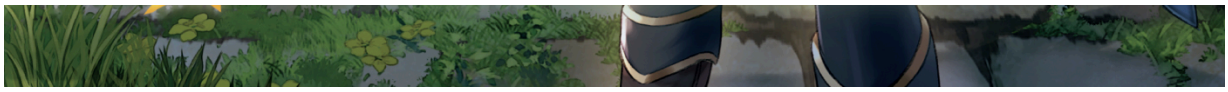

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3
Isekai Walking
Walking around the Otherworld
Magic Nation Eva • City Arc


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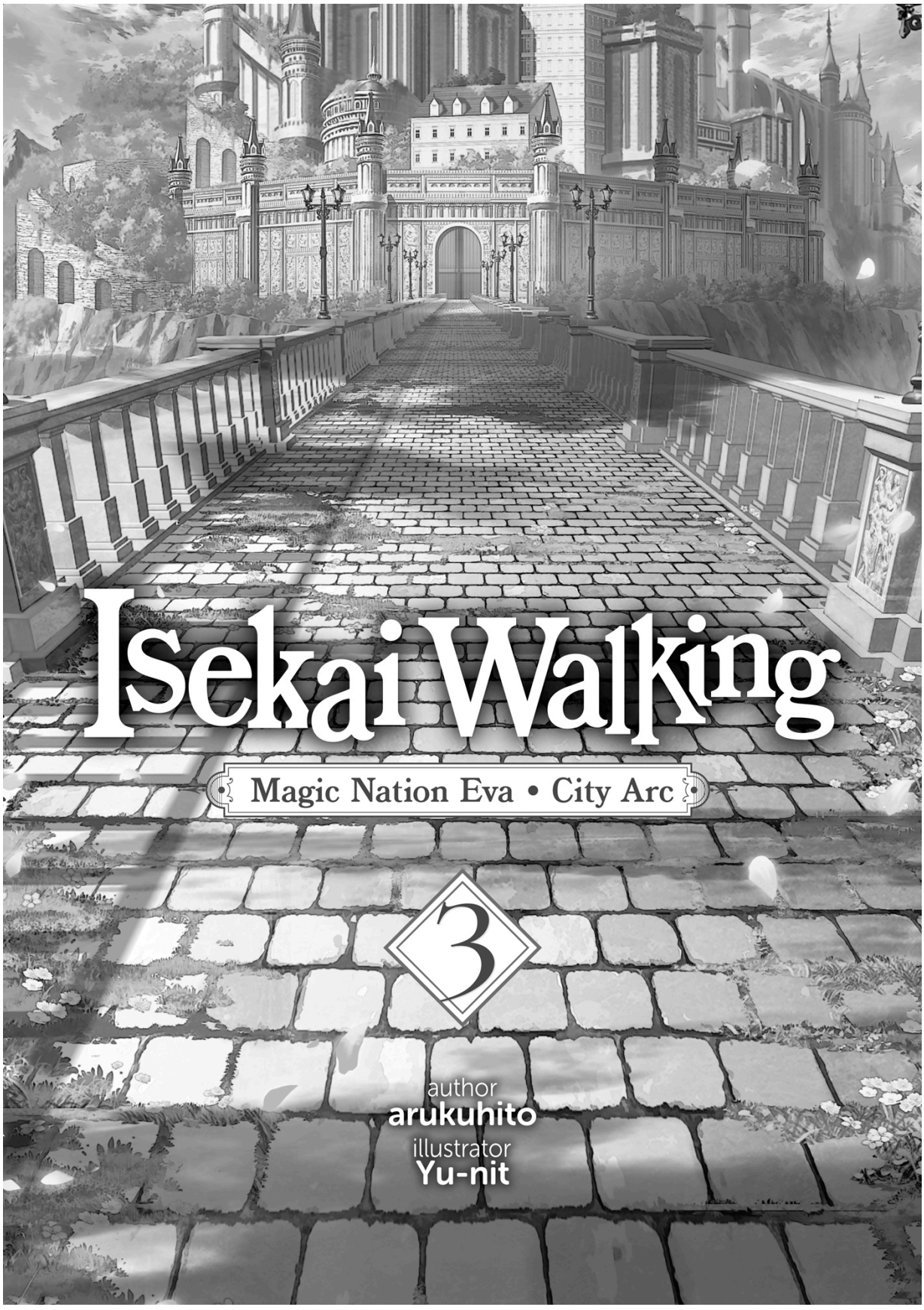

"Welcome home!"
"...'ccum home."
Elza
An orphan they meet in Majorica. She works for Sora as a maid.
Art
A boy who works for Sora with Elza.
ISEKAI WALKING 3


Magic Nation Eva • City Arc


Exploring the city of Majorica, with its academy of magic and a dungeon!
Joshua
A student at the academy who deeply respects Layla.
Layla
An adventurer Sora met in Frieren, leader of the Bloody Rose party.
Sora
A high school student summoned from another world, now exploring the world he finds himself in.
Ciel
A spirit who travels with Sora. Only certain people can see her.
Sera
A beastfolk who makes for a strong fighter. Rurika and Chris's childhood friend.
Mia
The Saint of the Holy Kingdom of Frieren. She cut her hair when she escaped from the Holy Capital.
Hikari
A former spy for the Kingdom of Elesia.
Seris
A mysterious librarian at the academy of magic. Who is she really?


Meanwhile, in the Las Beastland...
Rurika
An adventurer who works with Chris. They're looking for their childhood friends.
"I can't take any more!"
"Don't talk like that. Hang in there, Rurika!"
Chris
A mage who traveled with Sora in the Kingdom of Elesia. She's searching for something.





Isekai Walking

Magic Nation Eva • City Arc

3

author
arukuhito
illustrator
Yu-nit

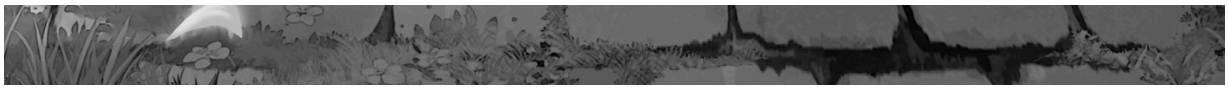


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Prologue

The shelf was lined with all kinds of boots. I was trying to decide which pair to buy. There was too much variety, and form seemed to be as important as function. I couldn't ask the shopkeeper for help, either, because they were currently dealing with another customer.

The choice would have been easy if I'd been buying a pair for myself.

"What about...those?" I proposed, pointing at a white pair.

"Master, those are weird."

So much for my carefully considered selection.

The shooting down had been done by Hikari, a young girl with dark hair and eyes. She'd been a spy for the Kingdom of Elesia sent to monitor me—a guy summoned from another world to become a hero—and through an odd chain of events, we'd ended up traveling together.

It wasn't one of those friendships-born-from-battle things or anything like that. It was just that I couldn't simply abandon her after I learned about her situation.

Hikari had become more expressive since our initial meeting, but she was still awkward in many ways. In particular, she wasn't afraid to let loose with a beaming smile when she was eating a food she liked.

"Sora, how about these?" said Mia, holding up a pair of boots.

Mia normally had long, eye-catching golden hair, but due to an incident in the capital of the Holy Kingdom of Frieren, she'd dyed her hair black and cut it to shoulder length. She was using contact lenses to darken her eyes as well. Because of that, she and Hikari looked a bit like sisters when they stood side by side.

Back in Frieren, Mia had been prepared for authentication as the nation's Saint. However, the machinations of a demon had cast doubt upon her status and led others to try to kill her for blasphemy.

The truth had eventually come out and Mia's reputation had been restored, but there was still a chance demons might try to kill her again. Therefore, she'd let everyone but a few select members of the Church believe she was dead and come traveling with me instead.

That last part had been Mia's choice, of course. I didn't force her or anything, okay?

"These have sturdy soles, but they're light, so they're perfect for you, Mia," Sera said as she took the boots from Mia.

Sera was a feline beastfolk whose cat ears and tail drew attention in any room she entered. Apparently beastfolk themselves were a rather rare thing.

I'd met her at the Howler Slave Company in Frieren's capital, where I'd paid quite a large sum to buy her. This was because I'd previously met two female adventurers named Rurika and Chris who had been searching for her. She was very closed off with me for various reasons, but after I'd told her I knew her old friends, she'd opened up to me...a little. I think.

The one thing the three girls had in common was that they all wore collars in different designs. The collars were an indication that they were slaves, and I was currently master to all three of them. In my defense, let me just say that I never forced them to do anything against their will. The only order I'd ever given them was to keep the fact that I was an otherworlder a secret.

Once Mia had the equipment she needed, we'd need to buy supplies for the journey to our next destination—the border city, Cite. These were mostly ingredients for cooking.

"Master, can I go to the stalls?" Hikari asked.

In response to this, the spirit Ciel drifted out of my hood where she'd been sleeping. She plopped down on Hikari's head and looked up at me with round, expectant eyes.

Most people couldn't see spirits, but for some reason, I could. I'd made a formal contract with Ciel when she joined me on my travels. Hikari and the others couldn't see her at first, but they had started being able to do so after our slave contracts were forged. I wasn't sure what principle was at work there, but nobody seemed to mind,

so I decided not to worry about it.

My affirmative response to Hikari made Ciel start flapping her ears in celebration. Mia laughed in amusement at the sight, while Sera tried to hold back a smile.

Hikari quickly headed for the stalls, with Ciel rushing to keep up with her.

"I guess we should join them," I proposed. There was no telling what might happen if we left those two to their own devices.

We ended up buying more food than just four people could eat, but that wasn't an issue, since I could just store it with my dimension spell, Item Box. I'd maxed out the spell's level, meaning it could now preserve foodstuffs indefinitely without any decline in quality. It was a skill any traveler would long to have.

After the buying spree, I stopped by the adventurers' guild and checked for messages from Rurika and Chris, then hit up the church to send a coded message letting Cardinal Dan know that Mia had chosen to travel with us. Then we went back to the inn and called it an early night.

The real journey for the four of us and our animal friend would begin tomorrow.

We'd traveled to Roille City from Tenns Village via wagon, negotiating a ride with a merchant I'd met in the village. I'd originally thought about walking, but I decided to hold off on that until we got Mia the right equipment. From here to our next stop, the border city Cite—en route to our final destination of Majorica in the Magic Nation of Eva—it would normally have been faster to take a wagon. Unfortunately, all the Cite-bound wagons had just left, and it would take several days until the next group set out. We could have just waited, but we decided to head out tomorrow on foot.

This worked better for me personally, thanks to the effect of my special skill Walking: "Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)." But while I'd been debating with myself whether it was all right to put the others through that...

"Mia, if you wanna keep journeying with our master, you'd better build up your stamina," Sera had chimed in.

To this, Mia had responded, “Ah, I’ll walk. I’ll definitely walk!”

I’d been worried she might have been making promises she couldn’t keep, but I checked with Hikari and Sera and they reassured me that she wasn’t. And with that, it was decided that we’d walk.

“Good night, then.” I put out the magic lamp, and the room went dark. I could still use my Night Vision skill to see if I wanted to, but there was no need for that right now.

Soon enough, I heard the sounds of sleep all around me. I closed my eyes as well, but there was one other thing I wanted to do before I slept.

I mentally voiced the words “open status” and saw my personal stat sheet appear in my mind’s eye.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Scout / **Race:** Otherworlder / **Level:** None
HP: 420/420 / **MP:** 420/420 (+100) / **SP:** 420/420
Strength: 410 (+0) / **Stamina:** 410 (+0) / **Speed:** 410 (+0)
Magic: 410 (+100) / **Dexterity:** 410 (+0) / **Luck:** 410 (+0)

Skill: Walking Lv. 41
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 189,739/690,000
Skill Points: 4

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. 8] [Alchemy Lv. MAX] [Cooking Lv. MAX] [Throwing/Shooting

Lv. 6] [Fire Spells Lv. MAX] [Water Spells Lv. 5] [Telepathy Lv. 8] [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]

As I looked over my stats, I thought about all the people I'd met since I first arrived here.

Immediately after being summoned to this world, I'd been deemed worthless and driven out of the castle to live on my own. After that, I became an adventurer and met a lot of people, the most memorable of whom were Rurika and Chris. We'd traveled for a while before parting ways in the stopover city of Fesis in the Kingdom of Elesia.

We hadn't gone further together because of a vague feeling of foreboding I'd had...which had turned out to be accurate in the worst way possible. I'd contracted with the spirit Ciel soon after that, so I wasn't too lonely. And in the days since, I'd steadily acquired even more new companions.

Traveling with Hikari and the others was so much fun, and the time I spent with them was something worth treasuring. I'd been reminded of that all over again when I'd had to travel alone from Frieren's capital, Messa, to Tenns Village with just Ciel. The scenery around me had seemed just a little duller during that time. Even though it had originally just been me and Ciel, going back to that

now just felt that much more lonely.

It had been a huge relief to meet up with them again in Tenns, and I was happy to find them so glad to see me. I was hoping I could meet back up with Rurika and Chris safely in Majorica too, but...

"I wonder what they're up to right now..."

They were currently in the Las Beastland, as far as I knew. While thinking about my two old friends, I closed my stat panel and went to sleep.

Interlude 1

"I can't take any more!"

"Don't talk like that. Hang in there, Rurika!"

"But Chris, if I walk any longer, my legs are gonna give out..."

I understood what Rurika was saying. My legs hurt too, to be honest. But... "I know that, but we don't have a choice."

The Las Beastland had roads connecting the capital to the outlying cities, but from cities to villages—settlements for individual tribes—the roads were more like poorly maintained trails. And when you were moving from settlement to settlement, you often had to pass through forests that lacked any beaten path at all. Because of that, just getting around was an exhausting experience.

"We still have a lot of settlements to visit. And there's almost no oversight on these things..."

The capital city where the Beast King lived was at the center, with one large city in each of the cardinal directions and tribal settlements dotted around them. We'd been around to different villages asking if any of the tribes had bought a beastfolk slave, but nothing had panned out so far.

A lot of people in the Las Beastland lived a rustic frontier lifestyle, so it was hard to get very reliable information. *Wouldn't it be better to have some central planning?* I truly worried about them.

We were here because we'd learned that a nearby village had bought a cat beastfolk slave, but nobody knew the slave's name. Of course, that had been a few years ago, and we hadn't heard it from the slave traders themselves, so the information wasn't necessarily reliable either. Even so, the possibility existed, so Rurika and I had gone to the village. Unfortunately, it turned out not to be Sera.

