to them. I heard snippets of the conversation, like “Elder sister, it’s a misunderstanding.”

After that had settled down, the older girl came over to me. I

was a little nervous at first, but when we actually talked I realized she was a kind, understanding person. The girls were students who went to school with Cardinal Dan's daughter Yor and were currently in an adventuring party together.

Tricia was the one of the six who was particularly interested in me, looking at me with sparkling eyes. She took my hands and pumped them up and down happily. She seemed to be a user of holy spells, and she said she was delighted to meet me, the Saint…

But I still didn't feel like we could be friends. *Th-That chest of hers…*

Then there was the boy, Sora. He was walking around with a slave. Was he a pervert? And what was with that mask? Maybe he was hiding leering eyes behind it. Since I couldn't see his expression, I had to be alert. *But he did save my life, didn't he?* I decided to thank him, at least.

Hikari, Sora's slave, was glaring at me hard. I felt an urge to run up to her and squeeze her tight. Was it because I'd been thinking about Shiro? But the minute I stood up to approach her, she hid behind Sora's back.

Yuri was Yor's little sister, who gave me a proper and polite greeting. Was it just my imagination that she seemed the most put-together of them all?

After the introductions were over, we talked about what to do next. It looked like I wouldn't have to return to the church, and I'd get to enjoy the Advent Festival. I wasn't too excited about living in an unfamiliar place for so long, but it seemed like an acceptable trade-off. I wouldn't have free rein, but they said they'd take me with them when they went out.

Will that be all right? Obviously I'll like it better than being trapped in my room, but… Ah, but I would like to visit that sweets shop the novices mentioned…

Maybe I'd ask about that soon.

A Quiet Conversation 1

A boy sat working at a desk in a white room. He smiled a beaming smile that reflected his still childlike nature.

“Ah, good. So the attack ended in failure,” he mused. The news was pleasing to him. He was still making preparations of his own, and he hadn’t expected them to jump the gun like that. “Ah, His Holiness really is a troublemaker. Got a little hasty, didn’t he?”

I’ll have to adjust the reins again… he thought. *Maybe I’ll even do* that *again? A bit of a chore, but I don’t really have much choice…*

“I should focus on getting them to keep their heads down until it’s time. I wonder what kind of verse I should use…” He’d have to rack his brain for a new prophecy. At the same time, he had to hold his annoyance and destructive urges at bay.

The preparations for the matter in question were proceeding smoothly, after all. He’d need to make sure to stamp out any nonsense in the meantime.

“Greetings, Your Holiness. Thank you for making time today.”

“Of course. What did you want to discuss with me?”

“The matter of the Saint,” I replied.

His true pettiness showed in his facial reaction to that word. “It’s about that, is it?” he scoffed. “In fact, I’ve just received a new prophecy.”

“You have?! That’s incredible, Your Holiness!” A very basic use of flattery, but it lifted the crankiness off the old Pope’s face. He was so easy to manipulate.

“Yes, and it says…” He began to explain. It was hard to keep myself in check while the old fool prattled on, but I managed to do so.

“I see. In that case…” I made a suggestion.

“Hrm, yes, that sounds fine,” the Pope replied. “That will strengthen my authority as well. As for the prophecy… Being members of the faithful, we *must* see it fulfilled. And most of all, that girl must be punished for her deceit.”

Is this man really the ruler of an entire kingdom? What a farce. “So,

regarding the assassination order, is it safe to assume you'll be putting it on hold for now?"

I'd apparently managed to stop the assassination attempts. I had no personal grudge against the girl, but she had been chosen to be the Saint. I had no appraisal ability of my own, but that person had checked, and so there could be no doubting it. The Saint was dangerous to our lord, and so I had to be rid of her, simple as that.

Not yet, though. Letting her die in silence wouldn't be effective. She needed a public execution, so that the eventual revelation of the mistake would be a massive blow to the power of the Pope, to the Church, and to everyone who had demanded it.

"Yes, I'll leave it to you," the Pope replied.

I bowed. "I serve only you, Your Holiness."

At those words, he nodded in satisfaction.

What would this man's face look like when he learned the truth? I couldn't wait to see. And it wasn't just him... Imagining those expressions of despair on the faces of all the humans set my heart racing.

Deep in the dark forest, there were traces of an investigation.

"Hmm, did someone find it?" I wondered.

Not that I minded. I wasn't exactly hiding it. I'd never expected it to be something I *could* hide. But if a commotion were raised now, it would ruin my carefully laid plan.

Should I just unleash it now? I thought for a moment, then reconsidered. Doing that would cancel out my own spell, after all.

"The adventurers' guild won't announce it without a good reason, so I just need to fine-tune things on my end."

It had taken many years of preparation. We didn't want to get sloppy right at the end, and this one thing shouldn't cause too much of a shock to the system.

"Honestly, just breathing the same air as them makes me sick. I've managed to bear it up till now, though..."

I suppressed my desire to see that person as well.

I'd just have to be thorough so as to have no regrets.

Chapter 4

My reunion with Mia had been very exhausting. I'd spent most of it getting chewed out by Layla, who had been furious for reasons I couldn't quite fathom. Now it was all cleared up, the anger was gone, and we were having a leisurely tea party around a table. Though our...guest (?), Mia, seemed kind of deflated, as if she'd been dealt a serious mental blow.

Beside her, Tricia, who was usually very quiet, was peppering her with questions. No one made a move to help her.

"She's like Yor asking about magic," I breathed. Yor objected to this comparison, although I noticed that she was the only one who did.

Yuri, sitting across from them, must have been interested, too, because she was listening intently. It seemed the Saint wasn't the kind of person you just ran into every day, and maybe they considered it a great honor as a church family. But, unfortunately, I didn't get that sense from Yor.

I took a drink of my tea and turned on Detect Mana. From what I could see, Mia's MP hadn't fully recovered yet, but she still had quite a lot of mana. I'd thought she might have a low supply of it because she was low-level, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Yet using just Heal and Recovery drained her dry. Has she ever used those spells before?

"Excuse me, Your Saintliness," I said.

"J-Just call me Mia. And what is it?"

She still sounded a little tense. *You don't have to cover your chest, you know. In fact, I resent the implication...* "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" was all that I said, though.

As if sensing that my mood was serious, Mia straightened up to listen.

"You seemed to use holy magic to heal me," I continued. "Did you use any other spells today?"

"No, not today."

The guilty expression on her face... Was she thinking about how she'd abandoned her church duties? "Do you use holy magic in

your day-to-day life?"

"I use it occasionally, when someone who's wounded comes to visit. On the worst days, I use it about ten times."

That made sense for a Saint. The pride she seemed to take in it was actually a little charming. "Have you ever collapsed like you did today?"

"C-Certainly not. Why do you ask?"

Aha. This is making less and less sense. I pondered it silently.

"Why are you asking me this?" she asked nervously when I didn't say anything.

I looked up and saw Mia's worried eyes on me. "Well, it looks to me like you have pretty decent mana levels," I explained. "So I was wondering why you collapsed."

"Yes, that's true," Yor chimed in, seeming equally confused. "You wouldn't normally collapse from just using two spells." Even if holy spells did consume more mana than regular ones, Mia was already using them in her daily life, and she didn't seem to know a lot about how they worked.

I seemed to remember Chris saying that using magic increased your mana a little bit. My own MP never went up through the use of magic, but then, my own stats and levels increased in a nonstandard way, so my experience wasn't anything to go by.

"Has anything like this happened before?" I asked her.

"Once. When I was a child, my puppy Shiro was injured, and I passed out after frantically healing him."

"What about this time, then?"

"I-I certainly was panicked. After what I'd just seen..." she stammered, her face turning red.

She must have been shocked to see me take that arrow right in front of her. *But that's no reason to blush like that, is it?* Or was she just embarrassed that she'd passed out simply from using magic twice?

I searched for commonalities between the two stories. *She was panicked, so...* Did she lose control of her mana while emotionally disordered? Or was the outcome of a spell linked to one's mental state?

"Could you just have lost control of your mana?" I asked. "If so, it's probably nothing to be too concerned about, since it sounds like you've been fine using it in the past."

Everyone nodded, seeming to accept that explanation. Except for one person…

"U-Um… Does that mean I might pass out again?" she asked timidly.

I nodded.

"Is there any way to prevent that?"

It wasn't impossible, I guessed. "Raising your level should boost your mana, but…"

"Level?" she asked.

Huh? She's never even heard of levels? "Um, basically, defeating monsters helps you mature, which increases stuff like your mana quantities. Layla, guys, do you know what I mean?" I asked the room.

"It has sometimes felt like defeating a monster made me more powerful," Layla answered.

"Yes, like my body felt lighter," Talia chimed in.

"Or the power of my spells increased, or I could use more of them," Tricia added.

"I feel like my spells also last longer than they did before, though I always assumed it came from using them more often," Yor put in.

The people in the castle knew about the concept of levels, so I'd assumed it was common knowledge. Was it actually not? But talking about it any further wouldn't get us closer to an answer.

It seemed, instead, like Mia's problem was releasing too much mana at once. In that case, rather than increasing the total amount, practicing to control her mana better would be the order of the day. That meant putting her in Yor's care would probably be the best idea. Mia didn't seem to have friends her age anyway, so this might be a good pick-me-up for her.

Meanwhile, I wanted to make a new fifth gun to replace my broken fourth-generation model. I didn't have many chances to use them, but having one on hand for self-defense made me feel a lot better, even though of course I couldn't use it with other people around.

"Do you mind if I ask for your aid?" Mia asked the girls nervously.

"Of course. Please join us, Saint Mia." Tricia seemed very excited.

Yor also smiled. Maybe they were happy to have another kindred spirit?

It feels a little like a school club meeting, I thought as I watched them get down to chatting.

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How did things turn out this way? Mia was sitting across from me, with Hikari sitting beside me.

They'd said they were going to run their usual study group, so I left it to them while I returned to my room, hoping to do a little alchemy. I'd gotten out my stuff and started making a few things.

That had been just two hours ago. Then Mia and Hikari had come into my room after a timid knock, and Mia had walked up to me listlessly.

"So you tried a lot of things and just couldn't do it?" I'd asked.

Mia nodded weakly. *It seems a little hasty to give up after just an hour, though...* Layla and Yor had drawn from their experience to teach Hikari and Yuri, so the study group seemed to be producing good results. Yet in this case, it hadn't. They'd apparently tried to reverse engineer a basic explanation of magic based around Mia's holy spells, and she'd had no comprehension of what they were even saying.

Still, was it okay to come ask for help from someone to whom you'd had such a violent negative reaction before? Was she just that desperate? Hikari explained that Mia had originally wanted to come alone, but Layla had asked Hikari to join her. It did seem like she was trying very hard to control her mana.

"What didn't you understand?" I asked.

"Everything," she said despondently.

"Mia, has anyone ever properly taught you how to use your holy spells?"

"No. They just appeared in my head one day, and I could use them."

Now that she mentioned it, she hadn't used incantations for her Heal or Recovery spells. *So she just says the name of the spell and it activates instantly? Could holy magic be fundamentally different from other kinds?* But then what about Tricia? Of course, she could use lifestyle spells and so on too...

“Hey, could you try healing me once?” I asked after some thought.

“Very well.” Mia paused. “Heal.”

Even with Detect Mana, I didn’t notice any fluctuations in her mana before and after she cast it.

“Wh-What? Was that strange?” she asked.

It felt to me like Mia used magic the same way I did, without having to recite a long chant beforehand. “Mia, could you show me your practice tool?”

“Sure.” She did so.

“Can you infuse it with mana?”

“I tried what they explained, but I couldn’t work it out. I don’t think I can perceive…mana, was it? At all.”

Hmm, that’s a problem. Being able to perceive your own mana was kind of a baseline thing. If she couldn’t even do that, there wasn’t much I could do for her. Though, of course, I could only do it because I had the Regulate Mana skill…

Then again, Hikari had started out the same way, so maybe Mia would be able to do it too with time? But maybe she felt like she didn’t have that much time…

I fell silent in thought, and Mia looked at me nervously. The expression on her face made her look a little like an abandoned puppy.

“Wh-What’s so funny?” she asked.

Had I been smiling? Her nervous expression was gone, replaced by a sulking one that felt more appropriate to her age. She’d seemed so tense, like she was trying too hard, but that disappeared in that moment. Maybe having an important position like the Saint left little time to relax.

“Hold out your hands,” I said. She did so, and I took them. She looked surprised, but redness gradually spread over her face and she turned her eyes down.

I wished she wouldn’t react that way. It made me feel self-conscious too.

“I’m not sure if this will work, but I’m going to channel some of my mana into you. Let me know if you feel anything.” I checked for her consent, then channeled just a little bit of mana from my right hand.

I’d been thinking a few things over, searching for a better way to

explain it to her, and this was what I'd come up with. If I channeled my mana into someone, they'd be able to sense the change.

Why didn't I do this with Layla and the others, you wonder? B-Because it was too embarrassing, of course! And what about now, you ask? I was still embarrassed, naturally, but Mia was desperate enough that I sucked it up.

"Well? Feel anything?" I prompted her.

"I don't know."

"I'll make it a little stronger, then. Let me know if you feel anything."

I increased the amount of mana I was channeling, adjusting it as I monitored Mia's expression. *Ah, a twitch in the corner of her eye. Did she sense something?*

"It feels a little strange," she said, "but I feel something warm flowing in through my left palm."

"Really? I'll make it a little stronger, then." I gradually increased the flow of mana, and Mia's breathing started to pick up. "A-Are you all right?" I asked.

"Y-Yes. I'm fine. Could you make it a bit stronger? I feel like I've almost got it." A serious expression appeared on her face, her brow wrinkled. I could feel her desperation to try to get the hang of it.

I increased the flow of mana as she requested. I was keeping a tight leash on it, of course, but I was still a little nervous. *Channeling mana like this won't make her explode or something, will it?* But the mana wasn't doing anything unusual as far as I could tell, so it should be fine. The mana I sent out through my right hand flowed through Mia's body and returned through my left.

Meanwhile, Mia was trembling and letting out some pretty sensual moans... *Does she not notice it or something?* Feeling a little like I was seeing something I shouldn't see, I looked away in an attempt to distract myself.

Hikari was sitting next to me, watching Mia curiously. Ah, but looking away from Mia actually made it worse, since it left my imagination in control. *Is this some kind of test? Actually, if someone opens that door...I'm dead, right?* But Hikari was a witness, so I'd probably be fine. Assuming they listened to her.

Mia's uneven breathing was the only sound in the quiet room.

Empty your mind, I told myself. *Purge it of all worldly thoughts!*

At last, the silence was broken by a huge sigh from Mia. “That’s enough. I think I have a sense of it now.”

Her forehead was beaded with sweat, but she smiled from the bottom of her heart. It was the kind of smile that would stop a man in his tracks, and I couldn’t help but stare.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“You have a really beautiful smile,” I answered.

Whoops! Didn’t mean to say that out loud. Mia’s face went an even deeper red.

We were still holding hands, though, which I seemed to realize the same instant Mia did. She tried to let go, but I just held her hands tighter. “I-I’m not trying to be mean,” I reassured her, then cleared my throat. “I just want you to remember that feeling and try to channel mana back into me.”

“Yes, all right.” Her reticence slipped away and her expression turned serious.

“Start in your own time.” I relaxed and waited.

Mia took in a few deep breaths, and soon her breathing stopped. Her eyes were closed and she was concentrating.

Time passed. I tried to focus on the sensation in my palms, but I felt nothing.

More time passed uneventfully. I didn’t feel a single thing.

At last, Mia let out another huge sigh. When she looked up, she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

I let go of her hands and found that my palms were sweaty. “Nobody gets it right the first time,” I reassured her. “Let’s just take it slow.”

Mia didn’t respond, her face turned down. I wiped off my hands, patted her on the head, then stroked her hair. Mia looked up and met my eyes.

“I’ll say it one more time: No one gets it right the first time. Let’s just try again tomorrow.”

“All right.”

“Go rest for today, then. Until tomorrow.”

Quite a long time must have passed while we were concentrating. The sunlight pouring through the window had started to change color.

After I sent Mia back to her room, Hikari asked to try the same thing. I channeled mana into her, and...

“Mm. Tickles,” she said.

But it did seem to inspire something in her. Hikari picked up her tool and channeled mana into it, and then the magistone lit up even faster than before.

“Th-That’s amazing,” I said without thinking. Hikari smiled back in great satisfaction.

While looking at her smile, I started wondering if I could make a magic item that would let Mia better feel her own mana. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find anything like that on the alchemy list. The world wasn’t about to bend to all of my whims, apparently.

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The next morning, Mia asked for another mana practice session, but it turned out poorly once more. Seeing her so despondent broke my heart a little bit. I wanted to tell her not to be so sad about it. We’d only just started, after all.

Before going to the merchants’ guild, I had a mock duel to get some exercise in. I also invited Mia there to give her a change of scenery, and she tagged along. I’d actually invited her knowing I’d be putting on a bad showing, and as planned, I ended up kind of humiliated. Layla, at least, beat the heck out of me, though I held my own pretty well against the other girls.

I could’ve beaten her in a no-holds-barred fight, but then it wouldn’t be training. I was trying to get experience and learn the fundamentals of swordplay, after all.

“I suppose there are things even you can’t do, Sora,” Mia mused when it was over.

“That’s just how life is. There are things we’re good at and things we aren’t. Nobody can do it all from the start. I’ve tried a bunch of different things since I came here and just managed to eke out a living. So even if you don’t get it right away, there’s no need to panic.”

I cast Cleanse on Layla and the others. Yor’s house had bathing facilities, but it was hard to use them during the day, as the hot water took a lot of effort to prepare. You had to draw the water and then boil it. They used magistones to do that here, so it was easier than at other places I’d been, but magistones were still a finite resource. It wasn’t like my old world where you could do

everything with the push of a button.

Could I combine fire and water magic to make a hot bath? I'd have to test it if I got a chance sometime.

I asked the girls their schedules for the day and learned that Layla, Casey, Yor, and Tricia were heading to the adventurers' guild. Mock duels alone wouldn't keep them in shape, so they were going to check if there were any decent quests available.

Meanwhile, Talia and Luilui were staying home. They said they had something to take care of. Their eyes seemed a bit glazed over, so I guessed it was studying.

Hikari, Mia, and I went first to an item shop so I could sell my potions. Mia would've stood out in her white Saint garb, so she dressed in some civilian clothing she borrowed from Yor instead.

"Looks like you're not used to dressing that way," I'd said.

"I generally wear the robes they give me at the church, so..."

"I see. Well, you'll have plenty of time now to get used to it, right?"

Her eyes opened wide in surprise. *Did I say something weird?*

"Master, let's go," Hikari urged me while I was talking to Mia.

I know, okay? You're looking forward to walking around town today. There were a lot of places we hadn't been yet. It also seemed like Mia wanted to visit that sweets shop, so I'd ended up letting it slip that we might stop there too.

It was a lapse that I immediately regretted. She'd just smiled so happily when I said it, okay? I really didn't mind going again—I enjoyed sweets once in a while myself—but whether or not we could actually go depended on how much I could sell my potions for. Getting the money to buy Sera had to come first, and the more people I was treating, the more money I'd have to spend!

Before we left the house, I surreptitiously cast my Barrier spell on Mia. It would defend against a single attack. I could also use my automap and Detect Presence to keep an eye out, but there was always a chance we could be ambushed.