"How many settlements have we been to now?" Rurika asked, collapsing into bed. We'd made it back to a city for the first time in a while.

I didn’t know exactly how many there had been. It had been nearly 150 days since we’d said goodbye to Sora and entered the Las Beastland. In the meantime, we’d visited three cities, including the capital, as well as the various settlements around them. It had taken so long because the Beastland was so vast, with so many settlements within its borders.

Having to take quests in city guilds to bolster our finances and keep our journey going had also eaten up a lot of time. In a country full of beastfolk, there weren’t a lot of hunting quests available, with only busywork such as herb gathering left for people like us.

“Sora would love all of these quests we’re taking,” I whispered, and Rurika looked up and over at me. A meaningful smile appeared on her face, and I got embarrassed, like she had read my mind.

“You think he’s doing okay?” she asked me.

“I think so. Probably?” I said, thinking back about Sora. At the same time, I thought about the little one who was with him. I hoped they’d managed to forge a contract safely.

“Anyway, we’ll go to the adventurers’ guild tomorrow and take another quest. It’ll probably be more herb gathering, though...” Rurika buried her face in her pillow and groaned out the words.

Rurika really hated herb-gathering quests, but not many people took them, so they paid a bigger dividend than the ones in the Kingdom.

We stopped by the guild the next morning, and indeed, there were no hunting quests available. So we took one of the many herb-gathering quests, checked out the prime locations for herbs, and headed out right away. Even the places closest to town were far enough away to require an overnight stay. Was that another reason people avoided them?

Once we actually got out there, we found that the patch was barely touched, probably because such quests were so unpopular. We were able to pick our fill, then returned to town and checked in with the receptionist. She seemed to remember us—two human women traveling together was apparently a rather unusual sight in these parts.

"A message? For us?" Rurika asked as the receptionist handed over a letter along with our reward.

There was only one possible person who could be sending us a message—Sora. *Ah, of course, it could also be a slave trader returning our inquiry...*

"Ah, you think it's Sora? Maybe he's worried about you, Chris," Rurika mused teasingly.

"Oh, stop that," I said with a huff. "Let's...go back to the inn before we read it."

We could have checked it on the spot, but I thought it would be better to do it in private. Rurika seemed to agree, so we hurried back to the inn together.

Once we arrived, we sat side by side on a bed and began reading the letter. It turned out to be from an unexpected sender—Sera herself.

She explained that she was now a slave, and that she was going to Majorica in the Magic Nation of Eva with her current master.

"Are we sure it's really Sera?" Rurika asked at the end.

"Well...she talks about memories of us and Granny, so I think it has to be." I thought it seemed trustworthy enough. The letter wasn't especially long, but it mentioned things that only we would know.

"True. Then let's send a reply and head to Majorica!"

"Okay, but we have to look around for Eris first," I reminded her.

"Ah, right. We've still got some slave markets to stop by and check for her."

I nodded. So far, we hadn't gotten any information on Big Sis Eris...or on any elves at all, for that matter. But there was always a chance. We still had to visit every city and ask.

"But it'll be great if this is true, right?!" Rurika prodded me.

"Yeah."

Rurika smiled happily. I was probably smiling too. After so much searching, we finally had our first lead, and a really solid one at that.

"Next we have to find out what kind of person Sera's master is. I hope they're not mistreating her..."

I felt like that really was a concern. If they tried anything with

her...

"Chris, you've got a scary look on your face. But if they gave permission to send a message, I'm sure they're a good person."

I decided to trust Rurika's intuition, and we started getting ready to set out once more.

Right, once we meet up with Sera again, we'll have to let Sora know. I'm sure he'll be happy for us...

Chapter 1

"That's the central gate of Border City Cite. So the Magic Nation of Eva is through there?"

Mia was looking up at the large gate built on the border between the Holy Kingdom and the Magic Nation. The city was divided into east and west sides with a checkpoint standing at the center. You had to pass through it to cross the border.

I'd expected lots of scary guards and knights guarding the passage, but although we had to do an ID check, it was actually very easy to get through. The two lands must have had a friendly relationship. Incidentally, there were quite a few other neutral towns that shared the "border city" moniker.

The appearance of the city on the other side of the gate was quite different. The buildings on the Holy Kingdom side were mostly white, while the Magic Nation tended toward darker colors. The actual construction didn't seem very different, so was the color meant to differentiate them?

It had taken eight days to travel from Roille to Cite, and we'd ended up arriving a day later than we'd expected. The reason for this was Mia, as we'd had to take periodic breaks to accommodate her, which limited the amount of time we could spend walking each day. Still, this meant we made it safely to Cite without her popping any blisters. The special poultice-like application of medicinal herbs I applied to her feet while we rested probably helped as well, and Hikari and Sera also used it a lot.

"I think we'll spend tomorrow resting, then set out for Lokia. I'd like to have Sera check in at the adventurers' guild for messages, then...look around at stalls, I guess?"

We'd been sitting on our beds talking about tomorrow's schedule when I noticed Hikari and Ciel start staring at me expectantly. *Yeah, I know. I understand what that look in your eyes means.* So I just

added stalls to the schedule without argument.

My words made them both spring up for joy while the other two adults eyed me with disapproval. I knew I was being way too soft on them, but it was an indulgence I was willing to give. Obviously if I had another goal that would've taken precedence, but I'd only been planning to take it easy in town tomorrow anyway.

The next morning, I took some free time after breakfast and stopped by the adventurers' guild.

"Miss Sera, isn't it? We have one message for you," said the receptionist as we checked in while taking one of the continuous herb-gathering quests. It looked like it was from Rurika.

"Master, they say they're in the Las Beastland right now, and they're heading for Majorica, but it'll take them a while." She went on to tell me that there were two cities in the Beastland they hadn't visited yet, so they were going to check those for Eris first.

The Las Beastland was quite large, so just doing that would probably take quite a lot of time—they'd apparently be there for at least thirty more days. And since they had to get to the Magic Nation after that, it would probably be a while until we met up again. They said they'd send another message once they entered the Magic Nation's territory.

"Which means we didn't have to hurry after all." I'd been rushing us a bit, hoping we wouldn't leave them waiting, but in fact we'd apparently had plenty of time.

"Master, can we go to school, then?" Hikari asked while I was thinking that over.

"I guess we'll see," I told her. "There must be requirements for enrollment. Why don't we look into it after we arrive?" If I'd known this would happen, I would've asked more about the Magius Academy of Magic. This made me think back on Layla and the other students of the academy whom I'd met en route to the holy capital.

"I'd like to go to the dungeon if I could," Sera added.

Surprised by this, I asked her why, and she said she wanted to earn money to pay back her debt to me. Sera was indeed a debt slave now, so she could buy back her freedom if she made enough money.

I'd assumed I would unilaterally free her once we met up with Rurika and the others, but she apparently didn't want that. She seemed oddly principled about certain things.

"Is there anything you'd like to do, Mia?"

"I'm not sure," she mused. "I'm just happy to get to spend time with all of you."

It was nice that Mia was free from her life at the church now, but suddenly having so many options available seemed to have made it harder for her to actually decide on anything.

"Come to school with us, Big Sis Mia. But I wanna see the dungeon too," Hikari added.

"Why's that?"

"We can get tasty meat there!"

You don't have to say it that enthusiastically! I thought. But Ciel was nodding firmly in agreement.

I decided to tease her. "What if goblins are the only monsters in there?" I'd heard goblins weren't good to eat, and I'd never once seen their meat for sale in the markets. It was hard to imagine a dungeon would have only had goblin-class monsters in it, though...

"You're mean, master." Hikari pouted, while Ciel whapped her ears at me in agreement. They really were two of a kind.

"Okay, okay," I conceded. "Sorry to rain on the parade. Let's all discuss what we want to do on our way to Lokia, then." I patted Hikari on the head as an apology. This seemed to calm her down, and she nodded happily in response.

I wanted to try out the dungeon as well. I needed magistones to make magic items with alchemy, but most of all, I just...really wanted to see what a dungeon was like! It was an otherworld staple, after all. It felt like the kind of place that would be equally exciting and dangerous. There were even adventurers who specialized in dungeons, fueled by dreams of striking it rich.

But there was just one problem.

"Mia, what will you do if we go to the dungeon?"

"Maybe...I'll go with you?" As I'd expected, Mia seemed nervous but still wanted to come along. I doubted she'd back off even if I stressed to her how dangerous it was.

It might slow the trip down, but maybe we should start making time for self-defense training too?

Two things changed after we set off for Lokia.

First, I restored the color of Mia's hair and eyes. She looked the same as me and Hikari at the moment, and we could have just left it, but having too many people with dark hair and eyes might actually make us stand out more. You couldn't see my eyes because of the mask, but the mask attracted attention all on its own.

Besides, Mia's original coloring—gold hair and eyes—suited her fair skin much better. When I happened to mention that, she turned bright red and looked down.

The other thing that changed was that we started doing some training before bed. Given Mia's stamina, practicing during the day would probably still be a little too hard on her, but Hikari took the lead on teaching her how to fight while I was preparing dinner. Sera was self-taught in her own style of monster-fighting, so out of the three of us, Hikari made the best teacher.

First, Hikari taught Mia how to move, focusing more on self-defense than on defeating an enemy. The main exercise was for Hikari and Sera to attack Mia with mock swords so she could practice dodging them. Naturally, they were going quite easy on her, but the point of the training was just to get her eyes used to following quick movements.

Indeed, if she could learn to follow Sera's and Hikari's movements, she should be able to do the same with most monsters.

Ciel remained behind Mia to cheer her on, which was very considerate of her—you'd never be able to focus with such a cute cheerleading section in front of you.

Still, Mia's training was in its early stages, and she collapsed to her knees once it was over.

"Good work today. Ready to eat?"

I gave her some soup I'd specially made to be edible even if you didn't have an appetite. She wouldn't have the stamina to move tomorrow without something in her stomach, after all.

"Thank you. I wish I could have helped... I'm sorry." Mia took the

bowl apologetically.





I'd repeatedly told her not to worry about it, but she didn't seem to believe me. The unusual circumstances that had led to her signing a slave contract with me might have made her feel a bit like a burden.

Then, after we were done eating, she passed right out from exhaustion.

"Big Sis Mia is too hard on herself," Hikari said.

"Agreed," Sera said. "But I guess it's only natural. She really wants to be with master."

Hearing Sera say that with a straight face was a bit embarrassing, but I didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea. What Mia felt toward me wasn't love, but dependency. The expression of despair on her face when the people of the holy capital had called her a false Saint...that was something I could never forget. Just thinking back on it made me angry.

"Anyway, just make sure she doesn't push herself too hard. If she passes out, I'm sure it'll just make her more depressed."

In response, the two just looked at each other with a shrug. Ciel also looked at me seriously, as if to say, *Leave it to me.*

◇◇◇

Five days after leaving Cite, we arrived at Lokia in the morning as planned. There, we got a room at the inn and ate lunch, then broke into two groups.

Group one was Sera and Mia, who would stay at the inn. Mia looked too exhausted to do more, so I told her to get a good rest for the day, and Sera said she'd stay with her.

"I'm tired too. Everyone staring at me and all that," Sera said as she lay down on the bed, to counter Mia's concern that she was being forced to stay because of her.

Mia seemed to see through Sera's lie immediately, but nevertheless she lay down happily as well and quickly fell asleep.

Meanwhile, Hikari and I went shopping in Lokia. We had plenty of stall foods and ingredients already, but Lokia was known as a food town, so it had lots of vegetables and meats we'd never seen before.

It was called a food town because most of the ingredients used around Eva were produced nearby. A great river flowed down from the mountains that towered far to the north, and the fertile land at their feet, just north of Lokia, grew excellent crops. The rich farmland had made Lokia a historically prosperous place.

"Master, what is this called?" Hikari asked every time she saw something she didn't recognize.

There were lots of things there that she'd never seen before. There were things I didn't recognize either, but I used Appraisal and repeated what it told me. However, it couldn't tell me what dishes I might use them in, so I surreptitiously asked the sellers when I had to.

"Master, are you gonna use what you bought today to make food from your world?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to test it out and see."

Hikari looked at me with shining, innocent eyes. I wanted to live up to her expectations but just wouldn't know until I tried. I just hoped my Cooking skill would guide me.

The most important thing I managed to pick up during this visit was spice. Now I could try making curry, a dish beloved in my old world by everyone from adults to children (though maybe that was just my bias talking?) The only issue was that I didn't have rice.

Also, even if I made curry, I'd have to adjust the heat levels. Hikari and Ciel didn't like spicy food, after all.

I was still browsing the stalls and shops when Hikari's gaze suddenly fell on the other side of the road. I followed it and realized what it was as I locked eyes with someone a small distance away. An expression of surprise appeared on the other person's face, then they ran across the road like the wind and threw their arms around Hikari.

"It *is* you, Hikari! Oh, I can't believe I ran into you here!"

Hikari seemed annoyed and tried to pry her off, but Layla was stronger. She'd really reached a new level since she defeated the orc lord.

"Better leave her be or she'll hate you," I cut in to warn her.

At this, she finally released Hikari, albeit reluctantly. Hikari

retreated behind me like a wary cat, glaring daggers at her.

"A-Ahem. It's been a while, Sora," Layla resumed. "I'm glad to see you're still well."

It felt a little late to try to pretend like nothing had happened.

"Instructor, it's been a while."

The other members of the Bloody Rose had appeared, running after Layla. Yor, Casey, Talia, and Luilui all looked the same as ever, while Tricia... Well, she looked a little down, actually. We walked for a while, and they filled me in on their situation. It seemed they'd just arrived in Lokia.

"Did they finish all the work over there, then?" I asked, referring to the aftermath of the stampede. They answered that the work still hadn't been finished by the time they left the holy capital.

"We had to leave early to get back to school," Layla explained. It seemed they'd asked the adventurers' guild to write a note saying their return had been delayed due to the stampede. After that, Yor's father Dan had arranged a high-speed wagon, and they'd made the journey from Messa to Cite in just ten days. The wagon he'd arranged could only be used in the borders of the Holy Kingdom, though, so they'd used a regular transport wagon from Cite to Lokia.

"My backside hurts from all the sitting," Yor grumbled while rubbing her posterior. Still, it had let them reach Lokia sooner than expected, so she admitted she was grateful for it.

"Do you guys know where you're staying yet?" I asked.

"Not yet. We only just got here," Layla responded.

Maybe it was perfect timing, then. I hadn't told them the truth while we were in Messa, and remembering their faces at the time still made my heart ache. It was probably why Tricia still looked depressed, in fact. But at this point we were far away from the Holy Capital, so I could bring them into the loop.

I was pretty sure the inn we'd reserved had some more free rooms, too, so I asked them to join us there. Then, when they arrived, I'd use the opportunity to show them that Mia was alive and safe. Telling them as soon as possible and setting them at ease seemed to be the best option.

On the way to the inn, Yor told me about the stampede's

aftermath in more detail. She said they'd obtained the monsters' magistones, then prioritized retrieving materials from the advanced subtypes and rare monsters.

"It was a relief that there were barely any goblin or wulf bodies left," Yor said. Talia and Luilui nodded in agreement.

Apparently burning the bodies at the end had been the hardest part, but it had to be done, because leaving the bodies out to rot could lead to them becoming undead. It seemed to me that that wouldn't be as much of a problem with so many Church folks around, but I didn't actually know how strong undead were. I'd also heard that leaving corpses around could lead to disease.

I showed the girls to the inn, where they managed to get two rooms for four.

"Our room is here," I said. "Why don't you come by after you get settled?"

"To your room? Not the dining hall under it?" Layla asked.

I nodded.

"We'll be there in an hour," she agreed.

Hikari and I went back to our room and found Mia still asleep in bed.

"Layla's group?" Sera asked after I explained the situation. She looked worriedly at Mia just once, probably because Yor was connected to the church.

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "They'll keep the secret. We won't be able to hide it once we arrive in Majorica anyway." We couldn't keep her hidden forever, after all, and we had Dan's permission, so it shouldn't be an issue.

As promised, there was a knock on the door one hour later. Layla and the others entered our room in their casual clothes.

"You're staying in the same room?" was the first thing Layla said when she came in and looked around. She wasn't exactly a prude, but she was probably a little concerned about me sharing a room with Sera, who was the same age. She must have already given up on the Hikari issue.

"To save money," I responded.

It sounded like an excuse, but it was the honest truth. There were plenty of free rooms in Cite, so I'd proposed separate rooms for men and women. However, I'd been turned down—not just by Mia, but by Sera too. For Hikari's part, she wanted to spend the money we'd otherwise use on separate rooms to buy food. Ciel had waved her ears in passionate agreement, and Mia and Sera couldn't help but smile wryly at the sight.

Then I continued, "It's probably faster if I show you. Hikari, sorry, but please wake her up."

Hikari, who was sitting next to Mia, started shaking her. "Big Sis Mia, wake up." When Mia didn't wake up right away, she started lightly slapping her cheek.

After a minute, Mia sat up, rubbing at her eyes. "Oh, what is it? Is it morning?" She really must have been sound asleep.

But Layla and the others were even more stunned.

"L-Lady Mia..." Tricia seemed to be the first person who snapped out of it. She stood up, ran over to Mia, and threw her arms around her.

Mia struggled in Tricia's arms, but Tricia had her completely pinned against her ample bosom, which squished and morphed each time she moved. It was probably rude to stare, but the girls hadn't yet rebooted from their total shock at the revelation.

Still, someone had to step in and interfere. I spoke to Tricia, feeling a bit sorry about it as I did. "Um, Tricia, a moment?"

"What?" she responded unhappily, with all the reluctance of someone being torn from a reunion with her one true love. She really did seem to venerate Mia more than anyone else in the holy capital.

"You can probably let her go now, you know. I think you're making her uncomfortable."

At this, Tricia looked down and saw Mia lying there, having gone completely limp. "L-Lady Mia!" She released her in a panic, and Mia recovered after a minute.

"I felt like I saw a woman smiling kindly at me," Mia said in a daze.

"Would you care to explain this, then?" The girls were now seated in a line in front of me, with Layla asking questions for the group. Since I'd told them in Messa that Mia was dead, perhaps her anger was justified.

I launched into an explanation of everything that had happened. First, I told them about the "False Saint" panic, caused by the Pope being manipulated by a demon. I told them about Dan going turncoat and saving Mia's life, and how we'd sent her out of the city to protect her. I told them that Mia was still traveling with us because Dan thought the demons might come after her again and the Church might not be able to keep her safe, and so he'd asked me to serve as her bodyguard.

The part about Dan asking me to be her bodyguard wasn't quite true, but Layla and the others knew how capable I was, so they had no trouble accepting it.

"I understand," Layla said.

"I've gained a new respect for my father," Yor whispered.

"Saint Mia. I'm so glad you're all right," Tricia added.

The others also showed genuine happiness at Mia's safety.

"Oh, speaking of my father," Yor said, "he gave me a letter as we were leaving the house." She handed me an envelope sealed with wax.

I couldn't tell if the wax was standard procedure or an extra security measure, so I decided to wait until I was alone to open it. The girls seemed curious and kept trying to steal a look at it, so I sealed it away in my Item Box to prove that I wasn't going to look at it now.

"You mentioned you'd be heading for Majorica. Do you know how long you'll be staying?" Layla asked next.

"We haven't decided just yet. We'll be meeting with some people there, so I guess it'll be up to them."

"Do you mind if I ask who you're meeting?" Layla asked, perhaps curious.

I looked over at Sera, who nodded in approval. "Friends of Sera's," I said. "They're actually the reason I bought her in the first place." Hiding the fact that I'd been an adventurer before, I

explained that some people who had helped me on my travels had told me about Sera, so I'd bought her when I found her and was now going to meet up with them in Majorica. "Hikari's also curious about the magic academy, so I figured we'd make Majorica our meetup point. Would you mind telling me more about the place, then?"

"Not at all. Ah, but what are your plans moving forward?"

"Plans?"

"Yes, like when you're leaving this city, how you're getting to Majorica, that sort of thing."

I told them I was planning on resting all day tomorrow, then walking the rest of the way to Majorica.

"That's a shame," Layla said. "We're in quite a hurry ourse— Ah, no, perhaps we should accompany you?" She stopped herself and checked with the others in her party. Everyone except for Casey was in favor, and Layla eventually convinced her as well.

"I thought you were in a hurry?" I asked low enough that only Layla could hear.

"We were, but after seeing Tricia's reaction..."

It seemed she'd changed her plans when she saw Tricia look so sad about the idea of saying goodbye to Mia right after meeting her again. Having seen her at her lowest point, Layla couldn't bring herself to tell her we'd be leaving Mia behind again.

"And we'll be a lot busier at school once we get back, so we won't be able to meet up as regularly."

So, it seemed, she'd chosen to go with us, even if it meant taking more time.

Layla cared about her friends, as always.

I woke up early the next morning and left the inn with the girls, including Layla and her party.

I'd told them last night that I wanted to spend the day taking it easy in the city, and there were two reasons for this. One was that I wanted to give Mia a day to recover before we got back on the road. The other was so that we could have a nice, leisurely look around the morning market.

The most notable thing about the city of Lokia was the food made

from the local, newly picked vegetables. You could get simple veggie sticks with a kind of mayonnaise-like dressing and visit stalls where they'd offer to stir-fry up your choice of vegetables.

"What do you think, Hikari?" I asked her.

"Hate to admit, but it's good," she said after a pause.

Hikari loved anything that wasn't spicy, but she tended to buy meat when she could choose her meals for herself. She rarely ate vegetables voluntarily, so I'd set this up as part of a plan to get her to realize that they weren't all that bad.

"But Layla, will you guys really be okay going with us?"

"Of course. We already made it here earlier than we thought thanks to Yor's father. Besides..." Layla looked into the distance with a thousand-yard stare and said, with deep emotion, "It really is important to eat well, isn't it?"

"Elder sister is right," Yor said.

"Very much so," Talia nodded.

"Yes. Getting to eat like this again just reminds me of that," Luilui agreed.

"So true!" shouted Tricia.

Casey said nothing, but she joined in with a nod.

"When we focused on speed, it cut down on the time we could spend cooking. And the rations that Yor's father prepared for us were quite good—better than the cheap ones adventurers buy—but even expensive rations are still *rations*..." So, she explained, their journey so far had been somewhat less than comfortable. The coachman couldn't cook, and the girls didn't cook regularly either, so they couldn't make anything especially good.

Before they'd come to the Holy Kingdom, their time in the dungeon had made them accept getting by on rations as par for the course. But thanks to me and the merchants' guild chefs, they'd learned that you could eat delicious food while traveling and had raised their expectations accordingly.

And that, she explained, was why she'd decided to walk the remaining four days to Majorica with us.

Jeez, you're making it sound like it's my fault... I thought. *But didn't you say yesterday that you were doing it for Tricia? That was*

pretty touching, you know. Don't look away from me, Layla!

"B-Besides, spending too long on a wagon leaves you out of shape," she added awkwardly.

It sounded like a labored excuse, but there was probably some truth to it. I hadn't spent much time in this world riding in wagons, but it was rough on the body when I did.

In any case, having them around during our walk to Majorica had benefits for me too. I could ask questions about the city—like how to enroll at the academy, assuming that was something an ordinary student would know. I also wanted to hear what it was like in the dungeon from people who had been there, including what kind of monsters you could find.

We toured the stalls for a little while after that, eating together and picking up some foods Hikari requested for later. Some of these would be for Ciel, as well. She wouldn't be able to eat in public with us, so although she'd started the trip out pointing her ears toward dishes that caught her interest, she was now sulking in my hood—probably because everyone kept talking about how delicious everything was.

"But I'm so glad you're feeling better, Tricia," Yor said after looking around for a while.

Indeed, Tricia was an entirely different person from the listless girl I'd seen during our initial reunion, and she was now happily seeing to Mia's every need. Yor had told me that Tricia had looked so despondent after the stampede threat had passed it was like her soul had left her body. They'd been seriously worried about her the whole time they'd been traveling.

"It looks like holy magic is special to Tricia, and those feelings carry over to Mia as the Saint. But that's not the only reason she respects her, you know? You might not know this, but Mia is a very hard worker," Yor explained. She then went on to say that Mia had worked more seriously than anyone during the mana control lessons, grumbling that the others could take a cue or two from her.

I know that Mia's a hard worker, but you don't need to turn that into a slight against everyone else... I thought. Layla had also mastered mana control, so I assumed she'd worked pretty hard too.

Then again, Yor was very passionate when it came to magic, so maybe that was just how she saw it.

Mia seemed to notice us looking at her, and her expression turned slightly flustered...right until she ran off, pulled along by Tricia.

That was when it happened. The shops around us began to rumble, and then the ground started shaking violently. Yor seemed about to pitch over, so I grabbed her shoulders and helped her to balance.

The shaking didn't last very long, but there was quite a lot of damage when it stopped. Shop inventory was scattered all around, and some of the stalls had completely collapsed. I joined forces with the others to put out some possible fires about to start.

"You all right?" I asked Yor.

"Yes, but I've never experienced this before, so I'm a bit shaken up," she responded.

The group met back up and made sure that everyone was okay, but the earthquake—the "shaking"—was apparently a new thing for all the girls. It seemed no one was injured, at least, but listening to conversations around us, I learned that shaking like this hadn't been uncommon lately. This had been the most intense so far, though.

Afterward, we helped tidy things up under Layla's direction, then returned to our inn. As an unexpected bonus, the merchants had given us some more food out of gratitude for our help.

"Elder Sister Layla never stops helping people," Yor said, and Casey nodded as if that went without saying.

The merchants were clearly resilient, though, and the market was back in place the next morning, so we got breakfast there and then set out for Majorica. I was surprised to hear the proprietress of the inn tell us that the food at the market was better than her own cooking, but maybe that just showed how important the market was to the people of Lokia.

You had to go out the west gate on the way to Majorica, and as we approached I saw a long line of wagons waiting to depart. This was apparently a common sight during the harvest season, bringing the newly picked crops to other cities within the Magic Nation. We

passed straight by the line of wagons and left the town through the pedestrian-only gate.

The first thing we saw as we left the city was a stone bridge. It was wide enough for four wagons to cross at the same time, and almost two hundred meters long. That didn't feel especially long for someone coming from Japan, but it was still the biggest bridge I'd seen so far in this world. Mia was so interested in it that she peered down from the railing, then turned pale and grabbed onto my sleeve. Indeed, it was quite a long drop to the rushing river below.

We took our time crossing the bridge. Then, after a while on the road, a forest came into view on our left side. Layla said that she and her friends hadn't been there before, but there were some popular spots in that forest for students to visit.

"Okay then, Layla. Can you tell us some things about Majorica?" I asked Layla while we were walking. You might wonder why I couldn't have asked her while we were staying at the inn, but generally while staying in cities I did a lot of walking around to see the sights. It was a good way of getting XP while also doing the important job of placating Ciel.

"What would you like to know?" she asked.

"About the academy and the dungeon, I think."

"The academy? Because of Hikari?" Layla asked, head tilted.

She was half right, so I didn't deny it. Still, I was also interested in the school for myself. What kinds of subjects did they teach in another world?

"Let me see..."

To sum up Layla's explanation, Magius Academy of Magic offered a general curriculum—reading, writing, and math classes—as well as classes for learning magic. It seemed that not all students could learn magic, but sometimes those who didn't start out having magic-related skills ended up with them after enough practice. There were several different courses you could choose, the two most popular of which were the specialized magic course—which those who learned to use magic could take to learn a specialty—and the adventuring course to become adventurers.

There were other curricula as well, such as a healer course which

you could take to learn to make potions, but most people took one of the former two options. Of the two, far more people took the adventurer course, mostly because that was what most people chose if they couldn't learn magic. It would help them pay their tuition and set them up for the future.

The academy didn't have an enrollment fee, but tuition and other expenses were quite high. Therefore, many students would go to the dungeon to learn the ins and outs of adventuring while also earning money to pay them.

"So wouldn't it be faster to become an adventurer straight out?" I asked.

"Not at all. Many people do struggle to pay tuition, but the school does a lot to help you. More senior adventurers at the school will also sometimes lead excursions," Layla explained.

"The adventurer uniforms they provide are also quite high-quality," Yor threw in.