As we walked around town, Mia looked around even more excitedly than Hikari. *Whoops, she almost ran into the person in front of her.* Mia was too old for me to take her hand and guide her like I'd done with Hikari (I'd asked and found out she was a year older than me), so I asked Hikari to do it instead. Hikari offered her

other hand to me, but the three of us walking in a line would inconvenience others, so I turned it down. Also, how would she eat without a free hand?

Mia asked a lot of questions about the wares at the stalls, as if they were all brand-new to her. Of course, I hadn't seen a lot of them before myself. Hikari answered all of her questions, much to my relief. It was enough that I even got a shock at Hikari's explanation of what some of the items were for.

I ended up selling my potions at the merchants' guild. Why did I go around item shops, then? To drive a higher price during negotiations. If I didn't know the current going rates, they might bargain me down to less than the potions were worth. I'd asked about that, and they'd told me it was important for a merchant to always know market rates. It was a fair argument, but they were still basically trying to rip me off, right? Of course, I couldn't say anything, since I was also trying to get as much money from them as I could.

The rest came down to the amount I was selling. Thanks to that, I managed to earn 250 gold coins in one exchange. It had taken about half of my potion stock, though.

That wasn't all I'd found out on my trip around item shops either. The most important thing I'd learned involved the paralysis cures. Assuming they would fetch a rather high price, I'd asked the owner of the item shop about them, and he'd said that the cost of antidotes in particular depended a great deal on quality. Poison came in a variety of strengths, and a weak antidote wouldn't work at all on a strong poison. So, if you were going to fight monsters with strong poisons, you'd need high-quality antidotes.

I'd learned a lot of useful tidbits like that. The man who explained it looked a bit shocked by my ignorance, but I couldn't let that bother me.

"Now that I've got some money, I'd like to go to the slave trader's. Is that okay?" I asked when we were finished.

It was a rather sudden change of plans, but they both agreed to do it. I wasn't sure at first if it would be okay to take Mia, but she insisted on going, so I allowed it. I was also afraid she might run off if I left her on her own.

"What kind of slave are you buying? A special slave?" she asked. Apparently special slaves weren't looked on as negatively as other

kinds. Unfortunately, I wasn't after one, though there might have been some for sale. Sera had been a war slave, but maybe buying herself back meant she was more like a debt slave?

"Kind of a war slave, I guess? Or maybe a debt slave. I'm buying her because I need an escort. It's not for sex or anything, okay?" I had to say that to protect my own honor. I'd have been lying if I said the idea didn't appeal to me...but I wasn't about to say that out loud.

"It's my first time at a slave trader's," she admitted. It wasn't the kind of place normal people went, after all.

"Master, are you buying that person?" Hikari asked.

"That's the plan."

"She's dangerous. You shouldn't." Hikari was probably worried because she'd acted so hostile before.

"Don't worry. Leave it all to me." I wasn't sure *what* I was asking her to leave to me, but I patted her head so she'd feel less anxious.

"You're going to take someone dangerous as a slave?" Mia added more fuel to the fire.

"Look, it's okay. You sign a contract that makes it impossible for them to turn on their master." I had a way out, at least. "By the way, Mia, you're the Saint, right?"

"I am. Why?"

"Aren't you pretty famous? For such a celebrity, you seem pretty good at walking around without drawing attention."

"Ah, I do the same as you. I normally wear an eye mask so that people can't see my full face...though yours is a bit odder in that you even wear it at home. I don't come out in public very often either."

I didn't appreciate the little jibe she threw in there, but the rest of it made sense. She'd just look like a regular cute local girl to anyone who hadn't seen her true face. She didn't even have any kind of imposing aura.

"That's not true. Master, you're cool."

Was Hikari praising the mask now? She'd said I looked suspicious the first time. Familiarity could do amazing things, though, and I guessed she had gotten used to it by now.

We approached the slave traders' while having that silly conversation. The red light district was nearby, and I could see women coming home early in the morning dressed in some dicey

outfits. Mia's face turned red as she saw them, and she looked over at me scoldingly for some reason.

Uh, I've got nothing to do with that, okay? But apparently even in the holy capital, people had to satisfy their desires somehow.

My pride wounded, I just pretended not to notice and knocked on the door of the Howler Slave Company.

The shopkeeper, Dredd, looked surprised as he poked his head out, but he immediately plastered on an ingratiating smile and greeted me. A true professional.

"I've come to buy that slave we talked about." I told him what I was there for, and he led me to the room in question.

As usual, I felt a wave of hostility the second I entered. Mia let out a small scream, then grabbed onto my arm nervously. *Yeah, she's still growing,* I speculated as she pressed herself against me. *Prospects for the future, perhaps.*

"So, whaddya want?" Sera asked me.

"I got the money, so I've come to buy you."

"Did you show up with more women today on purpose?"

Dredd couldn't help but smile at that. It wasn't a good look for a slave trader, but he probably couldn't get angry with her, knowing her circumstances. Meanwhile, was Sera acting disagreeably on purpose to keep people from buying her? When I'd brought up the Eld Republic, she'd seemed a little less sure of herself.

No, maybe it was the opposite. She couldn't take a human on their word. That probably helped explain her prickly demeanor.

"Either way, you have no right to refuse. And..."

"And what?"

"I want you to try trusting a human. I promise you won't regret it."

If Rurika and Chris were there she'd probably have been okay with it, but they were currently in the Las Beastland, and I didn't really want to bring up their names until we were alone.

Besides, even though Sera had a dangerous reputation, someone might still buy her up because of her fighting prowess. Beastfolk seemed to be popular, they were stronger than humans, and she was quite cute despite her personality. In the end, the slave had no right to refuse as long as you had the money to buy them.

“Now, Master Sora. Do you mind if I confirm the money first?”

“Sure.” I held out my card.

“I’ve confirmed that you have five hundred golds on your card. Now let us check the terms of the contract.”

It was forbidden for a slave to harm the person they contracted with, but that became void if the slave themselves was in danger.

“It’s quite simple, then?” I asked.

“This is the basic contract for war slaves, and the definition of ‘danger’ is broadly applied. For instance, trying to force them into sex counts as danger. There are some who will consent if it means getting released sooner, though.”

“I agree to the terms.”

“Understood. Come over here, Sera.”

The contract was forged inside the magic circle, and the manacles on Sera’s hands and feet were removed.

I looked her over again and realized that the simple sackcloth she wore was rather alluring. She was a head shorter than me, but she definitely had it where it counted, which made it hard to know where to rest my eyes. The presence of the collar just made the sight even naughtier.

Perhaps sensing my lascivious thoughts, Mia requested a robe. I held it out to Sera and urged her to put it on. Sera must have been used to her current outfit and so didn’t give it a second thought, but she was intimidated enough by Mia’s hostility that she did as she was told.

“You’re awful,” Mia muttered.

It wasn’t on purpose! I wanted to shout, but I knew Mia still wouldn’t accept that, so I wouldn’t make excuses. I really had looked at her that way, and I’d just have to accept it.

“The contract is now complete. Best of luck to you. I’ll be heading back now, so make sure you talk to the clerk on the way out.”

Despite being a slave trader, he seemed like a decent enough guy. He knew Sera’s circumstances and even seemed kind of concerned about her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make this all worth your while.” That was all I could say, and I couldn’t guarantee that she’d believe it. “First…let’s get you some outfits and a weapon. But before that, we should have some introductions. I’m Sora, and this cute kid is Hikari. She’s

a special slave, so she's been doing this a bit longer than you."

"Hikari. I've been his slave longer, so ask me anything."

"And this is my...student, I guess? Mia."

"I'm Mia."

"She doesn't have any friends, so please be nice to her during your short time together."

I was trying to lighten the mood, but she stamped hard on my foot. *Harsh.*

"I'm Sera," Sera replied.

"Nothing else to say?"

"Not especially."

She was still on the prickly side. I was hoping she'd open up a bit, but maybe that was too much to hope for just yet.

First, we went to a clothing shop to buy Sera some clothes. Sera goggled at the sights around her on the way. Mia tried to strike up a conversation with her, but she got ignored for her efforts. She seemed sad about it, so I comforted her. *You were really brave,* I wanted to tell her. *Especially since you were so scared at first!*

After arriving, we started with three ordinary everyday outfits. They had to be altered to suit Sera's beastfolk characteristics, so that took a little time. I asked her if that was all she wanted, and she responded curtly that it was fine.

I took the opportunity to buy Mia some clothes, too, as she'd been looking on jealously. She demurred at first but then timidly picked out an outfit, and by the end she was bringing one after another to me and asking my opinion. They all looked the same to me, but Mia insisted that they were different.

Hikari scolded me harshly for my reaction, and even Sera looked a bit disbelieving. It wasn't like I had any fashion sense, though, so why would she ask me in the first place? Or apparently that didn't matter? I told her to just buy whatever she wanted and got told that that wasn't the point.

I tried to put the outfits I'd bought in my Item Box, but Mia clung to hers happily and wouldn't let go. Sera let me take everything she wasn't wearing at the moment, though.

Next, we stopped at a shop that sold travel clothing, which was mainly patronized by adventurers. Sera seemed to know this stuff, and she gave it a critical eye. I'd told her I'd bought her to serve as an escort, and she seemed to be checking out things that would

be a good fit for that role. I gave her a budget and ordered her to buy some spares—if I'd just asked, she probably wouldn't have been very cooperative.

Mia got a little excited at this shop as well. Maybe because she would rarely have a chance to use it, she found it all fascinating and ended up asking Hikari a lot of questions.

Our last stop was the weapons shop, where Sera chose a double-bladed axe with a seventy-centimeter handle. Two of them, in fact.

"Is that one a spare?"

"No, I fight with one in each hand."

"They're not too heavy?"

"Huh? Nah, this is fine."

I'd heard beastfolk were strong, after all. I took one in my hands to try it and… *Huh? It's not that heavy after all.* Wielding one in each hand would probably be too much for me, though.

"Also pick up something like a wooden sword to use in mock duels," I told her.

"Are we gonna have mock duels?"

"Well, I try to stay in shape so I can fight when I have to. I was hoping I could spar with you a little." And I definitely didn't want to go up against those axes. That seemed like a good way to lose an arm.

"Think I've got everything I need," Sera said at last.

Sera was currently dressed as a townsperson; I was keeping her adventuring outfits in my Item Box for the moment. She could have worn her adventuring look if we'd been heading straight back to Yor's house, but unfortunately our next stop was the sweets shop. We'd talked about going there early on, and I was afraid Mia would be mad if I turned her down now. "Should we head back now?" I'd whispered, and I'd never forget the look of despair that had appeared on her face at that moment.

When we arrived at the shop, Mia's eyes lit up as if she'd just met her soulmate. *Don't just stand there, though. You're inconveniencing the other customers…*

All eyes turned to us as we entered the shop. However, the one drawing the most attention was not Mia but Sera. Beastfolk really must have been a rarity, because everyone was looking at her ears

and tail. Sera clearly felt their gazes on her and looked a little uncomfortable, but once she had a bite of those sweets, all those worries seemed to vanish.

"Hey, Mia, have you known about this place for a while?" I asked.

Mia explained that it was a well-known shop among church people, and she had always wanted to come here but never could because of her position.

That wasn't the real reason you ran away from the church, was it? I wondered. *Hey, don't look away!*

Sweets went into a different stomach—some things really were the same in any world you went to.

Ah, but back to reality. Hikari ate heartily like last time, but Mia really chowed down. Sera also ate well, if not as much as the other two—the covetous look in her eyes made me think she was holding back a bit. But all three looked like they were going to melt into their seats from joy with every bite. It was enough that they even split the cakes they bought, perhaps hoping to sample even more kinds.

I was happy to see them having so much fun, but the sweets were all a little too sweet for me.

With that plus souvenirs, our outing ended up costing a pretty penny. It wasn't so much that I was running through my golds, though. While sweets were definitely an indulgence in this world, the amount three girls could eat didn't add up to that much. The main cost was the souvenirs I'd bought—I'll add that just to preserve their honor.

Maybe because they'd shared some nice cakes together, the three girls suddenly seemed to get closer. They'd been holding hands before to avoid getting separated, but the feeling behind it had now changed. They were now talking like a group of sisters, with even Mia seemingly dropping her guard, smiling happily and joining in conversation with Sera. Sera still seemed a bit hesitant about it, but she was at least responding to her now.

I felt glad that we'd gone, but I also didn't want to go near another sweets shop for a while.

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Sera was peppered with questions the moment we returned to Yor's house. Yuri's excitement was brimming over, and Sera seemed a little taken aback by her enthusiasm. Roux just seemed amused by it all.

By the time Sera was released from her interrogation, she looked exhausted. *Good effort there,* I thought encouragingly. In the meantime, I'd been talking to the butler, Lond, and had asked him to tell Dan I wanted to talk to him when he got back.

Dan ended up coming back while we were relaxing after dinner, and I brought Sera in to explain the situation. He looked uncomfortable at first… Was it because he was talking to me, or because he'd seen the collar around Sera's neck?

"What is it?" he asked.

"I was hoping I might take a quest at the adventurers' guild and leave town for a bit tomorrow," I said, going back to my obsequious tone. There were quite a few herb-gathering quests available, and I was planning to take one of those. While we were out, I'd also tell her some things I couldn't talk to her about in town.

"What? Aren't you with the merchants' guild?" he asked.

"Sera here is the one I was hoping to register with the adventurers' guild. Layla and the others will also be going out on a quest tomorrow, so I wanted to ask how you might wish to handle Mia during that time."

"Hmm…" Dan folded his arms and thought it over, then told Lond to summon Mia.

"You called, Your Eminence?" Mia asked Dan when she arrived a few minutes later.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Dan said, "but this man wants to leave the city tomorrow for work. He would like to know what you wish to do, Saint Mia."

"Wh-What do you mean?" she asked.

"If you wish to go with him, I will arrange for that to be possible. Normally I'd rather leave you with my daughter and her friends, but their quest will be a hunt, which might put you in danger."

Mia glanced in my direction. "If it's possible, I'd like to leave town."

"Understood. I'll prepare some appropriate clothing."

I'd said I didn't mind if she wanted to go out with us, but I hadn't expected Dan to really let her do it.

After Mia had left, Dan said, "Are you surprised?"

I could only answer with a nod.

Dan seemed to think about that for a minute, then finally spoke. "I see. How much do you know about the prophecy?"

"The prophecy?"

"Yes, the one given out by the Goddess about three years ago, announcing the birth of the Demon King. Saint Mia was the one who received it first—at first, her position was that of 'miracle girl,' one who knew holy magic without having studied it. Then, when she received the prophecy, she became the Saint. It's been confirmed, as well, of course."

He said it all in one breath, with a faint sense of nostalgia. "At first, they called her mad. 'The Demon King, revived?' they said; it was all a mere legend, a fairy tale, and so they refused to believe her. But many others received the same prophecy soon after, and at that point, nobody could doubt it. The fact that large numbers of monsters began pouring out of the Black Forest at that time lent the notion further credence."

He explained that the first place attacked was the Vossheil Empire, which had resulted in a change in Mia's position. "Everyone began revering her as a Saint and seeking her aid. They weren't asking her to defeat the Demon King, of course. It was more…emotional support. The Black Forest is far away from us, so the revival of the Demon King was a distant concern. As long as our lives are peaceful for the moment, nobody seems to mind."

Dan then let out a tired sigh and continued with a grave expression. "But that's changed in many ways now. The sighting of the demon in the Kingdom of Elesia was the deciding blow, and we decided to hold her authorization ceremony to dispel the people's worries. Whoever's trying to kill her must be someone who doesn't approve of that."

"So there's a sort of power struggle even in the church?" I asked.

"Precisely. And once she's officially authorized, she'll lose a lot of freedoms. She'll likely be sent to the Black Forest sooner or later, and that's why…I'd like to humor her for as long as I can."

She was the same age as Yor, and he must have seen some of

his daughter in her.

As I departed, Dan said that he was leaving her in my hands, and that he'd tell me later about the escort unit he'd be secretly sending out with us.

Chapter 5

“All right, we’ll be back soon.” Layla’s group got up first thing in the morning, dressed in their adventuring gear, and left the mansion.

Dan dithered and worried the whole time, but Yor simply ignored him. Roux and Yuri just wished her well, then saw her off in silence.

The girls had apparently taken a joint hunting quest, and they would be gone for two nights. They had a wagon to take them to their destination and seemed very happy that they wouldn’t have to walk. When I asked why they’d taken a joint quest, they said it would be a nice change from a dungeon hunt, and most of all, they’d be with Locke’s team.

There weren’t many days left until the Advent Festival. Mia had said she would go back once it got close, and the thought that her current life would come to an end soon clearly had her feeling a bit melancholy. Maybe the fact that she felt that way even though we’d only just met suggested how rich the time we’d spent together had felt.

We were also going to visit the adventurers’ guild to look for work, but Dan called me back. “I forgot to ask last night, but my daughter told me you carry a lot of high-quality potions. I was wondering if you could sell some to us.”

“Surely holy magic is all the church needs?” I suggested in surprise. I’d assumed that if you had holy magic users you wouldn’t need potions, but he said that that was all the more reason they wanted a backup stock just in case.

I told him the price I’d gotten at the merchants’ guild, and he bought them for a bit more than that. I wondered if there was something else in play there, but he explained they were just that valuable.

Apparently the church had been surprised by the quality of some of the potions they’d bought from the merchants’ guild, and they’d asked him to stock up on more. I asked him how they knew the potions came from me, and he said that Yuri had told him. *You*

don't need to make that sound like a brag, though, I thought. As for why Yuri knew, apparently Hikari had told her.

They bought fifty each of healing, mana, and stamina potions for eighty golds. I was running out of cash on hand, so that was a big boon. I decided to put some on my card later.

Heading out was a bit of a mess, but we managed to make it to the adventurers' guild as planned.

Hikari was dressed in her usual all-black adventuring outfit, and Sera had also changed into her adventuring gear. Hers prioritized ease of movement, with equipment made from monster materials that provided more defense than it looked like at first glance. The axes would be too cumbersome to carry around town, so I kept them in my Item Box. It made me want a bag of holding just for them.

Sera's standard outfit had a dagger on the belt that could also be used to break down monster bodies, as well as greaves and gauntlets she could use to punch and kick, so she seemed to be okay without her axes in town. When I asked her why she'd chosen those, she'd said she needed something that would let her slay a monster even without weapons. It seemed like the Black Forest was even more dangerous than I'd heard.

Mia's clothing wasn't ready yet, so she was just in her normal townsperson outfit plus a cloak. It might be a little hot, but she'd have to deal with it. It was one of my spares, too, so it was a little baggy.

When we arrived at the adventurers' guild, Layla's group had apparently already come and gone. The atmosphere there felt subtly different than the last time I'd been.

This must have been Mia's first time here, because she was looking around wide-eyed at everything. *We're not really fitting in like this, Mia...* I was a man with two slaves and a female companion already, so standing out more than a rare beastfolk person was a kind of talent in its own way.

"Sera, have you ever registered at the adventurers' guild?"

"Nah."

"Would you mind registering with reception now, then?"

"You're not gonna register, master?" she asked me.

"No, there's no need. I'm already registered with the merchants'

guild.”

For some reason, Sera had started calling me master. It was probably because Hikari did—or maybe she didn’t want to call me by my name? *Also I never actually asked Hikari to call me “master,” you know…*

While Sera was getting registered, I listened in on the conversations around me. I was afraid Mia would run off if I left her to her own devices, so I had Hikari hold her hand. It was hard to tell which was the child here.

The adventurers mostly seemed to be talking about how there were fewer monsters around lately. I would’ve assumed that that was a good thing, but apparently going on hunting quests and then being unable to find any monsters was a pretty big problem for adventurers. This was also happening on multiple quests.

“Master, I’m registered,” Sera said.

She was still distant with me. I could feel a wall between us, even though she seemed to have broken the ice with Hikari and the others.

“Then as long as we’re here, take on an herb-gathering quest.” The idea was just to get out of town for a while, so I didn’t really need a quest, but I thought we’d better take one as long as we were heading out. If you didn’t take them when you could, you could run out of time and have your guild card nullified.

Sera took the quest sheet to reception, and several of the adventurers looked at her curiously. As an enslaved beastfolk, she probably stood out quite a lot.

We walked around town a little after that, and it felt like the atmosphere had changed a bit.

“There’s more decorations,” Mia said, and then I noticed it. Cloth embroidered with all different colors hung from ropes strung between the buildings. I also felt like there might be more flowers out. The streets seemed thirty percent or so fuller, and the vast majority of people there wore white accessories, with a surprising number of them having masks on. The sweets shop we’d visited a few times already had a long line out the door as well, despite the early hour.

“Mia, have you ever walked around the Advent Festival?” I asked.

“Only once before, though I’ve lived in the holy capital for a

long time.” She’d had to help with rituals, so she’d always been too busy—the pains of working behind the scenes. “So it feels like a dream to just get to walk around town like this. As impure as my motivations were, I still feel glad I ran away.” Sadness came into her eyes for a moment, but then she smiled again right away.

We returned early that day since we’d have to head out early the next one. Sera asked me if we needed to do any packing, and I told her I had everything we needed in my Item Box.

That gave us a bit of free time, so we had a brief mock duel. Since we’d be leaving town, I was curious to see how well Sera could fight. I tried to stay focused on my technique, but she defeated me with sheer power. It had been a while since that happened. Meanwhile, Hikari used her speed to get the drop on Sera and beat her.

“You fight so aggressively. Why is that?” I asked.

“Monsters don’t really do give-and-take. You’re at a disadvantage when they go on the offensive, so I got in the habit of trying to beat them before they could.”

Hey, she actually told me! It made sense, though: Sera’s combat style didn’t seem designed to fight people. In a positive sense, her attacks were efficient; in a negative one, they were too obvious. She didn’t even bother with feints.

Once the mock battle was done, Hikari, Yuri, and Mia dragged an unwilling Sera to the bath. A nice long bath was more effective for getting rid of exhaustion than just using the Cleanse spell, after all.

“I heard she was a slave, but she really is a nice, obedient girl,” Roux said as she watched them, smiling brightly.

“It seems she’s far less guarded around other girls,” I said, using my polite merchant speech with her as well. “And she still appears uncertain about how much to distance herself.”

Roux laughed. “You really watch her carefully.”

“We are going to be living together, after all. I try to be conscientious.”

“The way you address me is proof of that. You can talk to me the same way you talk to my daughter and her friends, you know.”

Was she teasing me? In some ways, Roux was the hardest person in the household to get a read on.

After dinner, we had free time. The girls got together and did

some more bonding. I left them to it, since I had a few things I wanted to do as well.

Once I was by myself, I started working on a few things. First was to make my fifth-generation gun. I wanted to increase its firing rate and also boost its durability. Increasing durability would make it thicker and heavier, so it was hard to get it right. In the end I decided to try integrating other types of ore and finally got it done.

But this time, my main focus wasn't on the creation of the gun, but the enchantment.

First, I made the bullets, using Enchant to apply various elemental properties and spells to them as well. However, I wouldn't know what effect this would have until I actually fired them, so I'd have to test them outside of town. I'd managed to make bullets with fire, wind, water, and earth properties, but when I'd tried using holy magic it hadn't worked.

I also enchanted some throwing knives. I would have liked to test those out the next day, but it would depend on what Mia's escort did.

In addition to that, I decided to create a silencer for my gun. Layla had seemed shocked by the noise of it firing, and while the echo inside the cave probably contributed to that, I wanted to be prepared to use it in secret someday if I had to.

I moved snappily through my preparations, and when Dan got home that night he summoned me for another conversation.

"These four will be your escorts starting tomorrow," he said. "Get to know them so you won't mistake them for assassins."

He'd called in me, Hikari, and Sera. I figured Hikari would find them especially suspicious, so I wanted to make sure she met them. I memorized the appearance of their signals on my automap and took that moment to explain Mia's situation to Sera as well.

"I'll leave Saint Mia in your care, then," Dan said.

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As we walked through the gate, Mia stopped and gazed at the sight in front of her. She had told me she'd left the capital before, but they'd taken a wagon then, so this was her first time actually

walking outside like this since she'd first been brought there. I was stunned to hear that. She really was a caged bird.

"We're blocking traffic, so let's move on ahead." There were far fewer people leaving than entering, but there were some adventurers heading outside as well.

With Hikari and Sera in the lead, we marched double file into the forest where we could pick herbs. It was the same forest I'd been to before, but my destination was a little different now. Even if we went to the same place, there probably wouldn't be any herbs left, and I didn't want to go as far in this time. There was also a special place we wanted to go, if Mia's stamina would hold out long enough.

"The air is lovely out here. I can't remember...the last time I felt this way." Mia looked a bit giddy as she skipped down the main road.

I'd learned from experience that times like this were the most dangerous, so I carefully made sure we took regular breaks and took a slow and steady course for our destination. Mia looked a little unhappy about this. *But I'm doing it to help you, you know?*

"We won't reach the place Auntie Roux talked about if we go this slow," she pouted.

"You're looking forward to that, huh? But it's not like we have to get back tomorrow, so let's take it slow."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"I told Dan that we might take an extra day, so we're set for food and so on."

Mia seemed relieved to hear that and admitted she was glad that we'd slowed down a little. Just as I thought, she'd been pushing herself a bit.

Around lunchtime, the forest finally came into view. *If I were by myself I'd be in there by now,* I thought, and got down to cooking.

"You're going to cook, master?" Sera asked.

"I was planning to. That's not odd, is it?"

Sera looked at Hikari and Mia. Hikari looked confident, but Mia was averting her gaze a bit.

Everyone except Hikari seemed hesitant to eat the food I'd made. *Not you guys too. That's so rude!*

"Master's food is very good!" Hikari declared confidently.

Her endorsement seemed to give them the confidence to try it.

I didn’t like the way they clenched their eyes shut as they did or the way their eyes widened in surprise after the first bite. It seemed a bit impolite, in my personal opinion!

“I don’t believe it,” Mia said.

“Me neither,” Sera added.

I was utterly offended, but they did clean their plates and ask for seconds, so I forgave them. *Just don’t eat too much, now!*

“Sora, you really can cook,” Mia said.

“It’s just been me and Hikari, after all.”

Mia nodded in realization.

“I thought most people ate rations while traveling,” Sera said.

I understood that, but rations tasted awful. When I told her that, she also nodded in firm agreement.

Perhaps the meal had brought back everyone’s health and stamina, because we finally managed to make it to the forest. We’d been told about a place where a stream ran through. It should be somewhat near the first herb-gathering patch I’d found my first time here.

“This way,” Hikari said.

We followed her until we did indeed hear the sound of water. “So we just follow this, huh?” I asked. Walking along it wasn’t easy, though. The grass grew so high on the banks that you couldn’t see where you were walking, and I felt like I was in constant danger of tripping over branches.

“It’s hot. I can’t stop sweating.” Mia, who wasn’t used to traveling, complained a lot, but she persevered. I was a little impressed by her fortitude.

Then, around the time the sun had started to set, we finally reached our destination. It was a wide open space with a line of large boulders. There seemed to be a spring bubbling up nearby, and it was nice and cool to the touch.

“I guess I’ll set up camp,” I said, and started building a hut. The two other girls were pretty surprised, but if I had the space to put one together, why wouldn’t I?

“I had no idea you could do that,” Mia said.

“I think I’m losing my mind,” Sera added.

You can rub your eyes all you want, but the house isn’t going away. “It’s just basic shelter, though. It’s not like it’s furnished or anything.”

Now we had a place to sleep, so I had to start on dinner. I set a fire and heated up some soup. All that remained was...

“As long as we’re out, could I try cooking?” Mia asked, then added quietly that she didn’t know how.

It probably would have been hard if I’d been making something elaborate, but thankfully there was no need for that. “Can you chop vegetables?” I asked her, and she said she could probably handle it. I handed her a hunting knife to chop with and watched nervously.

She held it well, but I could tell she wasn’t used to it at all, because she was very timid with the blade. The cut vegetables weren’t all the same size either, and she herself seemed disappointed by the result. The way she looked at me for aid was rather comical, but I managed to hold in my smile. I worked on them a bit to make sure they were roughly the same size, then started heating up a pan.

“Once the pan’s warmed up, you add the vegetables,” I said.

“Is that enough?”

“Well, it’s just us here. It’s not like anyone’s paying for it. This is just what camping is like.”

I pulled out a few kinds of orc meat and cut them into cubes, then added just a little salt and pepper for seasoning. The juices from the general and lord meat in particular would greatly enhance the flavor.

“Delicious,” Mia said when she took a bite, looking honestly surprised.

“Eating like this isn’t so bad, is it?”

“I suppose not. I’d love to eat with everyone next time.” I saw a light flash in Mia’s eyes as she ate, but I pretended I didn’t notice it.

Mia had been laughing joyously all through the meal, and now she looked pretty groggy. But we couldn’t sleep just yet, or it would defeat the purpose of our coming here. I definitely felt sleepy when I lay down myself, though, so we made some small talk while waiting for the moment to come.

Eventually, while we gazed up at the sky, the canopy of stars appeared. Although we were in the forest, nothing blocked our view in this particular spot. We’d been told that the darkness created by just the right amount of surrounding trees was what

made the sight possible, but whether or not that was the case, it was a stunning view.

"Beautiful..." It was enough to bring that word to your lips. Though, incidentally, that particular one came from Mia.

We watched in silence for a while, and then I heard the sound of soft breathing. I looked over and saw that Mia had fallen asleep.

"We do still need lookouts, though, so let's take shifts." It looked like all the walking had completely drained Mia's stamina. Her full belly had probably played a part too.

I picked Mia up and carried her into the house to sleep, then told Hikari to sleep first. From what I could see on the automap, our four escorts were keeping quite a distance, and I didn't spot any other signals nearby.

"It's all right for you to go to sleep too, Sera, but there's something I wanted to talk to you about first, just the two of us."

Sera just looked at me blankly when she heard me say that. I'd thought she'd loosened up a bit, but when it was just the two of us, her expression went hard again.

What I had to tell her was a bit of a secret, so even though there weren't any readings close by, I needed insurance. I used Silence, a spell combining dimension and wind magic, in a three-meter radius around me. It meant we could hear sounds outside the barrier, but sounds within couldn't penetrate outward.

"What was that?"

"A spell to block out sound. Don't tell anyone what I'm about to say to you. That's an order from your master."

"Got it." Sera's expression suddenly turned serious, perhaps responding to my firm tone.

"First, the reason I bought you. It wasn't just a whim or happenstance—though it was a coincidence that I found you where I did."

She paused to take this in. "What are you talking about?"

"Sera, I know all about you. Rurika and Chris told me. And...I've also appraised you with my skill."

[**Name:** Sera / **Job:** War Slave / **Level:** 66 / **Race:** Beastfolk / **Status:** Indignant]

That was what I'd learned from using Appraise Person on Sera.

Here, her expression changed. She seemed hesitant and confused, her eyes flitting back and forth.

“They’re traveling around looking for you and Eris.” I told her how I’d met Rurika and Chris and how they were doing.

Sera listened to me patiently through the entire explanation. “Is this all true?” she asked at the end.

“Yeah, though I’m not sure how to prove it. Just that they told me about Morrigan and the Spirit’s Talisman and things like that.”

Sera paused. “Got it. I’m worried about big sis, but I’m glad the other two are safe.” A new light was shining in her eyes now. Relief consumed her face, and she smiled with tears running down her cheeks. She probably had a lot of emotions churning through that petite form of hers.



“So anyway, having explained that, I’ve got someone I want to introduce you to.” I started getting ready for cooking all of a sudden, and Sera looked at me suspiciously. *Ciel, can you come over here?* I thought.

Sera started. “What was that?!”

“That’s my Telepathy skill. Unfortunately it’s one-way, so you can’t talk back to me. And Ciel is this little one here.”

A white spot appeared against the darkness of the night. Even Sera was surprised, and understandably so—it was impressive that she didn’t actually scream.

Apparently Sera could see Ciel, too, and that was the reason I’d kept Ciel quiet so far. Since Mia had been around, I hadn’t managed to find a good time to explain things to her, and at the slave market she’d acted so hostile that Ciel had been too scared to come out then.

“This is Ciel, a spirit I contracted with during my journey. I’m not sure why I could contract with her, but I guess she’s kind of like my animal companion? So I hope you’ll get along with her.”

Sera didn’t react. She might have been too surprised. Ciel also cast a curious glance in her direction, but she was overall more concerned with eating the food I’d made for her.

“It’s been a day of surprises,” Sera murmured at last.

“Dredd told me your situation. I know it won’t be easy to get along with us—well, with me—right away, but I hope we can work together.” She’d already gotten quite close with Hikari. It probably wasn’t as simple as bonding over sweets, but the shared experience of being slaves. “Hikari’s the only other one who can see Ciel. I don’t think Mia can. It’s probably related to the slave contract. So be careful not to talk to or look at Ciel when you’re around other people.”

Sera didn’t appear to fully believe me about this, but when she saw Ciel perched on top of Hikari’s head the next morning and Mia didn’t react at all, she finally seemed to realize it was true.

“You should get some rest too, Sera. I’ll keep watch.” Sera looked pretty tired from all the revelations, so I told her to get some rest.

Left all on my own, I gazed into the fire and pulled a magic item from my Item Box. *Ah, I forgot that I could use the messaging service in the adventurers’ guild to send a message to Chris and Rurika.* I’d

have to remember that when I got back.

As if to confirm, I channeled some mana into the magic item and checked in on them. This device could only give me their general direction rather than their exact location...but it seemed like they were still in the Las Beastland? They'd said they'd be heading to the Magic Nation of Eva after that, so I decided that would be our next stop.

It would be great to set a meeting point so we don't miss each other. Layla and the others said they'd come from Majorica, right? They said it was a dungeon city, so maybe I'll set that as our meetup point. It seemed the school they went to also had a sort of tryout program, so Hikari might enjoy that. But, depending on how fast Chris and Rurika were moving, another location might be better.

"Morning," Mia said. She'd gone to sleep early the night before, but she was also the last one to wake up. She'd lived an indoor life for so long, the journey really must have exhausted her.

In the morning, Ciel proved herself to Sera by plopping down next to Hikari while Mia didn't say a word about it. Ciel was trembling because she had to hold back on eating while everyone else did. *You're not angry. Right?* I thought. There was one time when it felt like Mia looked in Ciel's direction, but she was probably just surprised that Hikari ate so fast. Sera was openly shocked by it all.

After that, we walked around an herb patch. I got some herbs for the guild and others to make into potions. Mia must have been a bit curious about it as well; she asked me questions, so I taught her some tips about telling the difference while gathering. That meant I gathered fewer myself, but the way we went about it wasn't a bad feeling either. I was grateful I'd done so much reading in the adventurers' guild in the Elesian capital—if I hadn't, I couldn't have explained the visual difference between things like healing and mana herbs.

"I'd like to try something before we head back. Do you mind?" I asked.

So after eating lunch, we took a short break. I used earth magic to form a few targets and then threw my enchanted knives at them. The fire and water ones appeared to cause an explosion of the appropriate element on impact, while wind increased the

knife's cutting power. The earth-enchanted ones...seemed to hit with more force? The fire one had the most spectacular result, seemingly exploding in a conflagration when it hit the target and burning a little grass below it.

"What was all that?" Sera asked me.

"Ah, they're enchanted knives. I wanted to see what they actually did..." They'd completely destroyed the earthen targets I'd made. It looked like the effect would be greater the higher my level got, so they might really be something once it increased a bit more.

At the very least, I'd confirmed the effects of my enchantments, so we headed back to the holy capital after that. Perhaps because we'd come this way already and knew how far it would be, the return trip went pretty smoothly. The attack we'd been worried about never happened, and the only signals I saw on my automap were from the four escorts.

I was on the alert for anything but relieved that nothing had happened. *Maybe they've given up. Or maybe...*

There were five days left until the Advent Festival.

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We arrived back at the city around sunset. Deciding to save the visit to the adventurers' guild where we'd hand in the herbs for tomorrow, we returned to House Apostel and found Yor and the others waiting there. The only one missing was Layla, who they said hadn't come back from the adventurers' guild yet.

"Welcome back. I read the report. You didn't run into any problems?"

"No, no problems for us. How about you?"

"They haven't made any aggressive moves, but it definitely feels like the Pope's faction is doing something behind the scenes."

Was that okay? I wasn't interested in their power struggle, but I was worried about Mia being caught in the middle of it. I'd been through a lot with her by now, and knowing better what kind of person she was, I now felt some genuine empathy for her.

Our circumstances were different, but the way I'd been abruptly summoned from another world resembled the way she'd been abruptly venerated as Saint. But unlike me, who had failed to live

up to my assignment as a summonee (and been unceremoniously kicked out as a result), Mia was trying hard to live up to her duty. She could be a bit headstrong, but her choice to sneak out of the church was understandable given the future that awaited her. There was no way I could understand the pressure she was under.

As I was thinking that over, I heard a knock on my door. I looked out and saw Mia standing there.

"His Eminence told me it was time to go back." She was glancing nervously around my room. Did she want to talk inside? She'd been sharing a room with Hikari before, but now she was with Sera.

I also called Ciel to act as a witness in case anything happened, though I doubted anything would. Still, I felt self-conscious about her all of a sudden, and nervous too. *Maybe it's because I was just thinking about her?*

"So I talked to Hikari and the others earlier, but I wanted to speak to you as well," she said.

"Really?"

"Yes. I had a lot of fun and got to do a lot of things I always wanted to do. That wouldn't have been possible if you hadn't saved me that day, Sora. So I wanted to properly express my gratitude. Thank you."

She bowed deeply to me, her posture so flawless that it took my breath away for a moment.

"What is it?" she asked me.

"Oh, well...I know this might be pointless to ask, but are you sure you're ready to live as a Saint?"

She laughed. "I'm still not really sure, but I can save people by doing it, so I think I have to."

I didn't know how much she understood what a Saint did, but I felt like she was still determined to do it. She reminded me a lot of Rurika and Chris, who had a similar ironclad determination about searching for Sera and Eris.

"I see. Then I'll make you a parting gift," I said.

Mia's expression suddenly showed a curiosity appropriate to her age. I definitely liked her better this way.

I pulled the orc lord magistone out of my Item Box along with a few other items I needed. This time I was making a good luck charm—a magic one, of course. I created a base with alchemy,

then made an accessory—a pendant—by combining it with the orc lord magistone. At this point it was still just decorative, but then I added a bit more. I activated Enchant to infuse the magistone with a spell—this time, the dimension spell Barrier. It would create a shield around the wearer when they were in danger.

I imagined the idea while funneling in my mana, but unlike with the knives, I suddenly felt like my mana was being forcibly drained out of me. I checked my MP on my status panel and saw the number dropping fast. I drank a few mana potions from my Item Box, but it still wouldn't stop.