The adventuring uniforms looked like the regular school uniforms, but they incorporated monster materials and so offered a degree of magic and blade resistance. They were made to look just like the school uniform so that students could be identified at a glance.

Earning good marks in the adventurer program could also help you get a job after graduation. "A lot of people want to join the knights or different clans out of school," Layla explained.

A clan was a group of adventurers who united for a similar aim. Put simply, it was a larger version of a party. There were lots of clans in Majorica, and they were in constant competition, so they were always on the lookout for talented people.

I hadn't heard of a system like this in either Frieren or Elesia, so maybe it was specific to Eva. Or maybe it had existed in both kingdoms and I just hadn't heard about it.

"It sounds to me like the 'Academy of Magic' is a lot more about adventurers than it is about magic..."

"Th-That's not true!" Layla protested, but then she averted her eyes, so it sounded like I might have been spot-on.

"So how does someone enroll there?" I asked, suddenly remembering the main question I'd had.

"Well, there's an enrollment period, so..." Layla's hesitation told me the answer to my next question. We clearly weren't in the enrollment period right now. Nothing to be done about that, then.

"Master, what are you talking about?" That was when Hikari showed up.

Layla knew that Hikari wanted to attend the academy, so this was a little awkward for her. But it seemed better to tell Hikari in advance than to let her keep up the expectation, so I broke the news straight up.

Hikari just whispered, "Okay," then walked back over to Sera. There was no obvious change in her expression, but I could see the disappointment in her posture.

Layla must have sensed it as well, because she looked a little flustered. She always had such a competent air about her that I couldn't help but find this funny. But when I laughed, she got very angry at me.

Still, I definitely thought she looked cuter when she was feeling a little awkward than when she was putting on a strong front. Not that I'd ever admit that to her face.

"Now, regarding the dungeon..." After recovering her cool, Layla started explaining about the dungeon. "In order to enter a dungeon, you need to have an exclusive dungeon entry card made and registered. This gives administrators a record of your entries, exits, and floor completions. It also has a lot of other useful functions," she added, in a way that seemed to imply that I'd be shocked to know how many.

"Why do they need a record of entries and exits?"

"So that they know who's inside the dungeon at a given time. If you present a dive plan on entry and there's no record that you returned within the expected time period, they can form a rescue team to pull you out. This is probably more applicable for students than for most adventurers, of course."

Apparently this system had been implemented in response to previous cases of students going missing.

It reminded me a bit of the registration you needed to do before

climbing a mountain.

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"Well, we'll take the first sleep, then," Layla said.

"Good night, instructor," Yor tagged on.

"Saint— I mean, Mia, are you sure? Aren't you tired?" Tricia asked.

After dinner that night, it was decided that the Bloody Rose girls would sleep first while my party stood watch. Tricia was worried about Mia, who looked tired, but Mia assured her that she'd be fine.

The girls laid their bedding on the ground I'd leveled out and soon fell asleep. Normally I'd have made a house to ensure us all a very restful sleep, but such a thing would attract too much attention along the well-traveled road to Majorica. The area around the road was just grassland here, so we'd have to move pretty far off it if we wanted to avoid scrutiny. But I'd been through this several times before, so I already had a plan in mind.

The most important thing was to keep warm. The ground got cold at night, so it was important to find ways to keep it from sucking the warmth out of your body. Buying good equipment was one method, but I wanted to find out if I could get around it with fire and earth magic, and it worked—I'd combined the two kinds of magic to basically create a heated floor. On top of that, I used wind magic to wrap the area in a barrier that would keep cold air out.

So long as it didn't rain, this basically eliminated any possible need to create a house. Maintaining it did consume mana, though, so I could only do it when I had MP to spare.

"This is...pretty elaborate, master," Sera said in disbelief as she saw it.

What do you want from me? I like to sleep comfortably! I huffed to myself.

"Seriously, Mia, are you okay?" Sera asked about one hour after we started standing watch.

"Yes. I'm fine," Mia responded bravely, but I could tell she'd reached her limit and was beginning to nod off.

This was perhaps inevitable, in a way. Joining up with Layla's group had increased our walking pace—more precisely, we took breaks less often. Mia had gained some stamina since she'd first started walking with us, but she was still unreliable.

The bigger contributor to her exhaustion, though, was probably the mock battle we'd had before dinner. Mia had apparently proposed it to Tricia while we were walking, and Tricia had gladly accepted. I'd thought about stopping them, but Mia had insisted on learning more about staff-wielding from Yor and Tricia. She'd sounded very serious about it, so I decided to let her and just keep an eye on it.

After all, Mia wielded a staff, so there would be a lot she could learn from a similar staff-wielder and holy magic user like Tricia. The only opportunities she'd have to learn from her and Yor would be while we were traveling.

I felt a sudden weight on my shoulder and found that Mia had fallen fast asleep beside me. I felt her warmth and breath on my neck, but I knew that if she tried sleeping like this she wouldn't get any real rest, so I laid her down on a tarp I'd arranged in advance and kept watch with just Sera.

However, my automap showed no signs of monsters or suspiciously moving humans, so we were probably safe.

Once it was just me and Sera, there was no more talking, and we just sat in silence. That might have been why it was easy to hear the sounds of chewing. The two of us were standing watch while the third member of our party, Hikari, was eating.

You might think, *Just her, at this hour?* but Ciel was eating with her.

This was part of the reason I'd offered to have our group stand watch first. Ciel had started eating her own meal, and Hikari had looked on enviously. So I'd offered her food too, and she'd joined Ciel in enjoying her meal, with occasional whispers of "I like this one," "This one's good too," and "This is the one you found, Ciel."

Hikari had held back a little during the group meal before, probably knowing that she'd eat with Ciel later, but I still worried she was eating too much, even for a growing girl. Food really didn't taste

as good when you ate by yourself, though, and Ciel and Hikari really seemed to enjoy eating together, so I wasn't going to scold them.

"Okay, master. Do you have a plan for when we get to Majorica?" Sera must have heard my conversation with Layla while we were walking and became curious. She was casually petting Ciel, who was resting after her meal, so it seemed even she was charmed by the little spirit.

Hikari had joined us and was petting Ciel too, but she didn't seem to forget to keep her guard up. Ciel herself clearly didn't think anything of it, because she just gazed at them with her button eyes insisting on more pets. With each stroke of her head, her expression grew more blissful, and I could almost hear her sigh in contentment.

"I guess we'll head straight to the dungeon? But depending on what they say in their reply, we might want to go to a city closer to the Beastland to meet up with them sooner."

In response, though, Sera insisted that we should stick with our current plan. If we changed our meetup place, we might just end up missing each other.

"Maybe we should explore the area around Majorica too, instead of just the dungeon," I continued. "And...we'll probably need to find a house to rent." It might be cheaper than an extended stay at an inn. Obviously, staying in an inn meant the proprietress would take care of meals and cleaning and various other things, but it would probably be easier for Ciel if we rented a real house.

We spent the rest of the watch discussing the different things we wanted to do in Majorica. But when the time came to change shifts, Layla was nowhere to be found, so Hikari went to wake her up.

Layla finally showed herself and said, quite ruefully, "Traveling with you has ruined me." Apparently the bed had been so comfortable she hadn't been able to get up.

I'd assumed that would be a good thing, but Sera and Hikari agreed with Layla's sentiment.

The next day, we asked Mia for her thoughts about the subject, but since she'd generally traveled with me outside of her journey from Messa to Tenns, she apparently thought this was the way travel

usually went.

To this, the whole group responded in unison, “It’s definitely not!”

Chapter 2

Four days after we left Lokia, we arrived in Majorica as expected. We presented our guild cards, I gave proof that the three girls were my slaves, and we were once again allowed to enter a city without any issues.

Still, I felt like the guard had gone a little pale when he saw Layla's card. But Layla didn't seem to notice anything unusual about the exchange, so maybe it was my imagination?

We went straight on into the town from there, while the crop wagons around us split off into groups: Some entered the city with us, some ventured farther west, and some broke off to the north.

Layla told me that the ones going west were heading for Pleques, the other city with a dungeon inside Eva. There was a ravine on the way to Pleques, so you had to cross a bridge to get there. Across the bridge was the city of Altal, and Pleques was beyond that.

Like Majorica, Pleques had a dungeon as well as a school that taught magic, which had resulted in a kind of rivalry between the lords in charge of the two cities. Even in Eva itself, Majorica and Pleques were treated as a sort of "east-west rivalry."

"So you're going to look for a house?" Layla asked me.

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"We have to drop by the school first, and we might not see you for a while. So if you think you'll find a place to stay quickly, could you leave a message with your inn for us?"

We'd decided for now to stay at an inn Layla had recommended. It seemed she knew the proprietress, because they exchanged some casual conversation, and it looked like we were getting a discount on our stay thanks to her. This particular inn also got monster meats from the dungeons, and it was apparently known for serving some of the best food in Majorica.

It seemed Layla knew Hikari well, and Hikari herself seemed very

happy to hear it. Ciel looked to be content with it as well.

We reserved a four-person room for three nights. There was no point in arguing about this—I'd learned my lesson by now.

"That was a big help. Thanks," I told Layla. And there, we and the Bloody Rose went our separate ways.

It seemed they'd normally be staying in the dorms at the school, but Layla and Casey were going to stop by their homes as well. *I guess families worry about their daughters leaving the country, even if they are Rank B adventurers? Yor's situation must be a bit unique in that regard, since she's been away from home for years...*

The nonlocals, including Yor, headed straight for their dorms. The four of them shared two exclusive rooms, so I agreed to let Yor borrow the mana manipulation wand if she promised to take good care of it. I really thought she might start crying if I didn't. I warned her to be careful when she used it, though—the wand probably looked like a simple toy to people not in the know, but the school might have had some exceptional students who knew it was something more.

"So how do we find a house?" Sera asked me.

"First I thought I'd ask around at the merchants' guild."

"You're going there now?" Mia asked, and Hikari, who'd been playing with Ciel on the bed, looked over at me too.

I paused. "I was planning on going to the merchants' guild tomorrow, but do you want to have a look around the city?"

The most unique thing about Majorica seemed to be its waterways. They were very narrow, though, so it didn't seem like you could use them for boats. The town resembled a certain "City of Water," so it was a shame you couldn't enjoy it the same way.

The reason there were so many waterways was that the river flowing from the northern mountain branched off in Majorica's direction. This particular stem flowed through the middle of the city on its westerly path. All this flowing water gave Majorica the atmosphere of a nice, calm place to live. Maybe that was also why there were roadside trees all over the city.

"This is the student town, right?" Mia asked, remembering what Layla had told her.

I nodded.

The city of Majorica was broadly divided into three major sections.

One was the student town, which had Magius Academy at its center. There weren't actually that many students living in it, since most of them lived in the dorms on campus. But because it was home to the academy, which was like its symbol, it was called the student town. A lot of commoners lived there, so another of its main features was a large commercial district.

Another section was the noble town, where the lord's estate was. There weren't that many nobles living there either, but the town was home to many important facilities and wealthy people, hence the name. Most of the large clan houses were also there, and having a house in that area of town seemed to be something of a status symbol.

Last, there was the dungeon district, which contained the dungeon. Why wasn't it called the dungeon *town*, you ask? I wish I knew. It's not like I'm the one who named it, though.

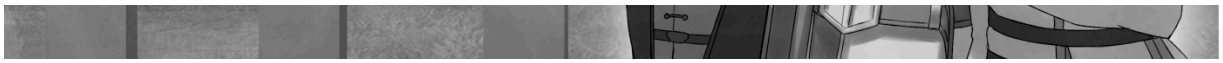
The dungeon district was a city built around the entrance to the dungeon. The lodgings for the adventurers' guild and the knights were there, as were a lot of weapon, armor, and item shops that catered to adventurers. There were also a lot of cheap inns.

"Master, this meat tastes weird," Hikari said after taking a bite of skewered meat she'd bought from a stall.

We bought some for ourselves as well, and I found it was lightly flavored, with a salty sauce base. Based on what I could tell from the surrounding stalls, all the meat served here was monster meat. A lot of stalls sold orc meat on skewers, and it was quite cheap as well. Apparently orcs were hunted en masse in the dungeon.

Perhaps because the city had a constant supply of magistones, I also saw many more streetlamps here than I had in the large cities I'd previously visited. Before now, you generally only saw them on the biggest streets in the large cities. In fact, many of the city's facilities and devices ran on magistones, and our inn had hot baths available despite the relatively inexpensive nightly rate.





"So that's the magic academy?" I'd seen it from the window on the inn's second floor, but it looked even bigger close up. Basically, it resembled a Western-style mansion, divided into many buildings in rows.

And what's that towerlike thing on the far end beyond them? Using Detect Mana revealed a faint aura around the entire structure. I also tried using Detect Presence, but it was as if a faint mist were hanging over the place, stopping me from making anything out. It only concealed the outside of the tower, though; I could still sense the people outside of it.

The school's grounds looked bountiful with nature, and the mansion—probably the school building—stood next to a lush, green forest. I couldn't judge the full scale of it from here, but from what I could see on my automap, there seemed to be a lake inside the forest too.

"So that's where they teach magic?" Mia, standing beside me, looked on curiously.

I felt like I could hear distant voices. Were classes still in session?

"Would you like to check it out after all?" I asked Hikari.

She almost nodded at first, then immediately shook her head and said it was fine.

After that, we looked around the student town a little longer. It felt to me like there were a lot of eateries there. There were trendy little spots with patio seating where girls and boys of the same age talked and laughed in groups. Students at the academy, perhaps? As we passed near them, a few of them cast glances our way. My mask must have been an unusual sight for them.

We'd only done a little walking around the inn and the academy, but it was already getting dark, so we decided to head back. When we arrived at the inn, there were already people in the dining area, and some people were drinking as well.

One drunkard started jeering at the sight of us—well, the sight of the girls—but the proprietress gave him a whack to shut him up. The women in this world—or at least the proprietresses of its inns—were not to be trifled with. Apparently dealing with rowdy customers every day built up a lot of muscle?

After looking the others over, I decided to have our meal brought to us. "Ma'am, could we have our meal in our room?" I asked.

"Ah, yes," she agreed. "That might be for the best."

This meant Ciel could eat with us, too, which made Hikari very happy. We couldn't get a portion for her brought in, but I had plenty of food in my Item Box for just such an occasion.