I couldn't control it. I couldn't even stop myself. All I could do was keep my eyes locked on the magistone, wait, and hope it would finish. By the time I'd drunk my fifth potion, the MP I was recovering with each use had dropped significantly. I'd heard that drinking too many potions in a short time frame would make them lose effectiveness, and apparently this was true.

I couldn't use any more mana potions. But just as I thought my mana might run out, the magistone let out a blinding flash. The light continued to shine for a while, but it finally died down, and the magistone turned from red to blue.

"Wh-What was that?" Mia repeated the question a few times, but I couldn't respond. "A-Are you all right?"

I felt my body start to tip over. I had a few MP left, but losing and regaining so many so fast had me feeling lightheaded and limp. *Uh-oh. Better lie down…*

Or so I was thinking until Mia suddenly grabbed me and pulled my head into her lap. *Why?*

"Miss Roux taught me…that this is the best thing to do for a man when he's tired."

I certainly was tired, but what in the world was that woman teaching her? *Um, Ciel, why are you looking at me like that? Are you thinking you've got blackmail material?*

Mia's face was right above mine, and her cheeks were a bit red. *If you're embarrassed, you don't actually have to do this, you know?*

"A-Anyway, what was that spell just now?" Her voice was a little louder than usual, maybe to cover her embarrassment. It cracked a little bit too. I wished she'd keep it down a little, though. My ears were still ringing.

"That was Alchemy," I told her. Trying to hide it would just give

rise to more questions, and Enchant was the skill I needed to hide more than Alchemy.

“That was Alchemy?” she echoed. “You said you make potions that way, too, so that’s quite curious.”

Did I say that? I couldn’t remember, but maybe it had come from someone else.

“I’ve never seen alchemy before, but it really is quite curious…” she repeated.

“I’m self-taught, so the way I do it might be a little different from the usual.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yeah, like your holy spells. I just knew how to use it one day, so it’s hard for me to explain how you’d go about it.”

“I see. That would make it difficult to explain.” She seemed to be putting herself in my shoes, and that was apparently enough for her to accept it.

“Mind if I sit up now? I think I’m feeling better.” I felt my strength coming back, so I figured I should probably be okay at that point. “So this is for you, Mia. A present from me. I infused it with a spell that will keep you safe from harm, so I hope it’ll be useful if you need it.”

“Th-Thank you.” She laughed. “I think this is my first time getting a real present from someone…” She sounded kind of sad, but she was smiling now, so I took it as a win. “S-So…as long as it’s a present, would you put it on for me?”

I felt like I’d been in this situation before…but when she looked at me that way, it was hard to say no.

In the end I put the pendant around Mia’s neck as she asked.

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By the time I woke up, Mia had already gone back to the church.

“Do you miss her?” Roux asked.

“I think so,” I replied. “Things were a bit complicated at first, but now that she’s gone I do feel like I miss her.” I couldn’t help but respond in the affirmative. We hadn’t known each other long, but she’d dragged me around, shown unexpected depths, and otherwise spent a lot of very fulfilling time with me. Based on what

Dan had said, Mia's life was about to get a whole lot busier, so he was glad that she'd managed to enjoy herself for these few days.

"Speaking of, I haven't seen Layla," I said. "She hasn't made it back yet?"

Yor explained that this was indeed the case. "She said she wanted to go to the adventurers' guild."

I decided I'd also go, then. I wasn't worried about Layla or anything, but I wanted to turn in our herbs and make use of their messaging service. I'd talked to Sera already about what the message should say.

As we arrived at the adventurers' guild, there was a curious air about the place. Normally you'd see a lot of lively back-and-forth about quests at this time in the morning, but now a heavy, quieter air hung over the place.

"Ah, big sister!" Casey spotted Layla first—I noticed Locke was with her too—and ran up to her.

Layla seemed to notice us and made her way out of the circle. "What are you all doing here together?"

"That's our line! You didn't come home yesterday, so we were worried!" Casey was upset, but Layla soothed her.

I decided we should probably finish our business first, so I quickly turned in our herbs and managed to use the messaging service too. I told them we'd be staying in Frieren's capital, Messa, for a time, before moving on to Majorica in the Magic Nation of Eva. Whoever arrived at Majorica first should ask the adventurers' guild there to send a message.

"So what's going on here?" I asked Layla.

By this time, the guild was in a tumult. An adventurer had strode purposefully through the door and spoken briefly to someone at the center of the circle. Then the person he'd talked to had winced before taking a few people with him into a back room.

Soon after, they returned, led by a kind-faced man. This was the local guild master, who had called an emergency meeting.

He faced the adventurers, who were curious about what was going on, and made a simple statement. "We've confirmed signs of an upcoming stampede."

The chaotic guild went silent at once, but it was only for a second before angry shouts began to ring out. The guild master was peppered with questions, and the agitation only continued to

grow.

The guild master explained that people who had been taking quests lately were often reporting a lack of monsters at their destinations, and so they'd mounted an independent investigation into the matter. This investigation had revealed an oddity in the middle of the forest to the northeast of the holy capital.

There were many monsters in the forest, and they seemed to be living as a group. The strangest thing was that, even though there were so many different monsters, they were not fighting among themselves at all. Even monsters had a kind of natural hierarchy, so there was nothing that required them to fight, of course, but it still seemed too quiet, and there was a sense that someone was controlling them.

The guild believed that there was an advanced subtype—in other words, a boss—among them.

"But why didn't anyone notice such a huge gathering of monsters before now?" someone asked.

Nobody knew quite how to answer that question. But the person who had found the horde had possessed skills that enhanced their ability to search, so it seemed that the monsters must have had an advanced subtype with a cloaking ability among them.

"So what should we do now?"

"Let's prepare to mount a defense while we investigate the forest. I've petitioned the church as well, but I don't know how much help we can expect in these circumstances."

These words caused a buzz among the adventurers. While I was an adventurer, I'd read about stampedes as well. Their scale varied, but it basically referred to a wave of monsters numbering several thousand, sometimes even into the tens of thousands.

Looking around the guild, the number of adventurers present seemed painfully small by comparison. It was the local capital, so there were likely a lot of people there who could fight, but it might be difficult for just the adventurers to stave it off. But, of course, there were more adventurers in the city than just those who were present.

"So how are we moving forward?"

"We'll follow the church's lead on whether to make it public," the guild master replied. "But there's no way to know when the

stampede might kick off, so I intend to start preparing at once."

The guild's policy was to assume the presence of a boss and divide into a faction to defend the town and an elite strike team to take the boss out. If a stampede had a boss, defeating it would apparently end the threat. And if there wasn't a boss, the elite force could still act as a flying column during the greater melee.

There was a lot of discussion among different adventuring parties about what to do. The adventurers who were based out of Messa mostly wanted to get involved in the defenses, while others seemed to be making the decision to skedaddle. "Elder sister, what should we do?" Talia asked.

"Yor's family is here, so I think we should do what we can. What do the rest of you think?" Layla responded.

"Yeah, I want to help Yor."

"Oh, yes! You need to help a friend in need."

"Yor is always helping us, after all."

"Yor's family is here, and we have to protect the town."

Talia, Tricia, Casey, and Luilui all agreed in turn.

"You guys..." Layla breathed, touched by their resolve.

Hikari looked up at me, as if to ask what we should do.

"I guess we should be ready to act if we're needed," I said. These girls had done a lot for me, but we had to put our own lives first. I'd do what I could, but I wasn't sure how much of a difference I would make on my own. I thought about it and then said, "Layla, can I borrow Luilui and Talia for a minute?"

"Huh? Why?" she asked.

"Um, I just want them to come with me to the weapon shop for a minute."

Layla looked surprised, but there was no reason they all had to stay together at the moment, so she said they could go off with me.

"What are we going to the weapon shop for?" Luilui asked.

"Yeah. Curious," Talia said.

"I want you guys to look at some weapons for me—specifically, arrows for Luilui and throwing knives for Talia—and pick a selection of the ones you like best."

My idea was to enchant their weapons. I'd probably end up needing a lot of mana potions to get through it, but enchanting their arrows and knives should raise their baseline attack power.

Besides, what would happen if I enchanted an arrow with area-effect magic? I wondered.

While I was thinking about that, Luilui and Talia were picking out the items in question. But when I saw how many they wanted to buy, I couldn't help but wince.

"Do you think we can head outside now?" I asked them, and they agreed.

We headed out the western gate and moved to a spot quite far from the city. There, curious to see what would happen, I enchanted an arrow and a knife with Firestorm, a spell that could set a large area ablaze. I used my earth magic to prepare targets and had the girls attack them. When the weapons hit the target, it caused a burst of flame, just like you'd expect from Firestorm. It seemed a little weaker than the spell version, of course, but it was good enough for me.

"What *was* that, Sora?" Luilui asked when it was done. Talia looked at me curiously as well.

It was a reasonable question, so I gave them a convincing-sounding answer. "It's kind of like making magic weapons with a combination of Alchemy and Regulate Mana? I can only use it on long-range, single-use weapons, though." In fact, I could actually enchant swords too, but having a spell blast out while you were slashing at someone might not be the best thing for the wielder. For melee weapons, enchantments with elemental properties might be better than ones with spells.

A magic sword... I mused. *I'll have to try that one out for real some time.* Out loud, I said, "Anyway, now that we know what they can do, I'll prepare a whole bunch for the stampede fight. I hope you won't actually need them, though."

We had time to spare on the way back, so I asked the girls how their Regulate Mana training was coming. Layla, Tricia, and Yor had all managed to infuse their magistones with mana, but Luilui, Talia, and Casey were still struggling. It seemed to just be the sort of thing you had to keep up with by practicing, so I encouraged them to do that.

But Layla can use it now too, eh? I thought. I'd have to warn her about a few things.

Layla and the others were back by the time we returned, so I spoke to Layla there. She boasted that she'd managed to infuse

her stone with mana, and I asked her to demonstrate by channeling mana into her mithril sword.

"Could I ask you to hold it like that?" I said once she had done it. She did, and she managed to hold it for five, then ten minutes. Soon after, she fell to her knees.

"What happened?" she asked groggily.

"I think you ran out of mana. It should replenish itself with rest, but it'll be a hard limit for how long you can use it in one go. I don't think you needed me to tell you that, though..." I cautioned her again against using too much mana at once, then told her it would be dangerous to use the technique in a real battle until she was used to it. Running out of mana tended to leave a person immobilized.

Layla looked frustrated by this, but she agreed. Yor and Tricia must have already experienced it, because they agreed it was a hard thing to go through. Luilui also nodded; had she experienced it too?

"You're back awfully late, though. Where did you go?" Yor asked me.

I told her we were doing some magic tests, and she peppered me with questions. It was a little rude, really.

Then I went back to my room and spent the rest of the day enchanting the knives and arrows we'd bought. There was no way I could get it all done in one day, so I spent the next day on it as well.

I sometimes heard raised voices outside the room; I assumed it was from their mock duels.

Chapter 6

After she got back from the adventurers' guild, the first thing Layla said was, "The church is going to tell the citizenry about the stampede."

With the Advent Festival set for the next day, they had apparently contacted the adventurers' guild to let them know. *Will they cancel the festival, then?* I wondered.

"The representatives from regional churches will likely stay, but I think many of the merchants will want to leave the city. There are ordinary people who came for the festival and low-rank adventurers who might also want to evacuate to the south and west," Yor speculated.

"They won't try to stop people from leaving?" I asked.

"I don't think so. A stampede can be over in just a day, or it can drag out to multiple days or weeks. That can lead to issues with supplies, especially food."

"So the fewer people there are, the longer they can hold out?"

"That's right. And the more people you have to protect, the more it can limit your options if something bad happens."

"I see. What's the church's...or rather, the guild's policy for dealing with a stampede?" I asked. Would they head out and fight, or hole up for a siege?

"The adventurers' guild will act as they initially said. The church wants to defend the town while annihilating the monsters."

Still, telling the people about it was a pretty bold move.

"The Advent Festival is important, but they want to prioritize people's lives more," Layla explained. "And if a lot of people end up hurt or killed and it gets out that the church knew about it in advance and didn't tell anyone, they could be in for some severe criticism." Yor explained the reasoning for the church's actions. "The rest comes down to the number of monsters there are and when the stampede will happen. Even if you evacuate out the far side of the town, the monsters still might go around and get at them."

Wouldn't that be their own fault, then? I wondered.

“Either way, they’ll prepare simple lodgings for adventurers to use near the walls, so we’re going to go there. We’d love to have your help, of course…”

“I can’t help directly, but I did make some tools for Luilui and Tricia. Just be careful how you use them, okay? Especially with allies nearby.” I also warned them that they could explode if jostled too hard, which seemed like another thing I should try to improve on.

Incidentally, I’d already moved the arrows and knives to Layla’s pouch-shaped bag of holding. I’d also given them a variety of potions, so they should have had everything they needed.

“Master, what do we do?” Hikari asked.

To be honest, there was nothing more we could do. *Should we visit the central church while we’re here?* I doubted we’d get to see Mia, but I’d never actually seen it up close. Mia hadn’t especially wanted to visit the churches when we were going around with her.

We went out into town and saw that business was as usual, suggesting word of the stampede hadn’t gotten out yet. If anything, people seemed even more excited than ever with the Advent Festival coming up the next day. *They’re going to announce it in* this *environment?* It felt like it would have been better to announce it yesterday. Maybe there had even been some fights about it.

“Master, I want to eat that,” Hikari declared in the middle of my thoughts.

Even Sera couldn’t help but laugh at Hikari’s single-mindedness. I looked over to Ciel, who was also flying around merrily. She seemed very busy chasing down bits of raining confetti.

I decided to buy a little extra in order to secure provisions. I felt a little bad, as someone who knew the situation, but things would be too chaotic once the stampede news got out, so I wouldn’t be able to buy anything then.

“Is everyone going to that church?”

After we’d been walking for a while, a current began forming in the crowd. Everyone was heading for the central church building at the same time. I listened in and heard people whispering that there was going to be an important announcement. Perhaps they’d leaked the rumor on purpose to get people to come.

I followed the crowd, and soon the central church came into view. There was already a huge crowd around it, with all eyes watching the entrance. The people in front of us stopped, so we did the same. Hikari was short enough that I wouldn't be able to see her if she got swallowed up by the crowd. It would probably be fine given my skills, but I still wanted to stop her from wandering off in the first place. I grabbed one of Hikari's hands tight, and Sera took her other.

And while we stood, waiting with bated breath… With a roar, the church's unique dome suddenly came crashing down.

◇Mia's Perspective 2

Cardinal Dan had taken me back to the church. The storybook time I'd spent outside had come to an end.

The moment I stepped into the church, something felt wrong. Although people still bowed to me as I walked the halls to my chamber, I felt a negative tint in a few of their gazes, almost like hostility. Maybe they were angry at me for abandoning my duty.

I was cleaning myself up when Regulus showed up. I apologized for my selfish behavior, and he smiled kindly and forgave me.

We spent the morning in prayer and went to confirm the schedule for the festival. My role would be to pay my respects to the cardinals and the Pope, then kneel before the Pope and receive his blessing. Then I would bow and go back to where I'd been standing.

The first year, I'd panicked, tripped, and embarrassed myself in front of everyone, but I'd been working hard to avoid a repeat of that situation. Surely I'd be fine this year. But since this year would also involve my confirmation ceremony for sainthood, they apparently needed to make some special preparations.

While I was thinking that over, I soon realized that it was lunchtime. Cardinal Dan came in with a worried look on his face. He looked like he wanted to say something, but while we were discussing what had gone on the last few days, he was called away.

Soon, the morning of the day before the Advent Festival arrived. I ate, said my prayers, and then was called into the large

central chamber by His Holiness, the Pope.

The Pope, the cardinals, and the high priest from each church were all there when I arrived. You could hold the Advent Festival with just the people in that room.

I was taken by my church guards to the center of the chamber and told to wait there. All eyes were on me, and I felt nervous.

“Well, here we all are,” the Pope intoned. “I heard the words of the Divine the other day.”

I listened intently.

“The Divine revealed to me that disaster would befall this land.”

I heard gasps all around me.

“Then, more recently, I heard word from the adventurers’ guild that there are signs of a stampede incoming.”

This stirred a variety of reactions. Some people were shocked, some tried to look calm, some nodded quietly. The cardinals largely seemed unfazed; they must have already known about it.

“But there’s more,” the Pope continued. “I also received a revelation about the cause of the stampede.”

All eyes turned to the Pope now. I joined the others in listening carefully for his next words.

“Mia there is a false Saint. She brought this disaster on us. It’s punishment for her mockery of the Divine!”

Excuse me? What? I was so shocked I almost forgot to breathe. The words he was saying didn’t make any sense.

Slowly, all the gazes in the room turned from him to me.

“It’s regrettable. Her humble demeanor deceived me as well,” the Pope said. What should have been a pained expression appeared on his face, but to me it looked more like a smile.

Ow...

I was taking a step back, shaken by his words, when a sensation ran through my body. It was a burning pain spreading out from my left side.

I looked down and saw a bright red mark blossoming on my white robes. I reflexively tried to cast Heal, but it didn’t work. I sank to my knees and looked up.

One of my guards stood there, a dagger in his hand. He met my gaze. *Hatred—that’s the expression in his eyes.*

I’m afraid. My instincts were telling me to run, but I couldn’t move.

Somebody help me. I wanted to call for help, but I couldn't make a sound.

Instead, endless tears began streaming down my cheeks.

I heard someone cry out, then the sound of a scuffle. I didn't know who was talking or what they were saying. My consciousness was growing hazy. My gaze was focused first on the floor, but then it began to rise higher as I felt myself lifted.

I looked up again at the others around me. Shocked expressions were on all of their faces. Then their faces began to move away.

No…I was the one moving away. The guard who'd stabbed me before looked surprised but began to pursue me.

The moment I thought he might catch up with me, someone moved to block his way. It was…Regulus. I saw his expression from the side, stern and harsh. But the moment our eyes met, his kind eyes returned.

Then one of the cardinals ran out. He was known as a genius, the youngest of all the cardinals—the youngest ever to be appointed to the position. The Pope was saying something to him. He nodded and thrust out a hand.

My eyes fell on his hand. I felt mana gathered in it.

Danger, danger, danger. Alarm bells rang in my mind.

The concentrated mana was powerful enough to see with the naked eye, and I found myself thinking it was beautiful. The mana was coming at me, and the distance didn't matter. It was instantaneous.

But it looked very slow to me. I saw a mirage of death approaching, step by step.

It was right before my eyes now.

Ah, I'm going to die.

No, no, no, I don't want to die.

I screamed. I screamed, but my voice made no sound.

I wanted it. I wanted to live. It would be too sad to die in such a pointless way. Too sad…

If this was a punishment for my selfishness, it was too severe.

I had made friends. I had made fun memories. I wanted to keep making more of them. My gray life had started taking on color.

Most of all, I'd become interested in someone. I didn't know what this mysterious feeling was, but I knew it was very, very

important.

Of course, that would all end once I assumed sainthood regardless. But still…

The mana exploded with a roar. The entire church building shook.

I was hit with a powerful feeling of exhaustion, and my consciousness became hazy.

But I was still alive. I didn't know why.

The strangely reassuring rocking of the guard carrying me away led me to let go of my consciousness.

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The sight had everyone at a loss for words.

It exploded? And from the inside? I wondered. Hikari held my hand tight, and I took a deep breath. I looked down and saw Hikari looking up at me worriedly.

Calm down. Let's find out what's going on first, I told her.

By the time we'd gotten a hold of ourselves, it was the people around us who were panicking. Some tried to run away, then tripped and fell. Just as I was feeling relieved that they hadn't started toppling like dominoes, a group of people came out of the church.

While everyone looked at them, an extravagantly dressed man stepped defiantly out from the group. He didn't seem panicked at all, despite the size of the explosion. Most of the people standing in front of the church knelt when they saw him.

"My children," he intoned. "A great sadness has befallen us this day. Please understand my pain in conveying this to you, and accept my words. I have received a revelation from the Divine! I find the words difficult to accept, but our Divinity would not lie to us. Therefore I must convey this to you."

The chatter died down as the man began talking, and he was shockingly easy to hear without a megaphone.

"Saint Mia has brought this disaster upon us—at first I, too, doubted these words. But all has come to pass just as the Divine informed me. I've been told that many monsters are gathering in the location the Divine spoke of."

He explained about the monster horde and the signs of an

incoming stampede. His words ran through the crowd in the blink of an eye, and shock appeared on the faces of all who heard them.

"The Divine told me that the stampede is punishment for mocking its power by accepting a false saint. When Saint— Rather, when False Saint Mia was told of this, she took her servants and fled like a coward. Hear me, my children! I call to you for aid! Capture Mia, enemy of the Divine, and return her to this place. Even if the hammer of the Divine is already poised to strike us, you must bring her here!"

The man bowed deeply as most of the plaza's crowd began to jeer in rage.

"Find the enemy of the Divine!"

"Capture the enemy of the Divine!"

"Punish the enemy of the Divine!"

"His Holiness is the truly faithful!"

The kneeling ones stood and began to disperse. The people—believers, I assumed—departed, leaving behind only a few confused-looking stragglers.

It occurred to me… How many people among those believers even knew what Mia looked like? She'd said that she normally wore a mask, so most of them probably didn't. Then why had that man, the Pope, told them to look for her?

I stopped that line of thinking. *My first priority should be finding Mia. If I use my automap… Ah, there she is.*

I know where Mia is. Let's move. I spoke via telepathy, and the other two nodded, though Sera still wasn't used to it and was shocked by how abrupt it was.

We turned back along the path we'd initially come from. As we were walking, I heard people talking about the stampede and Mia being a false saint. The game of telephone between them made the accusations get more and more vague, as well as hostile.

We eventually made it out of sight of the church, then cut through some side roads, choosing less traversed ones. Eventually we arrived at a completely ordinary-looking house. It was so ordinary, in fact, that I almost expected to see an old couple poke their heads out the front door in confusion.

I knocked. The signals inside didn't move, but they did look familiar.

Hmm? There's three of them all of a sudden…

I knocked again, this time louder. “It’s Sora. You were one of Mia’s escorts before, right?” I shouted loud enough for the people inside to hear.

Just then, I saw movement inside. The signal was approaching the door.

I knocked hard again. The door unlocked, and a face peeked out through the crack. It was one of the men who’d been assigned to escort her when we’d gone into the forest that day.

“What do you want?” He stared at me hard. Didn’t he recognize me?

“I have business with Mia and Dan…the people inside.”

“What are you talking about? I live here by myself.” I could tell his guard was up.

“Do you want me to start shouting her name?” I asked. “I’m sure it’ll bring the believers right to us.”

Clear panic entered his face at this suggestion, but he didn’t move to let me in.

“If you can’t decide for yourself, call Cardinal Dan over. But if you hurt Mia, I’ll make you pay.” I used wind magic to ensure my voice would carry inside.

Then I saw traces of movement. Slowly, the door in the back of the room opened, and Dan poked his head out, looking tired.

“Sigurd, this man is all right. Let him inside.”

The man scowled, but he did as Dan said and let me in.

Once we were all inside, he locked the door and silently urged me to walk in front of him. Was he afraid I’d stab him in the back? Or was he planning on attacking me? Either way, I did as I was told and followed Dan into the back room.

Mia was lying there, her face twisted in pain. She looked very pale indeed.

“How did you know we were—” Dan started to ask, but I held up a hand to stop him.

“You can’t use holy spells, Dan?” I asked.

“A few. But my magic failed to heal her.”

I looked at Sigurd as well, and he shook his head.

I appraised Mia again.

[**Name:** Mia / **Job:** Saint / **Level:** 6 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** Weak, Poison, Paralysis]

The fact that she was still in this state suggested that either they didn't have any potions or the ones they had didn't work.

I took two kinds of antidotes out of my Item Box, sat Mia up, and carefully tried to pour them into her mouth, but it didn't go well. The liquid simply spilled out of the corners of her mouth.

Sigurd started to say something, but Dan stopped him this time.

Ah, here it is. The legendary trope. I never thought I'd actually find myself in this situation. *Okay, calm down. You're doing this to save someone.*

I drank a bit of the paralysis potion, then fed it to Mia mouth-to-mouth, careful to keep it slow so that she wouldn't choke. The reason she couldn't drink the potion was because her body was paralyzed, after all.

Once that was done, I tried the poison antidote. I thought she'd be able to drink this one by herself after the paralysis was cured, but it looked like she couldn't, so I did it one more time.

I appraised her and saw Paralysis and Poison disappear from her stats.

[**Name:** Mia / **Job:** Saint / **Level:** 6 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** Weak]

All that remained was the weakness. I thought about using a healing potion, but going down that road a third time felt like tempting fate, so I cast Heal instead.

At this, her pained expression relaxed, and her breathing stabilized. She was still unconscious, though.

At the very least, her condition had stabilized for the moment, so I decided to ask Dan about what was going on.

"All I heard was that the Pope was going to make an announcement," I said. "How did things turn out like *this*?" He'd said something about a divine revelation, but I'd confirmed with Appraisal that Mia was not a false Saint.

"I don't really know either," Dan admitted. "A few hours ago, His Holiness called the various heads of the churches in to see him. Then he called in Lady Mia. I thought we'd be making preparations for the festival and her authorization ceremony, but then he

suddenly accused her of causing the calamity…”

“Which means the church has made it its official policy to get rid of Mia?”

“Correct.”

“Why’d you save her, then?” I cast a glance at Sigurd.

“He’s all right,” Dan said. “He’s one of the people I trust, which is why I put him on Saint Mia’s escort. The other, unfortunately, was placed there by the other faction. There was something off about what just happened too. His Holiness has never talked about hearing the voice of the Divine before.”

“But the stampede really is coming, right?” The adventurers’ guild supported that part, at least.

“Yes, I know about the report from the adventurers’ guild as well. But if they were connected, Saint Mia and others would have received the revelation as well. The fact that they haven’t is what’s so strange about it.”

Dan probably knew more than I did about how revelations happened. That knowledge most likely made it all seem even more inexplicable to him.

“So what do you guys want to do? Unfortunately, abandoning Mia isn’t an option for me. If I have to take her out of here to protect her, I’ll do it.”

No matter whether sacrificing Mia would quell the stampede, I couldn’t just let this happen. Hikari nodded in agreement as well.

“Let’s see… Yes, I’d like to save Saint Mia if at all possible. Maybe it’s because she came to our house and I got to see her as an ordinary girl. Seeing that, after only knowing her from the church, made me realize she’s a person like anyone else. I’ve been allowed to see her that way.”

Yeah, I could understand that. It was a bit odd, though. As someone in the position of cardinal, I thought he’d have been more strict about these things. Was I wrong?

“And something else concerned me. Unbeknownst to our faction, His Holiness apparently put out an order about Saint Mia quite a long time ago. But that was to arrest her, not to kill her. So even the ones who knew about that were surprised by this sudden turn.”

The fact that Dan had picked up all this information in such a short time surprised me. It didn’t seem like the flustered old man

whom I knew. Sera, being altogether new to the situation, showed no reaction, but Hikari and Ciel displayed open surprise. Did this mean that something hadn't gone according to plan?

"Can your faction in the church take her in? I mean...can they save her?"

"It might be possible if the stampede is prevented. But it'll be difficult, frankly. We can use this place for now, too, but not for long. And although the city is still in chaos, the search parties will grow more organized the more time passes. Someone who knows her will find her soon enough."

"Then there's no problem if I take Mia myself?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Absolutely not!"

"It's fine. He's already saved Saint Mia's life once, and he can move around more easily than we can. If we publicly rebel against His Holiness and throw the city into chaos, we could leave the whole place to be ravaged by monsters. That's one thing we have to prevent."

The life of one girl versus the lives of everyone in the town—he'd weighed one against the other, and this was the path he'd chosen.

From the way he was acting, I could tell that this was very hard on him. Despite what he said, his clenched fists testified to how frustrated he felt.

"But we can't let the situation continue as it is either. If the monsters attack now, it would be difficult for the church to muster any defenses."

"So the question is how to quell the chaos in the city. Sir, can you prepare a dead body?"

We'd just have to create a substitute, then. I figured they'd keep at this until Mia was executed or her body was found, so the best tactic seemed to be using a body to fake her death.

"A body? I see. But I'm not sure if I have any with a similar age and appearance to Saint Mia."

"Leave that to me. Now, we just need a way to get Mia out of the city..."

The church would know that she might be trying to escape. Would that make it difficult to pull off? Dan was right that the more time passed, the more likely it was that people who knew

Mia by sight would be posted at the town's exits. *No, maybe we should assume that they already are…*

Which meant we couldn't just disguise her as a townsperson. Wasn't there some way to change her appearance? My brain was working at full tilt, even employing Parallel Thinking, until looking at Sera gave me an idea.

"I know how to get us out. I can't guarantee it'll go perfectly, but it's the best option we have right now. I'll make the preparations. What will you do, sir?"

"I'm going to return to the church for now. Once I get the body…let's meet at my house, rather than here. It would be a bad idea for me to be seen coming in and out of here."

"Got it," I said.

"So this is how you really talk, eh? I thought the way you spoke before was a bit awkward, so that explains it."

I realized that I was in fact speaking to him in my natural way, rather than using my merchant's cadence. I must have gotten a little bit emotional.

"Should I go back to the other way?" I asked.

"It's a little late for that now. And you're helping me save Saint Mia, so I don't mind, personally. Just be careful around others. Now, Sigurd, you should hide somewhere else for now."

"Yes, Your Eminence," the guard agreed.

The two of them quickly left the house together. They seemed to have gotten themselves into a rather tricky situation.

"Master, what do we do now?" Sera asked.

"Let's wake Mia up for now." I'd stand out too much if I were carrying her with me. I needed her to walk on her own.

Hikari promptly began shaking Mia, but when she still failed to get up, she began mercilessly slapping her on the cheeks. Soon, Mia's eyelids began to twitch, then slowly open. She still seemed a bit groggy, and when our eyes met she looked surprised.

"Where am I?"

"Do you remember what happened?"

It looked like she still didn't know. It would be a hard experience to relive, but we had no time to spend on it.

"I'm…ah, that's right…" Her eyes filled with tears, which then rolled down her cheeks onto the floor.

I didn't know what Mia was thinking or feeling, which made it

hard to come up with comforting words. At the same time, I had a feeling that nothing I could say would truly soothe her.

This wasn't good. I really wanted to say something considerate, but I couldn't do it now. There were too many unknowns. Instead...

"I can tell you what I know for now. Would that be okay?"

Mia sat up and nodded.

"The Pope is telling people that you're a false Saint, and he's got the believers hunting for you."

Mia nodded again. Her eyes filled with sadness, and she looked at me like a puppy cast out into the street.

"The people who have been looking after you are Dan and a man called Sigurd."

"Cardinal Dan?" she asked.

"Yeah, and he entrusted me with getting you to safety."

She seemed surprised by the mention of Dan. Maybe she'd assumed the entire church was against her.

"Anyway, it may not be safe here," I went on. "Are you all right to get moving?"

I held out my hand to help her up. Then, realizing she couldn't go around in her current outfit, I pulled a spare robe out of my Item Box. I could use my Cleanse spell to clean the blood off her side, but her Saint robes would still be way too conspicuous.

Another reason I didn't use Cleanse was because I thought I could make use of that outfit later. And other than one part, Sera's clothes might be the right size for her, but there were parts that a beastfolk's outfit wouldn't hide.

I left the room and let Hikari and Sera help her dress. In the meantime, I'd do what I could on my own. I brought up my automap and activated Detect Presence and Detect Mana. The people around us were moving faster than I'd expected. I channeled some mana into the map to widen my search range until I could see the whole city.

I could sense one powerful mana source in the central church. It didn't look like the Pope. *A mage?* There also were more human presences around the city's gates than before, so it was probably safe to assume they already had checkpoints set up.

Still, I'd have to find out if I could carry out the plan I'd come up with. Once Mia got changed, we'd have to move right away...

Hmm? What's this? I checked the automap and saw one signal

moving unnaturally. *Have they already found us?*

As I was thinking it over, Mia and the others came out of the room, having finished changing. She looked a little embarrassed for some reason. *Is it because the clothes are mine? You wore it before, okay? Don't worry, it's clean. I used Cleanse, so it's good as new! There's no dirt on it! Or do you really have to wash these things by hand for it to matter?*

She'd left me in an awkward spot. I couldn't speak with her staring at me like that.

"Master, what do we do next?" Sera asked, and her words brought my priorities back in line. It was too late to worry about what would and wouldn't work, and I might even have to adjust the plan I was going for based on what other people did.

I expanded the location of the Howler Slave Company on the map. That frantic movement…were they leaving town? "We're heading to the Howler Slave Company. Sera, you go on ahead and give Dredd a message. Tell him we're on our way. If he's getting ready to leave now, ask him to wait for us."

"Got it. I'll go on ahead." Sera nodded and left the room.

No one would give a second glance to Sera, a beastfolk, moving alone. The ears and tail would disqualify her from suspicion of being the Saint.

I took Mia's robes from earlier and stashed them in my Item Box. She was about to say something about that, but I ignored her. Getting out of here had to come first.

We were in a hurry, but we had to be careful not to draw attention by running. We picked the emptiest back routes we could while making our way to the Howler Slave Company.

"Master," Hikari whispered.

I nodded quietly. She was right—we were being tailed. Did they know Mia had been in that house after all? But then why wouldn't they have called for reinforcements? I didn't know what our pursuer was after, but it was a good thing for us, so I didn't question it.

Turn left there. It'll be a bit of a detour, but we can lure them in, I said telepathically.

I ran, pulling Mia by the hand, and Hikari followed us as well. We were in the back alleys, so nobody was around.

Hikari disguised her presence and slipped down a side road

while Mia and I kept running straight.

Someone followed us into the alley and ran quickly after us. Around the time they passed the spot where Hikari was hiding, we stopped and turned. From here, she looked...about the same height as Mia? Her long hair was tied up in back, and she had on light clothing like the kind adventurers wore, so she'd be inconspicuous in town.

The figure, perhaps guessing our plan, stopped and glared hard at us. I heard her clicking her tongue. Maybe she was shaken by our actions, because her eyes started flicking side to side. Hikari had just stepped out, too, so maybe she'd realized we had her surrounded.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" The woman tilted her head, as if confused by my question. She was crouching down, maybe to fight back if she was attacked.

"You've been following us for a while, haven't you?" I replied.

Hikari, who had been behind the woman, took a step forward. The woman drew her sword, then ran at me while still in a crouching position.

I couldn't afford to take too much time. If a commotion started, it could draw more people, so I steeled my nerve and reached for the hand of the woman holding the dagger. I purposefully employed the movements of a novice, practically asking to be stabbed.

I sensed the woman grinning, but a moment later, her expression turned to one of shock. The tip of the dagger which she planned to run into me had stopped—thanks to the Shield I'd had up the whole time.

It was impressive that she didn't drop her knife from the shock, but her momentary hesitation would doom her.

She'd managed to dodge Hikari's attack, but while she did, I ran up to her and struck at her with my fist. I didn't have any punching skills, so I expected her to dodge this one. But another strike from Hikari sealed the deal, and we managed to capture the woman unconscious.

"Master, what do we do with her?" Hikari asked.

I tied her up while she was still knocked out and picked her up...in the "princess carry" style.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Mia scolded me.

It would be more dangerous to carry her on my back! I protested internally. *Even if she is tied up, she could still stab me in the back or something once she woke up! It’s just way too risky!*

After much fervent explaining of these points, I managed to get them across to Mia, and we got moving again. We had to take a long detour to avoid people, but we managed to arrive at the Howler Slave Company with no problems.

Inside, things were chaotic, with Dredd pacing back and forth, doling out orders. Sera was standing to one side, but she walked up when she noticed us.

“Master, Dredd says they’re planning to evacuate.”

After hearing that, Dredd noticed us as well and walked up.

“Well, if it isn’t Master Sora. Sera gave me your message. Are you intending to leave town as well?”

“That’s the plan, but I have a few more things to take care of first. Can we talk in the back?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. Wait just one moment.”

Dredd gave an order, and we went back into the transaction room to talk.

“First, I’m going to ask you for a massive favor. So if it’s too much to ask, please say so.”

It was dangerous, but I had to tell him. If he’d been a more unscrupulous man I might not have bothered, but from the way he’d reacted to Sera’s circumstances and his little brother Drake, I wanted to believe he was honest. *Of course, that could just be a front he put on to do business.*

“This girl here is Saint Mia,” I admitted. “I’m trying to get her out safely.”

“Wouldn’t that make you…an enemy to the Holy Kingdom of Frieren?”

Would it? The Pope was kind of like a king, so would that be what bucking his orders amounted to? I looked over at Mia and nodded. If Dan had been a bad guy I might have thrown his name into the mix, but he’d also taken Mia’s side.

Having heard this much, Dredd seemed to realize what was going on. “I see…” He looked up at the ceiling. It was a lot to ask someone.

When I looked at him again, his usual smile had vanished. He

asked me, with an almost frighteningly serious expression, “I am still a merchant. If I were to do what you ask, what would be in it for me?”

“That’s a good question. I can offer Hikari and Sera as guards,” I proposed. “Since the stampede might still happen, it could get pretty dicey out there. I’m sure you know what Sera can do, at the very least.”

“Yes, that is very true…” he mused.

“And…let me see…” Seeing Dredd’s hesitation, I tried to make one more push. I had him leave for a minute so it was just me and our group (plus one unconscious person) together.

“First, Mia,” I said. “Are you all right taking a slave contract if it means getting out of this?” Part of my escape plan was to have Dredd carry Mia out of town as a slave. Apparently, the exit restrictions were lighter for slave traders. They carried so many slaves at once, after all, and their status meant their identities were already accounted for.

Of course, there was a chance that his stock might be checked, so it was also a bit of a gamble.

Waiting for the stampede to start and hiding out in the chaos was another option, but I wasn’t sure if we could stay hidden until then, especially since the stampede might even cause them to bulk up security. So this might also be the fastest way to go.

“If this is our most likely chance of success, then I’ll do what you say,” Mia replied easily after I explained.

“What’s the plan, then, master?” Sera asked.

“I’m not sure if it’ll go well, but I think I’ll make a bag of holding,” I said.

This earned me a side-eye from Sera. It was an appropriate reaction for the average person who knew how precious bags of holding were, but we didn’t have time to waste.

I took out fifteen orc magistones and split them into three piles. First, I combined each set of five magistones into one high-quality one, which I fused with an ordinary bag. I then used Enchant to add an item box spell to it, and it was done. Appraisal told me that the completed bag of holding was of low quality, so it could only hold “about five sake barrels.” Not that I could judge if that was a lot or a little.