What? You want to eat more skewers from that stall before? Anything else? You want some too, Hikari? It turned out to be a really fun meal, with the four of us and our animal friend hunkered around the food and eating. The fact that Ciel could eat with us made it all the more fun. She was turning into a bit of a mascot to our team, as well as a source of good cheer.

"So, shall we head to the baths?"

The proprietress had said she'd come and collect our dishes later, so we decided to hit up the much-rumored bathing facilities first—separate facilities for men and women, of course. Actually, I'd spent so much time lately using the Cleanse spell to clean myself off that it had been a while since I'd last soaked in a bath...

I headed out alone for my bath, washed myself off, and then had a good soak. It felt great to get to spread out. Ciel had gone off with Hikari, too, so I could really take my time with it.

"Ah, that's the stuff," I found myself breathing in an expression of pure bliss. I was glad no one was around to hear it.

After getting my fill, I arrived back in the room ahead of the others. I was lying down in bed when it occurred to me that I'd never looked at Dan's letter. I took the envelope from my Item Box and broke the seal.

As expected, it was about Mia.

I'd sent my last message to Dan right after Yor and the others left Messa, so it might not have even reached him yet. The fact that he'd prepared this anyway suggested he'd anticipated the decision that Mia would make.

"He's really competent at everything that doesn't involve his daughter," I muttered. While I was thinking back about doting daddy Dan, Hikari and the others returned.

Hikari immediately walked over to me and told me everything that had happened at the bath and all her feelings about it. “Ciel’s even fluffier than ever,” she insisted. “Even though she got to swim in the bath. Not fair.”

I looked over at Ciel and saw her snuggling happily in Mia’s arms. Maybe her fur did look glossier than before.

“Mia, could we talk for a moment?” I said. “I want you to see the letter Dan sent.”

“His Eminence?” Mia took the letter and looked down at it. It was a short message, but she spent a lot of time going over it, clearly making sure to read it carefully.

“What will you do, then?” I asked Mia when she was finished.

I felt like I knew what the answer would be. The letter contained an update as well as documents attesting to Mia’s identity. With them, she could get her own ID issued and wouldn’t have to remain a slave.

But Mia didn’t answer my question at first. Instead, she stayed quiet, petting Ciel on her lap. Ciel closed her eyes blissfully and let her do it.

“I think...” She opened her mouth at last, but it took a while for the next words to come. “I think I’d like things to stay as they are. After all”—she took a deep breath—“if we drop the slave contract, what about Ciel? Would I not be able to see her anymore?” she asked.

Ciel heard her name said and looked up as if to say, *You called?* In response, Mia just murmured, “It’s nothing,” and went back to petting her. Ciel closed her eyes blissfully once more.

I wasn’t sure what to say in response. As far as I could tell, the ability to see Ciel was indeed tied to the slave contract. So if we removed the contract, would the girls lose the ability to see her? I’d have to dissolve the contract to know. Was it worth testing to find out? But removing it and then reinstating it could raise suspicions, and there was no way to know if it would even be possible...

“I understand how you feel. But are you sure?” I said at last. “Slaves aren’t always seen in the best light...”

The decoration on Hikari’s collar marked her as a special slave,

but Mia and Sera might run into prejudice. There were more slaves out on the streets here than there'd been in the Holy Kingdom, but you still saw people casting scornful glances in their directions and saying cruel things to them. In fact, when we'd entered the inn earlier, that had been part of the drunkard's rant at them.

Saying those sorts of things about someone else's slaves was definitely poor manners, but not everyone respected that. So, especially since Mia's reasons for becoming a slave had been rather exceptional, I'd assumed she would have jumped at the chance to leave that behind her.

"Yes. Being with you—with all of you—is the most important thing," she said at last. "And 'all of you' includes Ciel, so I want things to stay the way they are."

That meant I had a new goal: I needed to find or make a magic item that would make Ciel visible without relying on slave contracts. I hadn't seen one on the Alchemy list. Would I just have to find some new skill?

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My first stop the next morning was the merchants' guild. I'd made sure to ask our inn's proprietress exactly where it was.

There were no city maps in this world, so if I wanted to go somewhere I had to track it down myself. To do that, I often asked either the gatekeeper at the time of my arrival or the people at my inn. I could ask the people at the food stalls when we stopped there too. Once I found out where something was, my automap would update to display it.

We arrived at the merchants' guild, and I offered my guild card at reception.

"How can I help you today?" the receptionist asked.

"I was hoping to rent a house. Is that something the merchants' guild might handle, perchance?" I said in my humble cadence.

"Yes, it is. What kind of property are you looking for?"

"A detached house for at least four... Actually, at least six. With a bath if possible."

That bath part was a bit self-indulgent, but I'll ask for some indulgence there. There were only four of us at the moment, but considering we might meet up with Rurika and Chris, it would be better to have room for six, right? I wasn't sure what would happen after we got back together, but we probably wouldn't be leaving Majorica right away.

"Do you plan on a long stay?" the receptionist asked.

I thought it over. "I can't tell you the precise number of days, but it should be at least thirty. Other than that... Do you have any requests?" I asked my party.

"I'd love to have a big kitchen for cooking," Mia put in.

"Master, if we're staying a long time, I'd like a big yard to train in," Sera added.

Hikari and Ciel...didn't seem to have any requests.

"Understood. There are quite a few possibilities available. Would you like to see them?" the receptionist asked me.

"Yes, please."

"All right. I'll call a guide, so please wait a moment."

The guide showed us a few good prospects, but since we'd be living there for a while, I wanted to give it some real thought before we committed.

"I'd like to think about it for a while," I said. "Do you need an answer immediately?"

"No, that's fine," the guide responded. "But some of these properties have quite a lot of eyes on them, so you may lose out if you don't sign a contract before others. Just keep that in mind."

There seemed to be a lot of adventurers coming to town to hit up the dungeon lately, and renting a house was a popular choice for those looking to form a new party and make some good money. The ones with money to spare were generally those capable of traversing the lower floors, which meant they tended to have a lot of equipment to deal with.

I thanked our guide, left, and then stopped by Majorica's slave market. The market was on the outskirts of the dungeon district, and it was the largest I'd ever seen so far, with the buildings packed in tightly together. This was probably because it was so close to the

dungeon, as there was high demand for fighters as well as porters, so a lot of slave companies set up shop here. Accordingly, the market was full of strong and tough-looking people, including some former adventurers.

Perhaps because I already had three slaves with me and looked like a young man in need of increasing his combat prowess to take on the dungeon, the traders recommended slaves to me quite assertively. There were so many it was hard to look into all of them, but unfortunately Eris wasn't among them, and I couldn't get any extra information on elves.

"We look forward to seeing you again," I was told as I left. I hadn't bought anything, but the slavers remained very solicitous to the end.

Still, it felt like this market seemed to have a lot of children—children about the same age as Hikari.

After leaving the slave market behind, we walked around for a while, and then it came into sight. There was a wall over ten meters high, and it was quite intimidating to see up close. In front of the wall stood the adventurers' guild, which was set up so that the only way to get inside the walled-off area was through the guild.

According to what Layla and the others had said, the dungeon entrance resided at the center of an island surrounded by water. The only way to the island was a drawbridge. This was because it was written in old documents that monsters used to come out of the dungeon in a calamity known as a "monster parade" and cause great damage to the city. There were reports of such things in other dungeons as well.

I felt a lot of people staring at us as we entered the guild building, but only for a second. Slaves weren't especially rare here, and my mask didn't stand out that much either. Compared to men wearing full-face helmets or walking around topless, I looked positively inconspicuous. Mia seemed stunned, though, her mouth hanging open the entire time. I'd stopped by a lot of adventurers' guilds in my time, and I'd never seen adventurers with such strange modes of dress.

The reception area was on the right side of the guild from our perspective, and in one corner of that was a place where you could get information about the dungeon. First, I had Sera check for any messages, but unfortunately there was nothing from Rurika and Chris.

"Let's get the explanation about the dungeon, then."

We moved over to that corner and got an explanation of the rules as well as notable things about the dungeon itself.

First, interpersonal conflicts within the dungeon were up to the parties involved to resolve. However, punishment would be issued for malicious behavior like inciting monster attacks on others or kill-stealing.

Second, this particular dungeon had a labyrinth configuration. There was a boss room every ten floors, and only the members of a single party could enter at once. After entering a boss room, you couldn't leave until you beat the boss.

Third, parties had to register with a card known as a dungeon card when they entered the dungeon, and party members on the same floor could communicate through their cards. This function only worked within the dungeon, though; you couldn't use it outside. The dungeon card also automatically counted the number of monsters you'd slain.

Fourth, after you went into a boss room, there was a five-day waiting period before you could enter the same one again. This seemed to just be part of how the dungeon's internal system worked, so if you tried to enter before the waiting period was up, you'd be denied.

Fifth, you could register the floors you'd visited in the dungeon and automatically take the stairs to the lowest floor you'd been to during your next visit. However, you could only select this option when you first entered.

Sixth, there was a device on the stairs for every floor of a multiple of five which you could use to return to the surface. There was a similar device on the stairs for every floor, but you couldn't use them to escape because they were only there to register your

arrival on the floor. But if you did choose to jump right to the fifth floor, for instance, you couldn't also use that same device to leave right away. Investigation had proven that you couldn't use that particular device until three days had passed.

That more or less covers the basic rules of how it worked.

In addition, every five floors there was a special floor: Those that ended in a five were open fields instead of labyrinths, and those that ended in a zero were called boss rooms. Boss rooms were large rooms that only contained monsters, and you couldn't leave them until you'd defeated the boss inside.

Incidentally, "labyrinth" floors were mazes of passages, similar to a mine shaft or a cave, which you had to navigate to find the stairs. Field floors, by contrast, surrounded you with natural terrain like forests or grasslands. This latter environment might be more familiar to most adventurers who tended to do their adventuring outside of town, but apparently that wasn't the case for most in Majorica.

I was told to check the guild's reference room if I wanted to learn more. Otherwise, the main point of caution they gave me was that dungeon cards were only supposed to be used in dungeons. They weren't a substitute for IDs, and you couldn't present them to leave and enter a city.

"It's not something you can make a day trip out of, I guess," I mused when it was over.

"Yeah, gotta take plenty of food. Can't fight if you're hungry," Hikari responded.

She was right. We'd need to prepare to camp out. And though I was keeping most of our gear in my Item Box right now, it would be best if I could make it so everyone had access to their own stuff in the dungeon. I still didn't know much about what the dungeon was like, and getting separated seemed like a distinct possibility.

That meant I wanted to have a few more bags of holding, but the real issue was food. Rations would be a necessity...but they really didn't taste very good. I might be able to restock ingredients if we ran into the right kinds of monsters, though.

"Other than that, once you're in the dungeon there's no way to

contact the outside world until you leave, so we should figure out what to do if Rurika and Chris get here while we're inside." Going to only the shallowest floors and returning every day was a possibility, but if the monsters were low-quality there, we wouldn't get much out of it.

"Let's study more about dungeons in the reference room here," I proposed, and the other three agreed with me.

Information was crucial. Knowing what monsters we might encounter would let us strategize and buy the equipment we needed, which could make the difference between life and death.

The reference room taught me that the highest floors of the dungeon were labyrinths mainly populated by goblins and wulfs. The labyrinth floors also got larger the further down you went, although the special fields that appeared on floors ending with a five were always very large.

The fifth floor was the first of these special floors, and it was an area of vast grasslands and forests. You could gather herbs there, as well as unusual fruits and other food items that you couldn't find elsewhere.

There were four kinds of monsters you could encounter on the fifth floor: goblins, wulfs, killer bees, and blood snakes. You'd have to search the field to find the stairs, which meant the tiring task of examining hollowed-out tree stumps and rocky grottos. Making it worse was the fact that the dungeon would undergo changes at irregular periods, changing the geography and the location of the exits.

Once we cleared the fifth floor, we'd go back to labyrinths from the sixth floor on, where we'd run into killer bees, blood snakes, wulfs, and goblins in that order. Starting with the eighth floor, those monsters would come in groups.

"A good strategy for us might be to reach the fifth floor, gather up some rare materials, and then come back," I proposed. My biggest hope was that I could collect some of the healing herbs that formed the basis of my income.

Two of my human companions nodded in response to my

statement. The third, Hikari, seemed to have gotten bored halfway through and fallen asleep. She was still a child, after all, so she probably found all this quiet reading a bit boring.

Ciel was also sleeping with her, but that was standard practice for Ciel.

As we left the reference room, we found the guild in a fervor.

The room was on the second floor, so we were in a position to look out over the first-floor hall. There was a crowd forming around a group standing at the center. Everyone, from adults to children, was cheering them on as the group waved back to them.

Something was nagging at me about the scene, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"Hey, guys, there's a great view from here!"

I looked over and saw someone climbing the stairway. My first thought as our eyes met was that he was young—maybe about my age. He wore a big, beaming smile that suited his face well, with bangs swept back so you could see his forehead. He was also taller than me...a little taller.

When the young man noticed us, he very politely said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you." But when he looked back down at the group at the center of the hall, he couldn't hold back his enthusiasm, and he chattered excitedly with the other young people who'd come up behind him.

Something else nagged at me as I watched them, but I couldn't put my finger on that either.

"Oh, Sora. Why are they all dressed the same way?" Mia asked me about the new arrivals while I desperately tried to work out what it was.

A revelation from heaven! She'd hit the nail on the head.

There were a few differences between the men and women, but otherwise, their outfits reminded me of my student days. The men wore shirts and slacks with ties, while the women were clad in blouses with pleated skirts and ribbons. They all wore matching capes of different lengths.

"Eh? Something the matter?" the boy asked me, seemingly noticing my eyes on him.

"Ah, no. I was surprised to see you all in matching outfits."

"Is this your first time in Majorica, by chance?" he asked.

"Yes, we only just arrived yesterday."

"I see," he said gregariously. "Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm Joshua, and I attend the Magius Academy of Magic. These are my friends; we're a party." Joshua gestured to his friends and then bowed.

I returned the gesture. "Ah, you're from Magius, then?" I said. "I'm... Well, my name is Sora, and I'm a traveling merchant. This is my first time in a city with a dungeon, so I stopped by to see if I might find some hidden treasures." I struggled at first with what cadence to use, but I eventually decided to keep talking in merchant mode. Then I noticed that some of the kids behind Joshua were looking curiously at Mia and the others, and I added, "These are my companions. They act as my guardians and caretakers."