“Sorry, but please call Dredd in again,” I told Sera once the work

was done.

Surprised, Sera did just that, and the negotiations continued.

"I have two bags of holding here," I told Dredd. "They're each big enough to hold about five sake barrels. If you take my request, I'll give you these bags of holding. Is it a deal?"

It must have been a very appealing offer, and in the end he accepted. They were low quality, but apparently any kind of bag of holding was a hard offer for a merchant to pass up.

"So will you forge a slave contract with Saint Mia?" he asked.

"Yes, and I'd like to forge one with the woman sleeping there too. Mia...let's call her a debt slave, and the woman can be a crime slave."

We started with the contract with Mia. *Wait, first...* I switched to telepathy. *Ciel, could you hide for a while? I'll call you when it's safe, so I'd appreciate it if you could just watch from hiding for a bit.*

I didn't want to risk Mia seeing Ciel, just in case. Unlike Sera, I might be parting ways with her very soon—once the stampede had settled and the misunderstanding was resolved, she could potentially go back to being a Saint.

It would be obvious if they could just appraise her, of course; does nobody in this country even have Appraisal?

I quickly forged slave contracts with Mia and the unconscious girl. I wasn't sure if I could manage it while she was unconscious, but apparently there was a way to do it—sometimes you got people refusing to take on the contracts without a fight.

"So, Dredd, where will you go after you leave here?"

"The plan was to leave out the west gate and head to Idoll where Drake is."

"Could you take the girls to Tenns Village, then?" I asked. "I know the people there, and they should be willing to do what you ask if Hikari's with them." I told Hikari to explain the situation to the village headman, Mahatt, and ask for them to stay there. Sera and Mia were also listening, so I figured it should be okay, but still.

"Will do. It's on the way, so that should be fine."

I gave the two bags of holding to Dredd and paid him five gold for passage to Tenns Village. Dredd left the room; it looked like he was scrambling to get things ready as well.

I decided to make some preparations of my own.

"Mia, I know this is a hard thing to ask of a woman, but could

you cut your hair short?” Knowing that hair was a woman’s life, I thought she’d refuse, but she assented and cut her long hair up to her shoulders.

“Now maybe I can make some hair dye…” I used alchemy to make some in black and some in gold, using flowers and food ingredients. The black was perfect, but the gold took on a bit of a dusky hue.

First, I dyed Mia’s hair black. I used something like colored contacts to darken her eyes too. Some people felt scared using contacts the first few times, but Mia didn’t hesitate to put them in.

Now she and Hikari looked a bit like sisters.

“Master, what’s that for?” Hikari seemed to wonder why I’d made two sets.

“Oh, I was thinking I might use this myself later.” The mask made me stand out, after all.



While we were doing all that, the woman woke up. She looked at us, then saw at the collar around her neck and let out a wail.

"Shut up," I ordered her, and she did. The sight seemed to make her realize the situation she'd found herself in. "First, a question for you. You were trying to kill Mia, right?"

She nodded obediently.

"What other orders did they give you? Tell me the details."

She resisted at first, but unable to stand the punishment for refusing to obey orders, she spoke.

Here are the basics of what we learned: Her name was Isabella; she was a killer for an underground organization and a lone wolf. She insisted she *did* have friends, of course, and I decided not to argue. *Best not to poke that hornet's nest…* She trembled furiously when she saw the pity in my face, though.

At any rate, she'd taken a quest through a certain channel to kill Mia, but I'd blocked her first attempt. She'd been preparing for the next when she'd been ordered to hold out until a later time. Then, once the Pope's announcement of her false sainthood was made, she got the order to resume and sprang into action.

When I asked her how she knew where Mia was, she said she'd followed the poison in Mia's blood. I asked her to clarify, and she explained proudly that the poison had a particular scent. *What is she, a dog?* I found myself wondering.

"So what were you going to do after you killed Mia?" I asked.

"I was supposed to use a signal flare to let them know she was dead. They didn't tell me what to do if I took her alive." Apparently it had been assumed that she'd kill her.

If she was going to be executed anyway, it would be the same either way, right? No, she might say something inconvenient if she lived, so it was probably better for them if she were killed.

"All right, Sera," I said. "Tell Dredd not to leave town until the message about the Saint's death gets out."

"You won't tell him, master?"

"I'm about to be a little busy. I have to take Isabella to the Apostel house, and…the mask will draw attention, so I guess I'll use that dye."

The dye worked by just pouring it over your hair, so it was quite easy. I looked around and saw all four of them staring at me.

"Master looks weird."

“I agree with Hikari.”

“Um…it might not be your style.”

They all gave their opinions, and Isabella nodded in agreement. Perhaps golden hair and eyes didn’t look right on someone with Japanese features. *Maybe this makes me stand out more than the mask?* But it was probably better than the black hair and eyes.

“All right, good luck, everyone.” I moved my necessary things from my Item Box to the last bag of holding and gave the girls ten golds for expenses. It was quite a lot, but I wasn’t sure when we’d get to see each other next.

“Oh, Sora. I have a question for you,” Mia said.

“Yeah? What is it?” I asked.

“If you go back to House Apostel, you’ll see the cardinal, won’t you? I’d like you to ask after Regulus, if you could.” He’d apparently helped Mia when she was attacked, and she was worried about what had happened to him after that.

Soon enough, Isabella and I left the Howler Trading Company and headed for the Apostel estate.

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My arrival at House Apostel started out chaotic. It was hard to get anyone to recognize me. *Maybe I should’ve put the mask on just before I got here?* Did changing my hair and eyes make me look that different?

That was probably why “Who the hell are you? Get away from my daughter!” was the first thing out of Dan’s mouth when I saw him. It seemed to just be the thing he said to any men about Yor’s or Yuri’s age. “Well, I know why you’d disguise yourself that way,” he added quickly. “So who’s the slave?” He seemed to be pretending that first bit hadn’t happened at all.

It was a good thing Lond was the only other person around. As usual, he set the standard for all butlers, remaining completely calm while Dan raged. Or maybe he was just used to this?

“Her name is Isabella. She’s the assassin who took the job on Mia.”

“What?!” Dan purpled and seemed about to stand up, but he managed to restrain himself.

I explained to Dan what she’d told me.

“All right. Well, I got you your dead body, but you’d better get everything ready tonight.”

“Okay. Tell me where it is,” I said.

“No, I’ll go with you. We’ll take the girl as well. We want this to be as flawless as possible.”

I did appreciate his offer. I had a few ideas, but there’d probably be some holes in them. Having help from Dan, who was (according to everyone else) extremely competent at anything that didn’t involve his daughters, would surely serve to bolster my plan further.

As we walked, I told Dan that Mia was worried about Regulus, and he told me he’d been injured in the magical blast but would pull through. However, because he’d covered for Mia, he was now being kept in a cell.

Once we arrived at our destination, I got to work disguising the body. First I used materials I’d made with alchemy as a kind of prosthetic makeup to make the face look like Mia’s. I stumbled on that first step, though.

“That should do it, right?” I said.

“No!” Dan objected. “Saint Mia’s eyes look more like… Aah, leave it to me.”

“Her nose isn’t that prominent, is it? Or her cheeks,” I protested.

Time passed as we went around in circles. In the end, Isabella stepped in and finished it so quickly it made me wonder why we’d wasted time before. It was so well done that even those who knew Mia well would think it was her. Even Dan gave his stamp of approval.

“It was simple. The first step in our job is learning about our target, after all,” Isabella said shyly.

It didn’t really seem like something to be proud of, but I was glad she’d been so helpful, so I decided not to touch it. The body’s hair was also too short, so we had to use the hair Mia had cut off earlier and dye it just the right color. We then put her in Mia’s old clothes, but that was a job for Isabella. The men were driven out for this part. I’d also slipped a certain magic item into the clothes; if the body were investigated in more detail, I could infuse it with mana to make the body catch fire and burn.

I then used my Disguise skill as one final precaution. This was in case they had someone who could use Appraisal, but I wasn’t sure

how well it would work. I asked Dan privately, and he said that at the very least, nobody in the church had the Appraisal skill—at least, nobody had admitted it.

But if anyone did have Appraisal, they would have been able to confirm Mia's job and we wouldn't be in this mess, I decided.

"So the plan is to lay the body in bed in the house from before and let them find it?"

That was the result of what we discussed. Rather than leaving her out in the street, arranging her body inside the house would add to the illusion that she'd died from her initial wound. We then discussed when to have Isabella give the signal, and the day's work was done.

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Hikari, Sera, can you hear me? Tell Dredd to head out. After waking up the next morning, I telepathically told the two to move out based on the time we'd worked out the night before.

I used my automap to check their movements and saw the members of the Howler Slave Company start to head out. I hadn't been sure if they'd be able to hear me at this distance, but it seemed they had.

Right now, the flow of people in the city were torn between ones trying to leave and ones looking for the Saint. In particular, there had been long lines at the southern and western gates since that morning. They'd already been there when I woke up, so they must have been lining up all night.

Ciel, will you stay with me? I asked, and she nodded in response. She was probably being considerate because of the Isabella thing, but now that I thought about it, she might be seen by Mia if she went with Hikari and the others. And as the one who had contracted with her, I was honestly glad she had chosen me.

As the time neared, I got moving. I had to see up close how they reacted to the body.

The Pope had told them to bring Mia in, so I expected the body to be transported to the central church. From what Dan had said, they'd already prepared an execution platform in the plaza, so that would have to be the case.

While I was thinking that over, Isabella's signal flare went up.

Most of the signals heading our way were probably bystanders investigating out of sheer curiosity, but some of them were coming in at very high speed. There must have been people placed in different locations ready to move at once when they saw the signal, further supporting the idea that the people who had hired Isabella had come from the church.

By the time I arrived, I could hear voices shouting, “The false Saint has been found!” and “The false Saint is already dead!” The sentiment spread through the crowd in an instant, as if someone were passing on the information in a calculated fashion.

Soon enough, the body was tied hands and feet to a cross-like structure, to be paraded through the streets in public view. As it moved, people began to gather at its head. By the time it arrived at the central church, the people searching in other locations had also returned, so the plaza was teeming with people. However, the overflowing crowd parted to let the body through on its way to the execution platform. The sight reminded me of a crucifixion scene I’d seen once before.

All the curses and jeers being shouted by the masses suddenly stopped, and the plaza fell silent. Then the gazes of the crowd turned to the church’s entrance. I looked that way too and saw the man from the day before enter, dressed in his same elaborate costume: the Pope.

He walked down the steps surrounded by members of the Knights and the Church—probably cardinals and other big shots, given that Dan was among them—and finally stopped at a sort of lectern installed at the front of the stage. “You’ve done an excellent job capturing the criminal. It appears that divine punishment has already extinguished the flame of her life. We shall now hold the ritual of cleansing.”

Hearing the Pope’s declaration, a man clad in white approached the platform with a torch in hand. Some averted their eyes, some formed sigils with their hands, some knelt down and prayed. Everyone reacted in similar ways, except for one person.

At a glance he was the picture of innocence, with an appearance one might even call “boyish.” But he wore a smile on his lips—a smile he seemed to be fighting unsuccessfully to repress. He seemed to be enjoying the spectacle about to take place.

A single smiling person out of all the crowd in the plaza… He felt completely out of place. All eyes were focused on the platform now, so I was the only one looking at the boy. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I didn't know why, but I found myself appraising him.

What I saw nearly made my heart jump out of my chest. I deserved a reward for not crying out, in fact.

*What…what…*What *is he doing here…*

[**Name:** Adonis / **Job:** Cardinal (Temp) / **Level:** 43 (70) / **Race:** Demon / **Status:** Excited]

A demon?

But it was at that moment that I heard the Pope shout "Cleanse her!" I looked to the platform and saw the body wreathed in fire. The flames grew stronger, their pillar rising higher until the body was consumed. Perhaps the magic item I'd included had helped cause the quick conflagration. A minute later, only ashes lay on the platform, with not even the cross spared the fire's wrath.

"The cleansing is complete!" the Pope proclaimed, and the eyes of everyone in the plaza turned toward him. He was then about to speak again, when he was suddenly interrupted by laughter.

Everyone else heard the voice as well, and they turned toward its source. The Pope then looked back and stared at the boy.

The boy, feeling everyone's gaze on him, laughed an innocent, heartfelt laugh. "What an amusing spectacle," he declared.

"Cardinal Ado. What are you doing?" the cardinal next to him asked hesitantly.

The boy, Adonis, ignored him and nodded to himself. He looked at the Pope and said, with a gleeful smile, "Thank you for executing the Saint. This has been *such* an amusing farce, Your Holiness."

"Wh-What are you talking about? I merely followed the words of the Divine—"

"Oh, did you? And did the voice in your revelation sound a bit like this?"

A voice rang out. *Mia is a false Saint! This blasphemy shall bring disaster to your kingdom!*

"H-How do you…and that voice…" The Pope began to look

hesitant.

“I’m the one who issued that revelation, because the Saint is a nuisance to the Demon King. Besides, seeing those opposed to the Demon King kill the Saint with their own hands… I can’t even describe how it feels. And although you style yourself a holy leader, you’re still an ordinary human consumed by base lust for power. It was *so* easy to manipulate you!”

The people around Adonis, unsettled by his behavior, began to back away.

“But I had to hold back for so long, you know? Talking to you foolish humans, playing the role of cardinal, dealing with your stench… Every day was a new trial. But don’t worry. Today has been so wonderful that I forgive you completely. And as a reward, I’ll tell you one thing!”

As Adonis spoke on and on, some knights approached him from behind and moved to grab him. But they couldn’t get close before something blew them back.

“My name is Adonis. I’ve come to gift you with despair. Oh, and I arranged the stampede too! Wasn’t that considerate of me?”

Now, a demon stood before us. He was still dressed in his elaborate robe, but a single horn now grew from his head, and black wings sprouted from his back.

“A demon…” someone whispered. The phrase rippled through the crowd, and the people amassed in the plaza began drawing back to flee from Adonis.

“Now, give me something worth watching, humans! If you can survive the stampede, perhaps we’ll meet again! But can this powerless Pope of yours guide you through it?”

Laughing, Adonis flew into the air and unleashed something into the sky—a boom and a flash of light. I immediately turned my eyes away, and by the time I looked back, Adonis was already gone.

A Quiet Conversation 2

I nodded quietly as I heard that Mia had returned to the church.

The Saint had returned. There were rumors that she'd taken ill, but I'd looked into it and found out that she was spending some time outside of the church.

"But I'm glad she returned on schedule. Now we can execute the plan."

Then, the day before the Advent Festival arrived. As expected, the Pope had called the Saint in front of everyone. In advance, he'd set one of his men to be her escort, and the man had attacked her as planned.

I thought this would be the end of it, but something unexpected happened. The other of the two guards picked up the Saint and began to run off with her. The guard who attacked her followed, but then another unexpected thing happened.

It all happened so suddenly, you see, and I'd gotten flustered. I'd prepared a spell just in case the poison didn't work and she tried to run off, but I ended up accidentally unleashing too much power—enough to vaporize the Saint entirely.

My plan wouldn't work without a body, but this turned out to be a needless fear.

"Ah..." I found myself breathing.

The spell that should have hit her had been blocked. *Her saintly power?* I wondered, but I still felt genuinely relieved.

With nowhere else to go, the magic's aftershocks blew out the dome and the glass windows. The Pope was running around shouting.

I let out a sigh, walked up to him, and spoke. "Your Holiness. We must capture the Saint—ah, the false Saint."

My words restored some of his calm. He called to the other cardinals and we exited the church; he gave his speech and the Saint hunt began.

This was the signal to the assassin as well, and the beginning of my own personal game. I would take direct action only after the Saint's execution was complete.

The moons went down and the sun came up. I didn't hear anything about the Saint being discovered in the meantime.

"Is someone hindering us, then?" I wondered. At the least, it wouldn't be anyone from the Pope's faction. *The Saint's faction, then? Or perhaps a neutral party...*

Humans were ridiculous beings who pursued their own goals even though they nominally belonged to the same organization. It was absolute chaos. That was what had made it so easy for me to do what I'd done, in fact.

It was several hours later that things began to move again. The signal went up, notifying us of the Saint's death. I'd really hoped to end her life with the execution, in the cruelest way possible, but the dagger that had injured her had contained a powerful poison, so that couldn't be helped.

The whereabouts of the guard who had run off with the Saint were currently unknown, but I didn't care. I'd told them to find him if they could, but once the truth was out he'd probably be labeled a hero. Or perhaps he'd be punished somehow for failing to save her?

"To lament a death, though..." I did feel some sympathy for them in that sense. I'd heard about such feelings many times before. I'd only experienced them once myself, but I never wanted to go through them again.

"Cardinal Ado. His Holiness wishes to see you."

"Certainly, I'm on my way."

Now it was time for the final touches. I was so excited to see how the Pope and his disciples would react that I could hardly contain myself.

The Saint had died twice, first by poison and then with the destruction of her body on the platform. I only got to observe it from a distance, but the body was clearly that of Saint Mia.

The Pope gave a grand speech, and an ecstatic expression appeared on his face. *Probably drunk on his own power,* I mused. The pride of being the one to receive the revelation and to have his own desires fulfilled.

The crowd gathered in the plaza also looked on with bated breath. How many of them would this revelation drive mad?

“The cleansing is complete!” the Pope declared triumphantly, and at last I could hold back no more.

Unable to stop the emotion welling up in me, I began to laugh. Who could blame me? I carefully laid out the truth to that incompetent Pope.

His knights flew at me and tried to grab me, but they were no match for my power. As a finishing blow, I shut off a certain spell I’d cast as well.

I looked down and saw the people screaming in horror. It was absolute chaos.

But this was just the prelude. I genuinely hoped the humans would resist the stampede, but I also thought it possible that the holy capital might succumb to it and fall.

“Because if they survive, they can live forever in regret for what they’ve done!”

That would drag out their pain far longer. I especially wondered what might happen to the Pope.

I couldn’t watch to the very end, but perhaps I could check in from time to time. For now, my desire to meet the Demon King was the far stronger urge.

“Ah, perhaps the others will praise me when I return?” Even those who’d called me young and inexperienced would surely acknowledge me now.

◇Mia’s Perspective 3

I woke up and found Sora with me again.

The sight of the bloodstain on my side gradually brought my memories back. The Pope had called me a “false Saint,” and then I’d felt the pain in my side. But now when I touched it, the wound was gone.

The moment I’d lost consciousness, something serious had happened…I thought. I thought…Cardinal Ado had fired a spell at me. But just before it struck, something had protected me. I didn’t remember clearly, but I was still alive for now.

I had an idea of where the protection might have come from—it was the charm Sora had given me.

I reached out, but the moment I touched it, something felt off. It felt different. The jewel—rather, the magistone—was now

cracked.

Sora's words when he gave it to me played back in my mind—that it would protect me from danger. Was the pendant what had protected us, then?

Without receiving an answer, I got changed and walked into town with Sora and Hikari. Here and there I heard angry calls to search for me, which brought me to the verge of tears.

But Sora told me that the entire church was not against me. The knight, Sigurd, had saved me; Cardinal Dan had taken my side...and so had Regulus. And now, Sora and his friends were trying to help me as well. Why would they go to such lengths for someone they'd only met a few days ago? I could only wonder.

On our way to the Howler Slave Company, we were attacked by an assassin trying to kill me. However, Sora and Hikari managed to capture her instead. This surprised me, because Sora had told me he was a merchant. Hikari also proved to be very good in a fight.