"You know about the school?" Joshua asked excitedly. "Do you know someone there?"

"Yeah, Layla," Hikari muttered.

"Lady Layla?!" Joshua shouted in surprise.

"Lady...Layla?" That gave me pause at first, but it made sense. Yor and the others had called her Elder Sister, and she was a B-rank adventurer, so I'd had a feeling she was well respected in the school. I'd also heard she was one of the best students at Magius, so it wasn't that unusual for people to show her that level of respect, was it?

While I was mulling over that choice of words, Joshua suddenly backtracked. "Sorry, I misspoke," he said.

For a few moments after that, Joshua and I just looked at each other. *This is awkward. Gotta get out of this!* Just then, I remembered the people everyone was fawning over in the hall below and used that to change the subject. "As I mentioned previously, we're recent arrivals, so I was curious as to why everyone was making a commotion over those people there. Do you think you might enlighten me?"

"Ah, of course," Joshua said, seizing the opportunity for a shift in conversation. "It wouldn't be obvious at a glance, would it? The

people at the center of the hall are the biggest clan—do you know about clans?—they're the biggest clan in Majorica. They've also gone the farthest into the dungeon out of anyone!"

Joshua's behavior reminded me of something—like an idol singer's fanboy.

He said there were five main clans currently vying for supremacy in Majorica. Of those, the Guardian's Blade seemed to have managed a fairly significant lead lately. The reason Joshua was so excited was that someone he respected very much was in the group.

"He was a few years ahead of me at school, and he became their subleader right after graduation. He was also the leader of the party that set the record for dungeon diving while he was at school. I want to be just like him." I followed Joshua's eyes to a single young-looking person. He was standing among what looked like storied veterans, but his stance seemed as confident as that of anyone around him.

Soon, the person who looked like the group's leader gave an order, and the Guardian's Blade left with the crowd cheering behind them.

"Well, we really should be going now," Joshua said. "If you make an attempt on the dungeon, we might run into you there. I hope to see you then."

After the Guardian's Blade was out of sight, Joshua and the others left the guild as well. Had they really come all the way here just to gawk at their favorite clan? Or had they just happened to exit the dungeon at the right time?

With the interaction behind me, I let out a big sigh.

"Sora, were you nervous?" Mia asked.

I hadn't even thought about it before she asked me. Was *I nervous? When was the last time I talked to a guy my own age? My last escort mission in Elesia?* It seemed like all the men I'd talked to recently had been grown adults...

"Master, I'm hungry," Hikari said.

That made me realize—between the stop at the merchants' guild, house-hunting, and the stop at the adventurers' guild to register and

check the reference room, we were already way past lunchtime.

We left the adventurers' guild building and put our noses to the scents on the breeze. We were currently standing in front of a line of stalls meant to cater to adventurers. Some had large crowds of people around them, so they must have been popular.

Mixed in with the adults were small children—some the same age as Hikari or even younger—buying food. Some of these would buy a single portion and divide it up among several children. It was quite a large portion, so maybe it was too much for one of them to eat by themselves.

"Are you interested in that one?" I asked Hikari, and she nodded.

She'd locked her eyes on a stall selling meat skewers. It gave off an intense, mouthwatering aroma, but what had really caught her eye were the chunks of meat the size of a person's fist. Brawny men were buying it and chowing down one after the other.

Hikari rushed over to the stall and handed over the money. The stall owner looked surprised but apparently accepted her order, because she came back happily with a skewer in hand. He'd apparently had to cook it after the order was placed, though, because it took her some time to return.

I led Hikari by the hand as we went to find something else for us to eat. She seemed unable to stop herself from taking a bite on the way, and she informed us that it was delicious.

The portions at every stall seemed huge, probably because they were catering to adventurers. The low prices compared to the portion size suggested a supply that exceeded demand.

"Mia, what is it?" I was trying to decide what to buy when I noticed Mia acting strangely. She kept glancing in a certain direction as if preoccupied by something. I followed her gaze, but I didn't see anything in particular.

"Excuse me, sir." At last, as the initial wave of customers died down, Mia went to talk to the shop owner whom Hikari had bought the skewer from. Was it because Hikari had vouched for the taste? Her tongue never lied.

The shopkeeper looked very surprised about being called "sir." He mentioned that he was in his twenties, but he looked old—er, rather,

more distinguished than his years. The other stall owners around him started teasing him over being called "sir," and he persisted in claiming that he was a young man in response. But when Hikari told him his food was good, the way he turned beaming and bashful really did give him that older-man look.

"Um, well, I have a question for you..." Mia tried again, and this time she asked about the children in the plaza.

The kids had moved to the edge of the plaza to eat. There were fewer now than there had been the last time I looked, so some must have moved on. Looking at their clothing, I saw that some were armored up like adventurers and some wore large packs. None of them looked old enough to be registered as adventurers.

"I don't recognize you. First time here?" the shopkeeper asked. Mia nodded in response, and he cast a glance over at us, so I ordered skewers for four. I ordered them all small except for one large one, which would be for Ciel. I got permission from Sera and Mia to do this, of course; stall owners tended to get looser lips when you bought from them.

The shopkeeper gave us the story as he cooked, in a tone more polite than his appearance suggested.

The children, he explained, were orphans, and the sheer number of them around was because of the dungeon. People with children who made their living there—mostly adventurers, but not all—sometimes went to the dungeon and never made it back. The children left behind would band together with other ones in similar circumstances and try to take on the dungeon themselves or become porters for adventurers to try to earn a living wage. Of course, there were more than a few children who weren't cut out to do either.

"The children there are mainly the ones who try to get adventurers to hire them as porters. Most of the kids you saw just now were heading home from work."

"They go into the dungeon?" Mia asked, looking extremely surprised to hear it.

"Well, yeah. To make money in the dungeons, you need to bring

back both magistones and materials. But fighting while carrying loot around is hard even for experienced adventurers, so you need a dedicated porter. It's best if you can get someone you know to fill the role, but a lot of people who can't do that hire one of the kids. Quite a few adventurers have come out of those circumstances themselves."

So that was how it was. I remembered that, when we registered for the dungeon, nobody had said a word against Hikari being involved. It seemed there weren't age limits on dungeon diving like there were for the adventurers' guild membership. That explained what was bothering me about the people I'd seen gathered in the guild hall. There were so many children too young to register there.

"But, um, isn't that dangerous?" Mia asked.

"Hmm, I'd say so, but there's nothing to be done about it. It's the only way they can make a living."

"Aren't there any...orphanages, or places to care for them?!" Mia asked him in outrage.

The shop owner seemed taken aback by her response. "I'm not trying to defend it, but the lord of this city takes better care of them than most do. There's just too many to take care of all at once." The stall's owner said he'd been through many cities before coming to Majorica, and he'd seen places with far more orphans on the streets than this one. Building and maintaining orphanages always cost money, and there was only so much of it to go around.

"S-Sorry. I know it isn't your fault." The shopkeeper's obvious discomfort seemed to clear the steam from Mia's head, and she quickly apologized.

"Hey, that's all right. We worry about them, too, but we also have to make a living. It puts us in a tough spot. If we give out our unsold food willy-nilly, they'll start expecting it and never buy from us." That was why he fried up the skewers after people ordered.

By the time the man finished his story, the skewers had finished cooking, so we took them and headed elsewhere.

"Is something still bothering you?" I asked Mia.

Even after getting her explanation, she still looked distracted. It seemed like something else was still on her mind.

"Yes," she responded after a long pause. "Listen, Sora. Can that, um...presence-reading skill of yours be used to find people?" she said quietly as if to keep it confidential.

"It's hard to find specific people," I explained. "Do you know what direction they'd be in, or how many of them there are?"

"Two people, in that direction, I think."

I pulled up my automap and used Detect Presence, then checked the direction Mia was pointing. There were quite a few groups visible on the automap, but one of them was a two-person group moving slowly together.

"I think I see a group of two."

"Sora, take me to them!" she pleaded desperately.

At this, I put everyone's skewers into my Item Box and led the way. We entered a dimly lit alleyway chasing the signals, then ran along badly paved areas that made me hesitate to go on, and narrow paths that would be hard for grown adults to traverse. At last, we arrived at the place where the signals were.

Our sudden appearance brought a shocked expression to the face of the little girl in front of us. The boy quickly ducked behind her.

And behind them was a...hovel? A run-down old building that looked like it might come down any minute. But what surprised me more than that was the girl's eyes. They were so...lifeless and hollow.





Mia approached, knelt down, and was about to speak when she seemed to realize something. “You’re hurt!” she cried, and then she cast Heal.

The girl looked up at her in surprise as the spell took effect.

“Are you all right now?” Mia asked.

The girl nodded.

I looked again at them over Mia’s shoulder and saw that they were both terribly dirty. The taller girl’s hair was a disheveled dusty red, and the shorter boy had dark blue hair that was so long and wild I couldn’t make out his eyes.

Just then, I heard a gurgling sound and saw redness slowly start to spread across the girl’s face. Her previously hollow eyes had started to retake some emotion and light.

“Are you hungry?” Mia asked.

“...haven’t eaten in days...” the girl replied, so softly I could barely hear her.

Mia looked back at me. I knew what she wanted me to do, but...we had to get out of here first.

“I don’t think this is a great place to eat,” I said. I’d certainly think twice before I ate any food served here, at least. “Should we move?”

At my prompting, we left the alleys and walked along waterways until we found a good place to sit. I couldn’t bring the food out just yet, though. I held out my hand toward the girl and cast my Cleanse spell. Then I cast it again, then a third time, until her dusty hair turned an auburn color. Casting the same spell on the boy turned his own hair a more lustrous azure—more precisely, it went back to its proper color. Their clothing was now clean, though odd patches remained here and there.

“Just don’t eat too fast, okay?” I produced a container of mild soup from my Item Box, portioned it out into bowls, and handed it over.

The two kids took the bowls, but they just held them, looking at me in confusion.

“It’s good. Go on, eat,” Mia said kindly.

The two did as they were told. It seemed like they really hadn’t

eaten in days, because I ended up giving them three bowls each.

"Thank you very much," the girl said, and she bowed to me. The boy beside her did the same thing.

Once they seemed to be feeling well enough, I decided to ask how they'd gotten into their current situation.

The girl's name was Elza. Her story more or less matched what the stall owner had told us, but her circumstances were a little different from those of the little boy, Art.

Elza hadn't been born in Majorica, but had come to the city with her adventurer parents and their party several years ago. Her parents made a pretty good living from dungeon diving, but—as Elza explained rather sadly—she herself had a poor constitution and had to spend most of her time inside. Because of this, her favorite times were when her parents and their party came back and told her all of their adventuring tales.

One day, though, her parents went into the dungeon and never came back. They'd been away for long stretches before, but they always came back at least once every twenty days. In this case, though, day twenty came and went, then day thirty, then day one hundred—and they never returned. Elza remained at the inn the whole time, spending the money she'd been told to use in case of emergency.

Around that time she met Art, whose adventurer parents had met the same fate as her own. He was about to be sent out of the inn, so Elza took him in, and they stayed together waiting for their parents to return. But eventually the money ran out, and they both had to leave.

"The innkeeper was kind to us to the very end, though," Elza added. The inn's owner had known the situation and had let them stay for a while even after they lost the ability to pay. But new customers eventually arrived, and it couldn't be put off any longer. "He was very sorry," she said, "and apologized to us, even though he hadn't done anything wrong."

Elza went on to explain what happened after they left the inn. They had no close friends and therefore no way to enter the established orphan communities, so they instead got along as best

they could on charity from the stall owners. “We never used to go out much, so we didn’t know the rules and stuff. We’ve tried to get along as best we can, but we never really knew what to do.”

Large tears began falling from Elza’s eyes as she talked. Seeing that, Art hugged Elza tightly, and she smiled through her tears and patted his head. “Thank you for your kindness,” she finally said. “We haven’t had a full meal in so long.”

Suddenly, Mia tugged hard on my sleeve. I looked back and met her eyes. She opened up her mouth to speak, but didn’t actually say anything. Maybe being a slave had made her reluctant to speak her mind.

Nevertheless, I understood what she wanted. She was a truly kind girl—but helping someone took more than a few superficial acts. Maybe it would’ve been different if I’d been putting down roots here, but I wasn’t. I was planning to start traveling again after I met up with Rurika and Chris.

When that happens... As that thought entered my mind, I shut it down. *No one knows what might happen in the future. Focus on what you can do here and now. Past that, just work hard to make sure your actions don’t lead to irresponsible results.*

I couldn’t save every child, but maybe it was possible to help just these two.

“Okay, let’s go shopping.” I collected Elza’s and Art’s bowls, then took their hands and stood up.

They were both surprised (I assumed—with Art it was harder to tell because of his bangs) and looked up at me.

“I’d like to hire you both,” I said. “If you take the job, I can promise you both room and board.”

Elza didn’t seem to know how to react to that. “Wh-What do we have to do?” she asked.

“We’re waiting for Sera’s—this beastfolk lady’s childhood friends to come to this town. But they won’t be arriving for a while, so we’re going to rent a house. We’d like you to help look after that house.”

We’d need someone to look after the place while we were in the dungeon. That might bring some sad memories back for them, but it was the best I could offer right now. In the meantime, perhaps I

could come up with a less conspicuous way of helping them become more independent. Maybe by improving their stamina?

"Elza, Art. Would you like to come with us?" Mia said kindly to the still-unsure Elza.

"Y-Yes. Please." She nodded, her cheeks turning red.

That was a totally different reception than the one I'd gotten. *The power of the Saint!*

Our first order of business was to buy the kids a few outfits, and we went around to weapon and armor shops after that. This was mainly for Hikari and Sera, whom I asked to pick out some throwing knives. It was good to stick with things you were used to.

But Sera, do you really need the hand axes? Knives are too light, you say? Fine.

While we were shopping, Elza asked Mia quite a few questions. She mainly seemed curious about our relationship and what I did for a living. She seemed surprised to hear I was a traveling merchant.

Do I really look that little like one? I wondered.

As we were walking around different stores, one thing that struck me was the wide variety of rations on display. Every shop had its own original recipes, and they even had sample corners. We tested out quite a few and definitely found a few duds. Ciel looked like she wanted to try them too, but her enthusiasm dimmed when she saw how Hikari's nose wrinkled.

Ciel. Did you forget those disgusting rations you ate back at the start? I asked her telepathically. *Were you expecting these to taste good just because they smelled different from those?* Ciel's body and ear language were growing more expressive every day. She still couldn't talk, but I could understand her thoughts as easily as if she could.

Despite what I'd told Ciel, though, these were at least the tastiest rations I'd tried so far. At the same time, they weren't something I'd ever eat voluntarily. I could cook for myself and preserve anything left over. Still, rations seemed to be in high demand, as most of the visitors to the shop seemed to be there to buy them. A lot of them were like meal bars, but some were the kind that you dissolved in hot water too.

"If there's this much demand, maybe developing a line of tastier rations would be a way to clean up," I whispered, which got an immediate reaction from Hikari and Ciel. *Look, I haven't decided yet, okay? Don't look at me so expectantly...* I groaned to myself.

After that, I asked Mia something I'd been wondering about. "Hey, Mia. How did you know about Elza and Art?"

Mia spoke haltingly. "Well, when we were in the plaza with the stalls, I spotted Elza looking at us from the alley. She, um, ducked away immediately, but the way her eyes looked... I couldn't get it out of my mind."

That explained why Mia was acting so strangely. I don't think I'll ever forget that hollow look in her eyes when I first saw her.

"Then, when I heard what the man at the stall said, I realized their clothing was different from the other children in the plaza," she continued. "I thought maybe they were outcasts. And... Sora, I'm sorry for forcing you into that."

She really was a kind girl. Seeing the way her shoulders sank, I found myself patting her on the head. Her face flushed and she shrunk a little further, her eyes pointed decidedly downward. I'd been patting her head like I did when I comforted Hikari, but this was apparently embarrassing for a young woman like Mia. Of course, seeing her react that way embarrassed me too.

"I'm the one who made the decision in the end," I said. "And I don't know how to look after small children, so I might need your help. Do your best for me," I said to cover my embarrassment.

In response, she smiled and said, "Sure, leave it to me!" She really did look best when she was happy.

Once all our errands were finished, we returned to the inn. Our room was reserved through the next day, but I decided to extend it because we were still figuring things out about the house. I'd also need to make some changes in the rooming situation to accommodate Elza and Art.

When I explained the situation to the proprietress it turned out two three-person rooms had just opened up, so she let us switch to those. I'd have liked to have us all together in a single room, but

those were already fully rented out.

"I'd like two more nights," I said, but I explained that we might extend our stay even more if it took a while longer to find a place to rent.

We got one room for Mia to look after Elza and Art and another for the rest of us. That was a compromise, of course.

The six of us then gathered in one room to discuss what to do next, and Layla and Casey stopped by the inn just before dinner. Their clothing matched the attire worn by Joshua and the others we'd met at the adventurers' guild.

"Um, who are those children?" Layla asked first, so I explained the situation. "I...see." Layla responded a bit listlessly after I finished.

"So, what did you get up to today?" I asked.

"Ah, my father asked about what happened in Frieren, so I told him, and he said he wanted to meet you, Sora. So I came to ask if you were free."

"I am. I can stop by anytime." There was no actual hurry, anyway.

"Would you be willing to go now, then?" Layla asked apologetically. "Papa's been busy lately too, but he said he'd be free tonight. I really wish I'd stopped by in the morning to ask your plans first, of course..."

I asked if we all had to go together, and she said he only needed to speak with me.

Got it. Just me... I felt a little nervous about going alone, but someone had to stay with Elza and Art. I decided to leave all that to Mia and the others while I went to Layla's house with her and Casey.

As we left the inn I found a wagon stopped out front, and I was shocked when they told me to get on.

◇Mia's Perspective 1

We'd returned to the inn and had been talking for a bit when Layla and Casey came to visit. They said they had something to talk

to Sora about, so he went out with them. He seemed to have ordered dinner from the proprietress in advance, so those of us who stayed ate in our rooms and then had a bath.

The first thing that surprised me as the five of us entered the women's bath was the fact that Art was actually male. Hikari and Sera seemed surprised by my shock. *What? Was I the only one who didn't know?* Still, he was only five years old, and he'd have been too scared to go by himself, so I accepted it. I would've hated to separate him from Elza anyway.

The children washed off and we all soaked in the tub, letting out contented sighs.

"Big Sis Mia. What's Big Bro Sora like?" Elza asked me after we'd been in the water for a while.

She was curious because I'd told her that Sora was a traveling merchant, but he could also cast spells. There was a little bit of open admiration in her eyes as well... *A rival for my affections?*

I told her what I could about Sora in generic terms. As I did, I realized how little I really knew about him. He'd told me he was an otherworlder, but nothing beyond that.

Another world... He'd been called here from another world, but I had no idea of who he had been before he came here. *Will he ever tell me?*

I spent all my time wanting to know more and more about Sora, but I also wasn't sure if I had a right to know. I was still lying to him and imposing on his kindness.

The incident with Elza and Art, for example. I couldn't have saved them myself, but I'd had a feeling Sora would. After all, he was a kind person who had offered to help me as well. It turned out I was right; the fact that I didn't even have to say the words outright proved it. I'd also been afraid that if I'd asked, he might say it wasn't possible.

Then there was the letter from Cardinal Dan. It had said I could get an ID of my own if the church filed for it. I'd told Sora that things were fine as they were because I wanted to be able to see Ciel. But that wasn't entirely true.

Yes, I *had* grown close to Ciel, and I definitely didn't want to lose

sight of her by canceling the slave contract. Of course, it was possible I could still see her even if I lost the contract. Even Sora said he wasn't sure either way.

But the real truth was that I was afraid of losing my connection to Sora. *If I become free, what will Sora do with me?* I was afraid to ask. *Will he leave me behind? What would I do then?*

"What's wrong, Big Sis Mia?"

A sudden voice from nearby snapped me out of my reverie. Elza was looking at me in concern. Next to her, Art was also looking at me curiously.

"Nothing. The bath just feels so nice, I spaced out a little," I lied with a smile on my face.

They showed no suspicion and agreed about how nice it felt. My heart stung, but I couldn't tell them the truth. Still, I knew that things couldn't go on much longer as they were.

I remembered a conversation I'd had with Tricia on the way here. After joining the school long ago, Tricia couldn't use magic or do anything for a long time. Yor was in the same class and had encouraged her, and Layla welcomed her into the Bloody Rose despite everything. She'd fought hard to find a way to be useful, and when she discovered holy magic, she was overjoyed that she'd finally found it.

That was why, she'd told me, holy magic was so special to her, and why it was such a precious thing.

"I'll have to give it my best, then," I murmured aloud.

There were only two holy spells that I could use, but Tricia had said there were many more that were useful in dungeons. *How can I learn them?* Tricia had said she was busy, so I knew I couldn't ask her for help.

"Maybe I should go to the church...and consult with Cardinal Dan?"

But if I did that, I'd have to tell him why I wanted it. If I told him I was going into a dungeon, he'd insist it was too dangerous for me. He was the type to worry quite excessively; I'd seen that from watching his interactions with Yor.

Maybe I'll talk about it with Sora when he gets back?

◇◇◇

The wagon was heading for the noble town. It ended up stopping in front of a large mansion far bigger than Yor's house. The yard was huge, but the wagon entered the drive as if it belonged there.

The sun was going down and it was getting dark, but the lamps set up in front of the lawn lit up the greenery, creating a sort of mythical atmosphere.

"What is it?" Layla asked me.

"Um, is this really your house?" I recalled that when we'd first visited Yor's house, Layla and the others hadn't been awed by it at all. Apparently that wasn't just because they were Yor's friends, but because of the sight before me now. In other words, they were used to it.

Ciel was also trembling, cowed by its scale.

"I'll show you the way now," Layla said.

Layla took the lead as we walked, followed by me, then Casey. *No way to escape, huh?* Not that I had any plans to try.

We entered the house and were greeted by a group of maids led by a butler.

"Welcome back, madame," the butler said.

I wouldn't tell anyone how blown away I was by their perfectly synchronized movements.

Yor's house had been amazing, but Layla's beat it in terms of size and class. The room we were led to was absolutely luxurious. The teacups they set out were so exquisite I was nervous even to pick one up. I'd definitely have been in hot water if I dropped and broke it.

Ciel seemed drawn to the plate full of baked sweets, but she must have known she wasn't allowed to eat any. If we had a minute, I'd ask if I could take some back with me. If not, I'd ask where they'd bought them from.

"There's no need to be so nervous." Layla smiled and took her tea elegantly.

Casey didn't sit but simply stood quietly behind her. There was something strange about their behavior compared to the way I'd seen them in Frieren.

Layla noticed my curiosity and explained. "Cas here is from a family in service to mine. She's my attendant."

"E-Elder sister. *Casey*, please," Casey immediately corrected Layla, who couldn't help herself from smiling. This seemed to be a frequent interaction between them.

"We attend the same school, so I think we can keep our usual relationship until we graduate," Layla told her.

"It's fine to be that way outside the house, but it's important to respect decorum here."

Layla whispered something about her being inflexible, but Casey refused to budge. I'd thought she'd seemed very worried about Layla when we were in Frieren, and this explained it.

This double act of theirs did a lot to soothe nerves, and I managed to talk to Layla again in my usual way. We mainly discussed what we'd been up to since we split up. I told her about our search for a rental house, the adventurers' guild, and finally Elza and Art.

Their stories were mostly complaints about how much they'd had to do to catch up since they'd returned. *But isn't that your own fault?* I thought. Obviously the stampede had delayed their return, but they could have made up a lot of lost time if they'd used the wagons Dan had arranged.

"Still, Mia really is the same no matter where she goes." Layla did seem a bit heartbroken by the story about the orphans. Apparently the orphanages were both understaffed and underfunded, so her house also sent people to help them during the day.

"What does your house even do?" I asked her then. "I can tell you're in the noble class, but..."

Just as I asked that, there was a knock at the door. Casey went to open it, spoke to the person there, then came back.

"Mistress, it's ready."

"Very well. Sora, you should ask Papa about that directly," Layla said, and this time Casey led me to a different room.

"Thank you for looking after my daughter in Frieren. I am Layla's father, Will Alexis, Lord of Majorica."

I'd assumed he was a man of fairly high standing, but I hadn't expected him to be the town's top dog. "A pleasure to meet you, my lord," I said deferentially. "Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Sora, a traveling merchant."

"Hah, you can drop the formalities. Have a seat."

I waited for Will to sit, then took a place on the sofa. Layla sat down next to me, with Casey standing behind us.

"My daughter's told me most of the story. You're the reason she's still with us, aren't you? I wanted to thank you personally for that."

"I'm sure you're overstating the case..." I stammered. Layla was incredible, after all; she didn't need my help. She'd really distinguished herself during the stampede.

"No, she told me you ran into an orc lord. I've kept track of her progress at school, and I don't think she's strong enough to have beaten that monster by herself. Which means you're the reason she made it back safely."

"A simple stroke of luck, I'm afraid," I said after a pause. "I had a family heirloom which just happened to be useful in that situation." Besides, it was Layla who'd landed the killing blow.

"Ah, I see," Will said. "Either way, I wanted to give you a reward. My daughter tells me you're curious about the academy. Is that right?"

"Yes, a friend of mine is very interested." I had my Walking skill that let me learn magic, so I didn't feel much need for it myself. That said, I *was* a little curious to see what another world's school might be like. I'd only seen it from the outside, so I didn't know much about it, and I thought it might be fun just to walk around in it.

"Very well. I'll see to it that you can attend."

"Papa, really?!" Layla was even happier about this than I was.

Right, she saw how despondent Hikari was when she heard she couldn't go to school. Once I got back and told her that Layla had gotten her into school, she'd surely be overjoyed.

"But you'll only be able to study there," he clarified. "No matter

how excellent your grades are, you won't be allowed to graduate. Keep that in mind. Of course, you can always go through the official enrollment channels later if you like."

I'd only be staying in this town until Rurika and Chris arrived anyway, so that wouldn't be a problem. "Ah, but my companions are...well, slaves," I added. "Is that all right?"

I was worried that slaves might not be allowed to attend school, but apparently Layla had already explained my situation to Will, and he assured me that it would be fine.

"But Papa, I would like to ask one additional favor..." Layla cut in.

Hmm? What he'd done already seemed like more than enough for me, but apparently she had more to say. This seemed to take Will by surprise too; he looked over at me, but I had no clue. I shook my head and claimed ignorance.

Layla then explained the situation with Elza and Art.

Will took this information in. "I see. I also worry about the children being left alone to watch a house. Very well; I'll send someone from our household."

"You really don't have to go that far..." I began, but Will stopped me and explained.

"I'm not doing it purely as a favor. I'd like to see how well they'd do if properly trained to run a household. If they can learn, it will help them to be more independent, and if the same can be done in the future it could help to free up some human resources issues. An investment in the future, you could say."

Despite what Will said, I knew it wasn't quite that simple. Still, I did feel better having an adult there instead of just two children.

So I expressed my gratitude and bowed my head. "Thank you."

We discussed the details and decided that the person would live with us as well. Will said I could also leave basic housework to her. *But wasn't he sending her to teach the children?*

Our talk lasted into the night, and I ended up staying over at Layla's house.

I really had to ask where they bought that bed. Ciel, who was bouncing up and down on it, clearly liked it as well.

Chapter 3

"Really, master?"

"Yeah, you'll have to thank Layla next time you see her."

Back at the inn, Hikari jumped for joy when she learned that we could attend the magic academy after all. I'd never see her so openly emotional about anything. She'd been a trouper about it, but she really must have wanted to go.

"We'll have to go there in three days to undergo the enrollment process, so let's have a house picked out before then."

After recent events, I'd have to adjust the number of rooms. Adding Rurika, Chris, Elza, Art, and the caretaker maid whom Will would be sending to our party of four, the total shot up to nine. It also seemed like it would be nice to get a house as close to the school as possible.

Eh? Does that narrow it down to only one option? Thinking it over in those terms, I realized there was only one property that met our needs.

"Here is the key. Do you have a rental period in mind?"

"Let's start with a thirty-day contract. If I want to extend it but can't come in to pay by the deadline, what would be the correct procedure to follow?"

"Do you expect this to be a possibility?"

"I'm going to be attending the academy, and I might be going into the dungeon for my classes. What should I do if I'm delayed down there?"

"Let me see... I recommend signing up for automatic renewal. If you want to change anything about the contract, please contact us as well."