We arrived at the Howler Slave Company and made a few preparations. We forged a slave contract so that I could leave town, and I didn't resist. As I thought back on the last few days, I just wanted to go far away with Sora and his friends, even if it meant becoming a slave. But I knew that my presence would cause trouble for him, so I didn't speak those selfish thoughts aloud.

I could go crazy thinking about it. *How could I imagine something so awful, when I've already been so selfish?*

I spent the day in the slaver headquarters, and Hikari and I changed into slave clothes in the morning. It was a bit...well, *considerably* embarrassing. Just the thought of going out in front of people dressed so scantily made my cheeks feel like they were on fire. But looking around, I noticed that Hikari and the other slaves didn't seem to mind at all.

Soon enough we were split up by gender, put into prisonlike wagons, and sent off. It would be hard to see us through the canvas coverings, which made me feel better. The other slave traders' wagons didn't have canvases, so maybe that was something unique to Howler.

The wagons headed for the west gate in the surrounding wall, where we waited in a long line. The entire time, I heard voices shouting about searching for me.

Seeing me looking nervous, Hikari grabbed my hand. Even though I was the older one...

When our own turn finally came up, a commotion started around us.

“The false Saint has been found!”

“Hurry to the central church! The cleansing ritual is about to begin!”

The voices instantly swelled, and I heard the masses of people start to move toward the city center. Then our wagon arrived at the gate, and we were immediately passed through. I felt my heart skip a beat when the guards looked inside, but they simply said, “Dark-haired sisters? That’s unusual” and left.

Suddenly my body went limp. That was how nervous I had been. Had the discovery of the dead body loosened restrictions on leaving the town? If so, then Sora was incredible for thinking the plan through so comprehensively.

And so the wagon we were in made it out of town and headed down the road toward our destination, the village of Tenns.

Chapter 7

With the disappearance of Adonis, everyone's eyes fell on the charred body before them.

The Saint was dead. The people who had been calling for her death just moments ago now knelt and began to pray for forgiveness. Some openly wept to show their sorrow.

The Pope, who had been behind it all, just slumped over limply on the stage.

I looked at Dan and saw his contingent reacting in different ways. Some were still too stunned to move, while others actively berated the Pope. A few among them were giving out orders—Dan was part of the latter group.

I watched the sight with cold eyes. *Selfish. That's what they are.*

Still, I couldn't stay here forever. I actually wanted to go after the girls ASAP, but I had to check the situation with the stampede first. I wondered for a moment if hypocrites like these were even worth protecting, but Layla and her friends were staying regardless, and I felt like Mia would've wanted me to help them if she were there.

I navigated my way through the crowd and checked my automap for Layla and her friends. I picked up their signals near the wall about midway between the northern and eastern gates. I held down my impatience and walked along, meeting up with Isabella on the way.

"Master, what will we do next?" she asked me.

"I'm going to meet up with Layla, Dan's daughter Yor, and her friends. You go to Dan's house and be a go-between for us."

On receiving my orders, Isabella ran off like the wind. Seeing her move like that, I knew she would've been dangerous to face in a fair fight.

When I met up with Layla and her friends, the first thing Layla said was "Who are *you*?"

I wondered what my expression looked like at that moment.

"Well, instructor, why do you look like that?" Yor pressed.

“My dark hair and eyes are too conspicuous, and so was the mask. So how are things going here?”

“We got word a little while ago that the monsters had begun their march. It started at the same time we heard that big blast at the center of town.”

While Yor explained things to me, I heard whispers from the girls around me. “So that’s what he really looks like?” “Elder sister, did you see his face before?” and things like that.

Apparently the guild had sent someone into the forest to watch the monsters’ movements, and the following was what the scout had conveyed:

The monsters consisted primarily of goblins, wulfs, and orcs, with some advanced subtypes visible as well. There were also some serpents, arachnids, and insects, but not as many of them. But there was one point of caution that came with this analysis: The sheer scale of the horde made any precise declarations impossible. In particular, it was hard to make out the monsters at the back of the stampede, since they were blocked off by other creatures.

“Also, even though the monsters have started moving, they are going rather slowly,” Layla told me.

I tilted my head in confusion. I’d assumed a stampede would involve all the monsters charging at full speed, so I was surprised to hear that they were moving so slowly. Still, it would usually be a two-day walk from the forest to the holy capital. If they ran the whole way, they’d probably be exhausted by the time they arrived.

But Layla said you never knew when the monsters’ movements would change, so it was important to remain ready.

“So, Sora. I’d like to ask one favor…”

Layla was asking to share the arrows and knives I’d made with others. I couldn’t fault her; I’d made about five hundred arrows in all, and Luilui probably couldn’t fire them all off by herself.

Still, if too many were used at once, it could block the general line of sight, so it was probably up to the individual to mind their usage.

“I don’t mind,” I said, “but try to remember how many you gave away and to whom. And to collect any that don’t end up getting used against the stampede. If you can do those two things, go ahead.”

I didn't want people selling them off instead of using them, or keeping them to analyze.

"Oh, and please let them know to be careful of explosions." That was the biggest threat.

After that, Layla took Luilui to explain the plan to the guild management.

I was talking with Yor and the others when word of the Saint's death finally reached our contingent.

"Saint Mia was killed? And...a demon was behind it?" Tricia breathed. She was the most affected of everyone there, but most of the adventurers around us were still stunned by the news.

The atmosphere in the room began to turn dark, but just as morale was in danger of plummeting, the church knights appeared. They marched up to us in formation, led by Dan and some other people in important-looking outfits. A few of the bigwigs broke off, spoke to some nearby adventurers about something, then started walking off in the same direction Layla had gone before.

A strategy meeting with the top adventurers, perhaps?

"Sorry, but I've got a few things to take care of too," I said. "I think Dan's here, though, so I'm sure he knows more." Telling them that Mia was still alive would set them at ease, but it would be dangerous to reveal that information too lightly. You never knew who might be listening, and I would want to check with Dan about it before I did it either way.

As I separated from the group, Isabella walked silently up to me. "Master, a man from the church wanted me to ask if you had any extra potions."

A request from Dan, maybe? I wanted to keep some for myself and also give some to Layla's group, so I'd have to be careful how many I gave them.

One of the cardinals then informed the group what was going on in the city. The church had sent fewer knights than expected, but those they did send were mainly cavalry. Some of the adventurers seemed to be devout believers as well, and while some were aggrieved and yelled at them over the church's actions, the cardinal just accepted the blame without making excuses.

His last announcement was that we wouldn't hole up for a

siege, but would form a defensive perimeter outside of the town to actively drive the monsters away. The safest thing to do would actually be to attack from the ramparts with ranged attacks, but they didn't have enough people with the right abilities to drive back the sheer number of monsters. If a wall happened to be breached and the monsters got into town, it would not only put the populace in danger, but throw the town into a panic and make defenses even harder.

Once the announcement was over, the knights and adventurers worked together to build things like simple stockades. I could've done it faster with my magic, but doing it in front of so many people would draw attention I just didn't need. Instead, I gathered as many herbs as I could from item shops and went about making potions with alchemy. Obviously, I made sure I was paid for my work.

While all that was happening, the mood around the town was steadily getting more dire. This was mostly because of the faltering trust in the church that had killed the Saint, but I also sensed an escalating anxiety about when the monster attack would begin.

Looking out over the state of the city, I remembered the word Adonis had used. Despair—maybe that was the feeling hanging over the vulnerable citizenry. The person from whom they usually drew emotional support—not the Pope, but the Saint—was nowhere to be found.

I saw people walking down the streets trembling in fear; I heard believers and others coming together in prayer at the churches, asking for salvation...or forgiveness.

Soon enough—in the morning two days later, just as Layla had predicted—things came to a head as the monsters appeared near the city. They let out a war cry and then charged, their footfalls stirring an earthquake beneath them.

It was the sign that the stampede had begun.

◇◇◇

The monsters came in an indistinguishable mass. We fired off arrows into that throng, and they came down on the monsters' heads like rain. When they hit, it activated the Firestorm spell that

consumed the monsters in flames.

This massively thinned out the goblins and wulfs. Some of the advanced subtypes escaped the inferno, but it was only a handful who could then be picked off individually. Given that the goblins and wulfs made up seventy percent of the horde, that meant the initial charge was easily a victory for our side.

Next came a group consisting mainly of orcs, and...were those ogres? with snakes and spiders making up the wings. This time we rained normal arrows down on them, but they charged through heedlessly. There were mages unleashing spells as well, but they couldn't deal damage as reliably as they had in the first wave.

One observer shouted, "Why didn't we hold some of those arrows in reserve?!" but it seemed to me they couldn't have taken out the first wave if they had.

Soon the battle was a melee, with both sides charging and retreating in turn. The cavalry bravely tried to get around to flank the monsters, but monsters with long-ranged attacks stymied them, and blood snakes charged into the cavalry itself to wreak havoc. Priests quickly healed the injured, but while they could cure their wounds, they couldn't restore their stamina. That meant they became less and less capable the more time passed.

You would have expected the monsters to start tiring, too, but their attacks stayed as fierce as ever. Most of them were still rampaging gleefully. The tide seemed to be turning against us.

The Bloody Rose was part of the fighting force, and I was walking along behind them.

"That one's next!" Layla pointed at an ogre.

It was spreading terror in our ranks as it sent adventurers flying with each swing of its club. This was an average member of its species, but it was stronger than many weaker monsters' advanced subtypes.

The party surrounded it and tried to attack, but couldn't land a meaningful hit. The ogre had very tough skin, and though it should have been weak against magic, it seemed unfazed by our magic attacks as well. The other monsters also offered support, preventing us from overwhelming it with numbers. This was not just happening for our party, but for everyone around us as well.

"Casey, support me. I'm going in!" Layla paused and concentrated. I could feel her mana escalating. Seeing this as a

potential turning point in the fight, she'd started infusing her sword with mana.

I used some spells of my own to keep the ogre in check while moving to the front of the group with Casey to draw the ogre's attention from Layla. Talia and Luilui also fired shots from a distance to interrupt its attacks.

Perhaps sensing the incoming threat, a group of orcs led by an orc warrior charged us. The adventurers around us joined in, trying to drive them back, but it wasn't enough to stop their momentum. I also used as many skills as I could to take them down, but it barely made a dent in the face of so many enemies.

Just when I thought our line might break, Layla came running in, slicing through the orcs like they were made out of paper. Each swing took an orc down, and in no time she'd amassed a mountain of corpses. She kept that pace as she approached the ogre, then sliced straight down, leaving a large cleft in its body. The ogre let out a bellow as the attack landed, but it caught its balance and struck back. Before it could, though, Layla reversed her slice, and this time she took the ogre down.

The adventurers who saw it let out a cheer, but the strength immediately drained from Layla's body. She stumbled and then hit the ground as well.

"Out of mana?!" I gasped to myself.

Seeming to see an opening, or perhaps sensing the threat posed by someone who could defeat an ogre, the orcs fighting nearby whipped around and rushed at the spot where Layla had collapsed. Casey and the rest of us tried hard to save her, but other monsters blocked our path. I quickly sliced through the monster in my way with Sword Slash and other sword techniques, but there was no way I'd make it in time at this rate.

I pulled a knife out of my Item Box and threw it. It was enchanted with earth magic, so the extra power it dished out knocked the orc a few steps back. It wasn't enough to slay it, but it did give me an opening. Then I slid in between the monsters and Layla and drove back the first of the orcs bearing down on her. But the monsters kept on charging, so I threw myself into their ranks.

Fortunately, I'd made enough of a show now that they were targeting me instead of her. I was chaining sword techniques, hoping to make up for my lack of a mithril sword, but it was

draining my SP again very quickly. Using Parallel Thinking while chaining spells meant I was also running out of MP fast. I used Detect Presence in the hopes of seeing reinforcements on the way, but the only signals around me were monsters. Other adventures had joined in the fight, but they couldn't quite break through.

I switched from trying to thin the monsters' numbers to conserving stamina and buying time. But this time, it backfired. I'd just blocked an attack from an orc when its body was suddenly torn to pieces as a club the size of a log swept toward me. I managed to think fast and deflect it with my sword, but the power of the impact made my hands go numb. If I hadn't been braced as hard as I was, I would've gone flying for sure.

The unexpected attack distracted me enough that even with Parallel Thinking, I reacted too slowly to what came next. Detect Presence had told me that the ogre was approaching, but I never would have dreamed it would swing its club at me then. Nevertheless, I'd just barely managed to deflect the attack, but I wasn't in time to block the ogre's next attack from my blind spot as it quickly stepped in to close the distance.

Well, maybe I could have blocked it—but that wouldn't have protected me from the rain of arrows that were also coming my way at that moment.

I immediately used my Barrier spell, but it only defended against the ogre's one strike and a few of the first arrows. I could sense that my shield had gone down, but there were still arrows flying at me. I thought I'd just have to dodge them, but remembering Layla was still behind me and they'd hit me if I moved, I decided I'd try to knock them out of the air instead.

I swung my sword at the arrows while trying to put up my magic shield again...but one arrow got through my defenses and struck me in the chest. I felt a blinding pain and impact that drove me backward. But the arrow that I thought had hit me fell onto the ground, harmless.

Did I get my shield up in time? I really could have died from that. *Talk about a hair's breadth...*

Then, just as I was getting ready for the next attack, reinforcements appeared, breaking through the monsters—the cavalry of the church knights. As they trampled their way through, the distracted ogre was sent down to a knee by coordinated

attacks from Casey and Talia, then slain. This one went down not to mithril weapons, but to peerless skill.

Not long after that, the monsters began their retreat. There'd been a massive reversal in their numbers advantage, and soon there seemed to be fewer than a hundred of them. The monsters had continued charging in a frenzy nevertheless, but now they suddenly looked hesitant. I heard the sound of a distant gong.

"They defeated the boss," Yor told me. The gong indicated that the elite force sent into the forest had slain it. "But instructor, are you all right? It looked like you were hit by an arrow..."

"Yeah, but my Barrier spell—" I was about to say the spell had made it in time when I realized that couldn't be right. If I'd had my shield up, I shouldn't have felt any pain. But I definitely had.

I suddenly reached for the place I'd felt it—the place the arrow had hit—and felt something there. I pulled out the transmitter I'd made for Chris. The magistone was broken, and a quick appraisal of the device confirmed that it was no longer functional. Looked like there was no way to repair it either.

"What's that, instructor?" Yor asked.

"It looks like it blocked the attack for me. Where's Layla?" Had I just gotten that lucky? It felt like a fairly extreme coincidence.

"She seems all right, since you protected her. Casey was at her wit's end about it, though."

I followed Yor's gaze to Layla, and saw Casey devotedly trying to...nurse her? I guess that was what you'd call it.

Then I looked back at the ruined pendant in my hand. Though it had been embarrassing at the time, I was glad I'd decided to adapt it into something I could wear. At the same time, I felt nervous that Chris and Rurika would no longer be able to track my location.

But that was only for a moment. I decided to stay positive and have faith that they'd get our message and we'd reunite safely.

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Morning came. Rather than holding the Advent Festival a day later, the people had a ceremony of mourning. They were accepting the death of the Saint—of Mia.

The night before, Dan had come back to talk things over with

me even though he'd been so busy dealing with the battle's aftermath. The biggest issue was Mia, and the question of whether to reveal the fact that she was alive. I still had some reservations, but if the Holy Kingdom could keep Mia safe, I thought it might be for the best to go public. The demon had manipulated them before, but the church would surely want to prioritize her safety after everything that had happened.

Surprisingly, Dan disagreed. Then he bowed to me and said, "Please, keep Saint Mia safe." As long as the demons were after her, he explained, there was no way the Holy Kingdom could fully protect her, and she'd be forced to live an even more stultifying life than before. He wanted to let her live the life she desired.

Most of all, he said, as someone who had seen the long power struggles of the church, he was afraid that the most trivial of things might draw her back into a new conflict.

Still, I couldn't just say "Leave it to me" and accept.

We ended our talk at a stalemate, having decided we'd leave it up to Mia to choose. Dan wrote a letter to that effect and gave it to me. He said that if Mia wanted to return to the church, I should send her back to them. If not, I'd send a letter back to him using coded language.

If Mia didn't return to the church, there was a chance she might receive another prophecy from the Goddess. When that happened, we should tell him about it via the church of whatever town we were in at the time. Then Dan gave me a brooch. It had a beautiful design, and he said that it would put you in touch with him if you showed it at a church.

I told him that if Mia came with me, our next destination would be Majorica, and we decided I could tell Yor and the others the situation then, since we'd likely run into them there.

At this point, he cautioned me against making a pass at Yor. I told him I had no intention of doing any such thing, and he seemed unhappy about that as well. *What do you want from me, man?*

"But this means you're deciding all this about Mia on your own, right? Is that really okay?" I asked.

He responded immediately that it wasn't a problem.

Then we talked about the stampede, and he gave me a platinum piece as a reward for the aid I'd provided. This included

payment for the potions, saving Mia, and everything else I'd done.

I had a favor to ask of Dan as well. It was about Isabella. I couldn't bring her with me, so I asked him to take her in. I thought he'd be against it since she was a former assassin, but he accepted. He didn't have anyone to run intelligence, he said, so he'd put her to work in that way.

Yor also gave me money when she returned. It was payment for the enchanted arrows and knives and apparently a reward for my participation in the stampede "hunt," even though I wasn't a registered adventurer.

In the end, those cheap weapons wound up netting me several hundred gold. Quite a few people had died in the stampede, but compared to descriptions of events of this magnitude in old records, that was on the low side. My magically enhanced weapons had apparently been a big contributor to that, which had kicked my reward up by quite a bit.

Yor begged me to tell her how I'd done it, and I managed to fudge my way through without revealing too much.

"But why do I get a reward for being involved in the hunt?" I asked.

Yor simply explained that I'd distinguished myself, which I assumed was just because I'd fought in the presence of the indomitable Layla. But when I said as much, Yor looked at me like I'd grown a second head.

Okay, Ciel. There should be some stalls out, so let's buy a good variety.

First thing in the morning, I transferred Isabella's slave contract to Dan, then went with Ciel to look around at stalls. There were still people in town, but far fewer than there had been when we'd gone around with Mia. Many people had evacuated because of the stampede, and even accounting for the adventurers who were still outside of town cleaning up the monster bodies, the streets felt deserted.

Most of those who remained had gone to the different churches to pray. In particular, the plaza in front of the central church was full of people who couldn't fit inside the building itself. Some degenerates ran stalls in the middle of all that, and apparently they'd received permission to do so because there were

rumors that the Saint had sneaked out to enjoy the festival while she was alive.

She had actually done that, so it wasn't a lie, but it still seemed dicey to me.

Ciel had been trawling the stalls in an attempt to cheer herself up, and I bought most of what she asked for…really, enough to feed a few dozen people. She was shocked at first by the amount, though she also looked very happy about it.

We'd moved to a rather empty space and were sitting down to eat when I heard bells ringing. They were coming from the west side of the town. Normally you'd have heard the bells from the central church, too, but unfortunately their bell tower had been destroyed.

It reminded me of the conversation I'd had with Dan the night before.

"When I thought about it calmly, there was something odd about this," he'd told me. "His Holiness said he'd received a prophecy from 'the Divine.' Normally you'd say you received it from the Goddess." He'd said that if only he'd noticed it at the time, maybe he could have prevented all of this.

"Well, nothing we can do about it now," I whispered. Ciel looked up at me, then immediately turned her interest back to the food.

After we finished, we walked around Messa a bit longer, buying the ingredients I'd need for my journey. It was my first time purchasing monster meat from a store. Wulf meat was cheap, but orc meat went for a pretty high price.

Then, that night, while getting ready to set out again, I checked my skills:

Skill: Walking Lv. 38
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 596030/610000
Skill Points: 1

Learned Skills
[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 3]
[Enhance Physique Lv. 9] [Regulate Mana Lv. MAX]

[Lifestyle Spells Lv. MAX] [Detect Presence Lv. MAX] [Sword Arts Lv. MAX] [Dimension Spells Lv. MAX] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 8] [Boost Recovery Lv. 9] [Hide Presence Lv. 6] [Alchemy Lv. MAX] [Cooking Lv. 9] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 6] [Fire Spells Lv. MAX] [Water Spells Lv. 5] [Telepathy Lv. 7] [Night Vision Lv. 8] [Sword Tech Lv. 5] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 5] [Earth Spells Lv. 8] [Wind Spells Lv. 5] [Disguise Lv. 5] [Engineering/Construction Lv. 6]

Advanced Skills
[Appraise Person Lv. 7] [Detect Mana Lv. 6] [Enchant Lv. 6]

Contract Skills
[Holy Spells Lv. 3]

Title
[Spirit Contractor]

My Walking level was the same as before, but it was close to turning over, and the fight with the stampede had considerably increased my battle skills as well. However, the best part was that I'd maxed out Dimension Spells. The reason I'd bought so much food and so many ingredients was because they would never go bad in my Item Box now.

This would make traveling a lot easier.

◇◇◇

I said goodbye to the members of House Apostel and left Holy Capital Messa behind.

Layla and the others were sad about saying goodbye, but they cheered up when I told them our next stop was Majorica. Dan watched Yor with a complicated expression, but nobody said anything about it.

I brought the color of my hair and eyes back to normal and left the town in my usual masked style, heading for Tenns Village. The

transport wagons weren't running, so I walked.

At first I traveled by the normal main road, but eventually I split off and headed west. The city of Wrent was to the southwest, but Tenns itself was due west from here. I figured cutting through the woods instead of stopping in Wrent would get me to the village that much more quickly.

Obviously, there were other reasons I chose to travel this way. If I had to camp out either way, I wanted to do it in comfort. That meant I'd need to use my skills to create a small house, and if I did that along the roadside, it might be seen. Nobody would just build a single house by the road, so if I was going to have to leave the road anyway, I might as well just cut through the wilds. It wasn't like the lack of a proper path to follow would tire me out faster, and I could easily avoid bandits and monsters with my automap.

My journey went on uninterrupted, and whenever I wasn't eating or sleeping I could just keep walking straight. My Night Vision skill meant that I could walk quickly through the forest even when the sun went down.

Thanks to that, I saw Hikari and the others not too far away at one point when I expanded my automap's range.

I was thinking I might even reach Tenns before them if I kept up my current pace, but just then, the weather took a turn for the worse. I gave up on trying to walk in the pouring rain and created a small shelter with earth magic. I sized it at about ten square meters and included a bedroom, kitchen, and bath, so it was quite cramped. But since I didn't have any furniture and it was just me and my animal friend, it was good enough for our purposes. However, the main reason I'd done it that way was because the area was so thick with trees that I didn't have the space.

I knew I could use a spell to deflect the rain while I was walking, but walking through the mud wouldn't be easy, so I decided to opt out. I wouldn't get physically tired from it, but having to watch where you stepped so you didn't slip on the rain-soaked ground got mentally exhausting. I also thought that I'd probably reach Tenns Village before the others even if I took a day off.

"Resting for today won't hurt anything."

So I cooked, tested my skills, and spent time with Ciel. But despite my expectations, I ended up spending three days in the hut instead of just one. I'd never seen it rain for this long in this

world.

This meant that Hikari's group—which, according to my automap, kept on moving even through the rain—did end up reaching Tenns Village before me.

When I first tried to enter the village, I was treated with suspicion. I didn't recognize the gatekeeper, so he was probably someone recently dispatched to the town. I showed him my guild card, but... *The mask? Is it the mask?* I hypothesized, but the more suspicious factor was apparently that I was walking by myself with light equipment and no bags. I had most of my things stored away in my Item Box, after all. *I really should've unpacked before I arrived...*

While I was going back and forth with the gatekeeper about my identity, a familiar face from the village came running. As soon as I was given permission to enter, she threw herself at me.

"Master, we were worried," Hikari said.

I genuinely felt bad about that. I'd known thanks to my skill that they were all okay, but it was still a massive relief to actually get to see them again. I suddenly realized I should have used telepathy to let them know that I was all right. *Sorry, I forgot.*

We walked around Tenns Village and saw a lot of traveler types hanging around. The village's total turnaround had understandably been a surprise to the people who'd stopped there on the way to Messa, but it was still rebuilding, and their inn couldn't accommodate so many people. As a result, the travelers had been assigned an empty plot of land to camp in. It was safer than the road, since they at least had the city walls around them.

"Where are Sera and Mia?" I asked Hikari.

"Helping."

Hikari led me to the only inn in Tenns, where I'd stayed once before. We peeked into the kitchen and saw the women of the village cooking together, Mia among them. Sera had apparently gone out with Elke and Dredd's slaves who could fight to do some hunting outside the village.

"Sora!" Mia shouted when she saw me, and the group of women all turned from their work to look at us. I was a little surprised that they were synced up so well. Among them I recognized Ney, who gave me a strained smile.

“Were you cooking?” I asked Mia as she broke off from the group.

She seemed a little embarrassed as she explained. She’d tried to help out but just ended up messing them up. I praised her for trying something she wasn’t used to, and she responded that she couldn’t stand just sitting around and doing nothing.

Afterward, Ney took me to see Mahatt, and he thanked me again. I thanked him in return for giving Hikari and the others room and board at the inn, even though I was sure people had complained about them getting special treatment.

“It’s nothing compared to you saving our village,” Mahatt said, then told me what was going on at the moment.

It seemed that the main problem really was a lack of people. They’d been promised aid, but apparently it would take a while to get there. Not many people wanted to move to a village that had recently been leveled by monsters. Therefore, they were now negotiating to buy a number of slaves from Dredd.

“You don’t have any aversion to buying slaves?”

“Not especially. It helps that Dredd’s slaves are debt slaves. I’d be more hesitant if they were crime ones.” A lot of people had no choice but to become debt slaves, for all kinds of reasons.

I thought a while, then decided this was the place to spend the huge unexpected windfall I’d received.

“Are you sure about this?” Dredd was surprised at first, while Mahatt was stunned and grateful for my offer.

I’d decided to spend my platinum piece to buy all the slaves that Dredd had. Based on what Sera had told me during her time at the slave company, I knew he wasn’t a bad guy, which played a big role in my decision.

“I also have a personal request for you, Dredd. Do you mind?” Once we were alone together, I asked him once more to keep Mia’s secret and also made one other request. Creating an environment where it would be easy to ask this favor was another reason I’d so casually bought out his slave stock.

“Eris the elf, eh…”

I told him why I was searching for her and asked him if he could help me find information on her whereabouts. The Howler Slave Company had branches across different lands, and I thought maybe I could use their network to broaden my search.

In particular, given the way Dredd had ended up with Sera, I hoped he might have acquaintances and intermediaries in the Empire.

“If you learn anything, please send a message to Sera at the merchants’ or adventurers’ guilds. We’ll be staying in Majorica in the Magic Nation for a while.”

“Very well. But though I’ve been in this business for a long time, I’m afraid I’ve never seen an elf. I’ve never heard word of one, either, even though it’s definitely the kind of thing people would talk about. I may not be able to fulfill your request. Is that all right?”

“Yes. Even if you don’t hear anything, telling me that will narrow down the area I have to search. And if you could keep in regular contact, I’d appreciate it.”

After that, he transferred the slave contracts in accordance with our agreement. They’d be the property of the village as a whole, which required a rather special contract, but we didn’t have problems forging it.

That night, a dinner was held so the people of the village and the slaves bought from Dredd could get to know each other, and we were able to enjoy a rather lavish feast. I donated the food I’d bought at the stalls earlier to celebrate the occasion.

And though I say it was lavish, it was really just a little better than usual. The real fun was just getting to sit around a table with a lot of people and enjoy myself for the first time in a while.

Hikari seemed to understand the food situation, and she had apparently been limiting her portions lately. That meant her eyes sparkled when she saw the lineup of dishes.

Epilogue

After dinner, I moved into the room where the girls had been staying. Apparently they'd mentioned I'd be meeting up with them later, and they'd gotten a room with four beds. There was no room to spare, so I had to share with them. Let me be clear on that point—I didn't have a choice.

"Did you have any problems on the way?" I asked them.

"No monster attacks. It was a safe trip," Sera said.

Hikari nodded in agreement, while Mia…looked a little anxious. I asked her how she was, and she squeaked out a reply. I couldn't help but laugh. Maybe she didn't like that, because she puffed out her cheeks sulkily.

"I'm glad it was uneventful. And Mia, Dan gave this to me for you."

"The cardinal?" Mia examined the letter I handed to her.

Dan had already told me what was in the letter, so I was ready to accept whatever decision she made. At least, I hoped she'd make a choice that she wouldn't regret.

"I'm so glad…Regulus is all right." Mia's eyes filled with tears that she quickly wiped away. "Sora, do you know what the letter says?"

"Yeah."

"I see. Would it be a terrible burden…if I stayed with you?" she asked after a long pause.

I wasn't expecting Mia to ask that at all, but her expression was serious, and her eyes quavered with anxiety. Hikari and Sera also watched me closely, waiting for my answer.

With three sets of eyes on me, I finally opened my mouth. "I'm…traveling for a specific goal right now. I'm looking for someone." I cast a glance at Sera. "So I'm going to be moving around a lot. The world's more dangerous outside of cities than you might be thinking, and we could get attacked by monsters. Are you sure you still want to go with us? And are you okay with going along as a slave?"

I'd made a slave contract with her to leave the capital, and she'd

have to keep that up if we would be traveling together, at least until we left the Holy Kingdom.

Mia listened quietly to my explanation. In reply, she held out an object.

It looked familiar to me. It was something I'd made and given to her.

"I thought I was dead then," she said. "You're the only reason that I'm alive right now. So...I want to be with you."

It felt like a kind of dependency. But considering what Mia had been through, it was only natural. Betrayed by people she'd trusted, made the target of hatred by so many. Even if it was all a misunderstanding in the end, it had still been a deep blow to her.

So it might be okay to keep her with me until she mentally recovered, though I didn't know how far she could go with me.

Now that that was decided, then, I knew my next step. "Okay. But if you want to stay with me, there are some things I need you to do. Is that okay?"

For some reason, she blushed.

Just because you're a slave doesn't mean I'm gonna ask for anything weird, okay? I thought in frustration. "First, don't tell anyone about what I'm going to tell you now, even after the slave contract is lifted."

"A-All right. I swear on the Godde— I mean, I promise."

I wondered briefly if I should make her sign a contract to that end, but I decided we could do that after the slave contract was up. *Ciel, come out,* I prompted telepathically.

"Oh? What was that?" Mia said. It made sense that that was her first reaction to telepathy. Ciel then appeared, and Mia's first words when she saw her were "Oh, how cute!"

Ciel seemed quite pleased with that reaction, and she was at Mia's side in an instant.

I was jealous that Ciel let Mia pet her so quickly, but I kept it to myself. *How long did it take before Ciel let* me *pet her like that?*



Once Mia's excitement had died down, I continued my explanation to her and Sera. First, I explained that I was one of the heroes summoned to the Kingdom of Elesia from another world, but my summoners had kicked me out because I didn't have any fighting skills, so I'd decided to become an adventurer and make my way in this world.

I told them how I'd met Rurika and Chris, how they'd taught me the ins and outs of adventuring, how they'd told me what their goal was. How, after we'd parted ways, I'd forged a contract with Ciel. How I'd fought Hikari and met a demon, how I'd met Layla and the others, how we'd defeated the orc lord together. I told them everything up until I'd met Mia and Sera in the holy capital and right up to now.

"It's almost unbelievable. I've never heard of an otherworlder before...ah, sir." Mia seemed to be trying to change her way of speaking as a slave, but I told her there was no need for that. Sera talked to me normally other than the "master" thing, so it was probably easier that way.

"Granny told me that otherworlders end up in this world now and again, but I'm surprised to learn you're one of them, master," Sera mused.

"Master is an otherworlder for sure," Hikari added.

"And Hikari, you were a spy... That must have been a hard life," Mia added.

"I don't remember much. But I met master, so it's okay."

Perhaps because of the Slave Mask's effects, it felt like Hikari had lost a lot of old memories, but she was showing a lot more emotion these days. It was good progress.

"As I've already told Sera, our next destination is Majorica. We might try out the dungeon there, but our biggest objective is meeting up with Rurika and Chris."

I just hoped they'd gotten our message. I'd have to keep faith that they had and wait for them.

"Master, can I go to school?" Hikari asked.

I told her that I wasn't sure. I didn't know what the school was like at all. I didn't want to get her hopes up only to dash them, so I kept it vague.

"By the way, Sera, do you have a Spirit's Talisman?" I asked. "Rurika and Chris mentioned they could use it to vaguely sense if

the other person was alive or not." I'd just remembered about that. I felt like Sera had been surprised when I'd told her the other two were alive.

"Sorry, but I lost mine," Sera said after a moment. "It happened in the Black Forest, when I got hurt so bad I almost died. But I didn't even know it could do that."

How did Chris and Rurika know, then? And if Sera doesn't have hers, how were they aware that she was still alive? I had too many questions and not enough answers.

"Sora, um, will you go back to your world after you defeat the Demon King?" Mia asked.

"No. Well, more precisely, I can't actually harm the Demon King."

"What do you mean?"

"My soul was pierced with a limitation. You remember how I said I'd met a demon? I let him put that restriction on me so he wouldn't kill me. It means I'm not allowed to harm the Demon King."

"Was he that strong?" Sera asked. Apparently she still hadn't met a demon herself.

"So strong. I was helpless," Hikari said, trembling. She seemed to have a vague recollection of the encounter.

"Still, from the way he talked, he didn't seem like a bad guy. Reasonable too. Just ruthless in pursuit of his goal," I said.

Mia's face twisted up, which was understandable after what the demon Adonis had put her through.

"Well, you know how humans are," I added. "There are good ones and bad ones. I'm sure there are different kinds of demons too."

"Ah…yes. That's true," Mia agreed.

"Anyway, that means I won't be fighting the Demon King, and I still don't know how to get home. So I've decided to make a life in this world."

I felt like I was starting to get sidetracked from my original goal to enjoy this other world. Was it a sign of how many people in this world I'd met and gotten involved with?

Afterword

Hello for the first time, or good to see you again. I am arukuhito. Thank you very much for picking up *Isekai Walking 2 ~Holy Kingdom of Frieren Arc~*.

It wasn't long after I first tasted the thrill of seeing my writing on a bookstore shelf that I received, with great gratitude, the offer to publish the second book.

I started work on the rewrites around mid-April, and since I have a habit of taking walks and looking at nature when I get a block, it was the perfect time to be doing it. Seeing all those flowers in bloom and so much green in the world made it a great time to be outside.

The main issue I had in this book was how to handle communicating with Ciel. It's not an issue when she's alone with Sora, but he'll be getting new companions starting in this volume. Ciel's charm is greatly reduced if nobody can see her. And I also wanted to write not just about Sora playing with Ciel, but the other girls too!

So I talked the matter over with others and got to work, did a lot of writing and rewriting, tried to figure out how to change things while preserving the flow of the web novel, and added a few more individual stories. Overall, I think I took out more direct confrontations and added more slow-moving elements...I think.

So I think this part should be equally enjoyable for first-time readers and those who've already read the web novel. In particular, the web version basically ignored the whole stampede, which gave me a lot to worry about here.

Now, I also have an announcement. This series is getting a manga adaptation. It's being run in *Magazine Pocket*, and the art is by Ogawa Kei. I hope you'll read more about it in the Kakuyomu updates.

Now, here at the end, let me thank some people. O-shi, my supervising editor, who gave me a lot of advice and suggestions when I was writing this to make my work even better. Yu-nit, who once again drew such beautiful illustrations and appealing

characters. And all the proofreaders who pointed out contradictions and typos, thank you so much. The reason I can put this out into the world is because I had all of your support.

And to you, the reader, who picked up this book and read it this far, and to those who send me all kinds of messages on the web version, thank you very much.

Here's hoping I'll see you in the next volume.

arukuhito

Current Stats



Fujimiya Sora

[Job] Scout [Race] Otherworlder
[Level] None

[HP] 410/410 [MP] 410/410 (+100) [SP] 410/410
[Strength] 400 (+0) [Stamina] 400 (+0) [Speed] 400 (+0)
[Magic] 400 (+100) [Dexterity] 400 (+0) [Luck] 400 (+0)

[Skill] Walking Lv. 40
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 581170/650000
Total XP Accumulated: 8236170
Skill Points: 3

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 3]
[Enhance Physique Lv. 9] [Regulate Mana Lv. MAX]
[Lifestyle Spells Lv. MAX] [Detect Presence Lv. MAX]
[Sword Arts Lv. MAX] [Dimension Spells Lv. MAX]
[Parallel Thinking Lv. 8] [Boost Recovery Lv. 9]
[Hide Presence Lv. 7] [Alchemy Lv. MAX] [Cooking Lv. MAX]
[Throwing/Shooting Lv. 6] [Fire Spells Lv. MAX]
[Water Spells Lv. 5] [Telepathy Lv. 7] [Night Vision Lv. 9]
[Sword Tech Lv. 5] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 5]
[Earth Spells Lv. 9] [Wind Spells Lv. 5] [Disguise Lv. 5]
[Engineering/Construction Lv. 7]

Advanced Skills
[Appraise Person Lv. 7] [Detect Mana Lv. 6]
[Enchant Lv. 6]

Contract Skills
[Holy Spells Lv. 3]

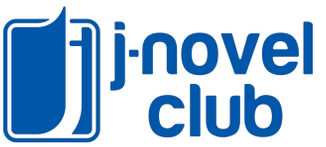
Title
[Spirit Contractor]


author
arukuhito
illustrator
Yu-nit
2
Isekai Walking
Walking around the Otherworld
Holy Kingdom of Frieren Arc


Ciel
A spirit who comes along on the journey. She can also be seen by those who sign a slave contract with Sora.
"Hah, that tickles. She's petting me."
Hikari
A former spy who went by the name No. 13. Began traveling with Sora after he saved her.
ISEKAI WALKING 2
Holy Kingdom of Frieren Arc


To the Holy Capital to attend the Advent Festival!
"A-Amazing. How did you do that?"
Layla
Leader of the adventurer party Bloody Rose. Like a big sister to the others.
Yor
The mage of the Bloody Rose party. She's a magic geek who's very interested in the spells Sora uses.
Sora
A high school student summoned to another world. Kicked out of the hero party, he's now traveling around the world.
Mia
The Saint who first received the prophecy of the Demon King's revival. She's supposed to have her official debut at the Advent Festival, but...


"I see. How much would it cost to buy her?"
As I walked up to the room, the figure on the bed glared up at me intensely. She displayed an intensity far beyond that of the other slaves.
Sera
One of the friends that Rurika and Chris are searching for. She seems to hold a grudge against humans.



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Isekai Walking: Volume 2 Holy Kingdom of Frieren Arc
by arukuhito

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis
Edited by Jack Hamm

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