And with that, I had my own house. A rented one, of course!

"Ah, but after your first automatic renewal, you will have to stop

by in person at least once within one hundred days. If you can't come in person, you may send a proxy. Make sure they carry proof of authorization. If you fail to do this, the contract may be terminated."

That seemed to kind of defeat the point of the automatic renewal, but apparently the houses could end up in pretty bad shape if they went too long without anyone living in them, so they needed to make sure someone was checking in regularly.

I'd ended up renting a house with ten rooms. It had originally been an inn, but some adventurers had remodeled it into a clan lodging house. I was told the previous owners were still in the adventuring business; they'd just moved on to another town's dungeon—chasing a woman.

Luckily, this place had the large kitchen that Mia had wanted, as well as a yard the adventurers had probably used for training. But while it looked like the house had been regularly cleaned, the yard had been neglected and so it was quite overgrown.

"It looks like we'll have to go to a general store for some things," I said. There were bed frames in the rooms, but no mats or blankets.

Remembering the quality of the bed in Layla's house, I decided to splurge on these. Ciel bounced up and down on different beds to test the feel. I wished she'd tone it down a bit, but I still ended up buying the ones she'd recommended. I also bought plates and cooking utensils.

The maid Will had introduced me to was named Iroha. She was a woman in the prime of youth with silver hair tied back into a low bun, presumably to keep it out of her face while she was working. She'd recommended that I buy some cooking utensils that would be easy for us to use. I didn't know much about them, though, so I had Mia and Elza ask for help from the general store owner while we were making our purchases.

I also bought a pot for camping, which inspired a complaint of "*Another* one?" from Mia and Sera. It was true that I had almost ten already, but the more I had, the more flavors I could try. My next goal was to make curry—I wanted to try miso and soy sauce as well,

but I'd never gotten good results even when I experimented with my Cooking skill, so I was putting that off for now.

I also bought a grass-cutting sickle and cleaning supplies, then headed back to the house. We'd be seriously moving in two days from now, and we had to get the cleaning done before then.

I tried using my Cleanse spell and got good results, but Mia and the others told me to lay off and leave the cleaning to them—that was slave work, they said. I told them they didn't have to worry about that, but they shoved me out of the room anyway.

I felt sad about being left out, but it was what they wanted, so I couldn't argue. All my attempts to help inspired glares from Mia and pouts from Elza. The methods they were using didn't look efficient at all...but I decided to just drop it. I ended up leaving food for lunch and heading to the adventurers' guild on my own.

I was going to look up information about the dungeon and buy magistones. Ciel was coming along with me again today, but I still felt lonely going off without any of the others. It felt like a sign of how much I'd grown used to having the girls in my life, and how much I couldn't imagine losing them.

◇◇◇

"Miss Iroha?" I returned to the rental house around sunset and found Iroha standing there. She seemed to be on her way out, about to head home.

"Master Sora, welcome home." She bowed politely as she greeted me.

Talking to Iroha made me nervous for some reason, maybe because of her prim and proper demeanor. She was a difficult person to read, almost as expressionless as Hikari.

"May I ask what you might be doing here today?" I asked. "Is something the matter, perhaps?"

"You needn't speak that way with me," she said, chastising me for using my humble merchant's cadence. "Simply address me as you would Mistress Layla. You are my employer, after all."

"But...it was my understanding that you weren't working for me

directly," I persisted. I wasn't even paying her, after all; Will had just sent her over as a show of friendship.

"You needn't worry about that either. His Lordship is paying my fee. As for the reason I came here, I wished to size your two...maids...for work clothes."

"Work clothes?"

"Yes. Similar to a combat uniform for those in my profession."

I guess appearances are important for this sort of thing? I wondered silently.

"I would also advise you to praise them for their efforts," she added. "They've all been working very hard for your sake, Master Sora." At that, a smile suddenly appeared on Iroha's face.

It was only for a moment, but it made my heart skip a beat. It took me totally by surprise. A smile from someone you never expected always hit harder. I could feel myself blushing, and in my shock, all I could say in response was "All right."

We went on to discuss a few more things after that. *I guess I navigated that conversation well?* I thought when it was over. *It's hard to tell...*

But as I entered the house, I was surprised by what I saw.

"Well, master?" Hikari asked proudly as she rushed up to me.

I wiped a smudge off her nose. It must have tickled, but she seemed to enjoy it. "I guess it's a lot cleaner than before?" I speculated. Indeed, they'd made a lot of progress on cleaning the place. The previously dingy floors were now sparkling, and they'd trimmed the weeds in the yard so the ground was now visible. There was still a long way to go, but it was looking a lot better than before.

"It didn't go well at first. Miss Iroha taught us a lot," Hikari continued. They'd followed her instructions on cleaning procedures, and in no time things had started going a lot smoother.

"I see. You worked hard. Great job." I thanked each of them in turn.

Elza smiled happily at the praise and shared a pleased expression with Mia. Art was sticking to Elza as usual, but Sera told me he'd worked really hard too.

"Then let's go back to the inn for today," I proposed. "If things

keep up at this rate, we can move in the day after tomorrow as planned."

Indeed, the next day we finished getting the house into a livable state with my help. Granted, my "help" mostly consisted of pulling the new bedding and utensils out of my Item Box and telling the others where to put them, so I'm not sure how much it counted...

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The next morning, we said goodbye to the inn's proprietress, then moved into our rented house, which would be our new base of operations.

"We spoke yesterday, but allow me to introduce myself officially. I am Iroha, and I shall henceforth be in your employ. A pleasure." Iroha, dressed in a maid outfit with a long full apron, bowed elegantly as she gave this very formal greeting. It was flawless. She was a true professional.

Elza cheerfully greeted her back, while Art...hid behind Elza. Art was extremely shy and usually only talked to Elza, though he would nod in response when Mia talked to him. Part of it was probably just a shy personality, but it was also understandable that it would take a lot of time to warm up when thrust into a group of unfamiliar adults. We'd just have to give him that time.

Iroha had come by with Layla first thing in the morning, told me to leave the rest to her, and then taken Elza and Art by the hands and led them inside. The large bag over her shoulder must have held the work clothes she'd mentioned.

"We should be going, then," Layla told me, then led us on the way to the magic academy. Will had asked her to help us get settled there.

Layla walked in front, followed by the four of us and then Casey.

It took about ten minutes to walk from our house to the academy. At some point, we ended up walking along a wall that eventually led to a gate. This seemed to be the entrance most students and teachers used.

There was a kind of gatekeeper there who let us in after Layla explained the situation. Still, he kept stealing glances at us in the meantime. Was it because he'd noticed the slave collars?

I'd been shocked by the size of Layla's house the other day, but the academy was several times larger. A neatly tended cobblestone path led straight to the foremost building. We followed it inside and learned that this building housed the classrooms, as well as a library and other reference rooms, plus the offices for the school's authority figures like the principal and teachers.

Layla took us to the principal's office on the top floor.

The principal was a woman in her thirties sitting behind a desk stacked with paperwork. Beside her was a sharp-eyed woman whose outfit resembled a snappy business suit. I assumed she was a secretary, and apparently that was more or less a fitting description of her position.

She gave us a broad outline of how things worked at the school, which more or less matched what Layla had told me before. The one bit of new info was that we wouldn't need to take the basic academics course because we were auditing courses. Instead, they asked us to please participate in the adventurer course if possible. Apparently Layla had talked up our abilities quite a bit.

I glanced over at Layla, but she looked away the moment we made eye contact. *I might have to have a talk with her later.*

Of course, the adventurer course would let us learn more about the dungeon, including trips with senior students acting as our guides, so it would probably be educational. It seemed students in that course also held a lot of mock battles to prepare for fighting monsters, so this was also a good chance to find out what others could do and find party members.

"Well, give it your best and don't push yourselves too hard," the principal finished.

We were just about to leave when someone appeared.

"M-Mr. Vice Principal. It's not polite to burst in unannounced," the principal chastised him.

Indeed, the newcomer had entered without even knocking. The man with a slightly receded hairline whom she'd addressed as the

vice principal glanced over at us, then turned back to the principal and said, "I heard that a certain group has been given special permission to enter. I find it rather questionable."

"The vice principal is right! This shattering of the rules of our venerable school is highly questionable! And on top of that...to allow slaves to enroll..." bellowed a muscular man who had followed the vice principal in.

"Mr. Helio. This is highly improper..." The secretary looked at him in disapproval, but Helio just let out a snort and glared in our direction. The principal didn't seem to care about the slaves at all and apparently hadn't opposed our coming here, but these two men seemed to disagree.

"This is the will of His Lordship," the principal argued. "And they've already been accepted, as you know."

"But allowing slaves to enter the school is utterly unprecedented. It may affect the students' performance," the vice principal countered.

"The vice principal is right!" the other man affirmed right away.

The principal thought for a moment. "I see. But I'm sure you know it would have been difficult to turn down a request from Lord Will. Mr. Helio, what do you propose we do?"

"Many of our students are hot-blooded, and they may take their aggression out on the slaves. I want to test their strength!" He spoke his reply without hesitation, as if he'd prepared it in advance.

"I see, I see. What do you think of this?" the vice principal proposed. "We can hold a mock duel between them and the students. If they acquit themselves well, I'm sure they'll be given a wide berth and accepted as fellow learners."

The principal grimaced, but she didn't argue with him. It seemed like she couldn't.

"Then, Mr. Helio," he continued, "I'll leave the selection of their opponents to you. From what I can see...the little girl there and the beastfolk are the merchant's escorts, correct?" The vice principal indicated Hikari and Sera.

Should I thank my lucky stars that he didn't choose Mia? I wondered dryly.

Helio then took us to a certain location, a bit like a stage surrounded by seats.

Layla gasped and objected, "Sir, you can't possibly..."

Helio ignored her. In fact, Hikari's and Sera's opponents were already there, as if this had all been arranged in advance. The spectator seats also contained a scattering of students.

"Layla, what is this place for?" I asked her.

"It's...an arena," Layla replied hesitantly. She went on to explain that it was a special training ground to get real-life fighting experience. Any damage you took was magically redirected so as to prevent fatal blows. You still felt pain, though, and the arena's functions consumed a lot of magistones, so it was used somewhat rarely.

This was one of the facilities that had existed since the academy's founding several hundred years ago, and exactly how it worked had remained a mystery ever since. Some people studied it day and night, but it seemed they'd made no progress.

"So, what will you do? Part of courage is knowing when to flee! But if you do that, I won't approve of your entry into the school!" Helio said with a laugh, while the students waiting behind him grinned at us.

All the while, more students began to file into the spectator seats for some reason.

"A duel?"

"I hear it's like a test."

"Lady Layla brought them here?"

I could hear all kinds of conversations around us.

Helio nodded in satisfaction at the sight of the students filing in. He'd apparently arranged for them to come in advance to add to the "humiliation."

"I'm sorry, Sora," Layla said. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"It's not your fault, Layla. I guess the principal and vice principal don't really get along, huh?" I'd seen these kinds of power struggles on TV shows, but I'd never expected to see one play out at an otherworld school.

"I...suppose not." Layla explained that this certainly wasn't the

first time she'd seen the two of them at odds.

"So, who first?" Mr. Helio taunted. "Feel free to step in yourself, merchant! No, I suppose if you're a merchant, you can't fight at all! You can just hide behind your slaves, then!" It was quite an insult, but I couldn't tell if it was earnest or just trash talk.

It definitely seemed to upset some people, though—namely Hikari and Mia.

Layla quickly tried to stop her, but Hikari walked up to the shouting Helio and said, "Apologize to my master." She seemed quite upset.

One of the students saw this and walked up to Hikari. "Are you *my* opponent?" he asked, letting out a patronizing snort of laughter.

His attitude made Layla so mad she was about to rush at him, but I managed to stop her.

"Doesn't it bother you, Sora?!" Layla argued with me, but from what I could see he was no match for Hikari. Layla should also have known how tough Hikari was.

Or maybe this student has talents not represented by his level?

While I worried about that, Hikari and her opponent picked out their gear and got ready to fight. The rule of this duel was to fight until someone surrendered or was immobilized, which the arena would enforce after you took a certain amount of hypothetical damage. Even so, they used weapons with dull edges.

While her opponent chose a sword, Hikari tried out a few different daggers before picking one.

"You really think you can fight me with that?" The student looked rather insulted by Hikari's choice of weapon. I had no idea why; I was sure she was just picking out the one she was most used to.

"A-Are you sure about this?" Mia, who had been just as angry moments ago, was now beside herself with worry.

"It's okay. I'm sure it'll be over in no time."

Part of the reason I was so calm was that I could see her opponent's level, but I also knew how strong Hikari was in a one-on-one duel. For a while, the increase in my Walking level had let me keep up with her speed, but she'd left me behind again after the level increase from the orc battle in Tenns Village. Real battle

experience must have played a role as well.

"Heh. I'll show you who's boss here!" her opponent said enthusiastically.

"Both fighters, get ready... Begin!" Helio sounded the beginning of the battle just then.

Hikari's opponent made the first move. He charged her, sword aloft. Just as I was wondering if he seriously planned to leave himself wide open like that, he did indeed, charging in close and swinging his sword down. It was an obvious attack, not even bothering with a feint.

The crowd let out a cheer at the speed of the slash, but it tore through empty air. Then, when the swing was complete, the man looked around in confusion, having completely lost track of Hikari. It was obvious to everyone else that she'd ducked around behind him, so the sight probably looked a bit comical.

Hikari didn't even give him a second to react before she kicked the back of his leg to send him down on one knee, then held her dagger to his neck. "Want to keep going?" she asked, looking at Helio.

It was all so sudden that the spectators gasped. Helio should have easily been able to see that Hikari was the superior fighter. The battle wasn't yet over per the rules, and before he could declare it over, the student began his counterattack. Rather, he was *about* to try a counterattack, but Hikari quickly recognized it and simply dealt a hard blow to his neck that knocked him out.

She looked unconcerned, but apparently she was still quite angry. If the other student had just given up, he could have avoided the extra pain. Instead he passed out on the stage, frothing at the mouth.

Ciel clapped her ears and flew around Hikari, applauding her impressive showing. Hikari watched with a satisfied nod, then rushed back to our group and threw her arms around me. Her eyes were expressionless as she looked up at me, but they seemed to be asking for praise. I patted her on the head, and she smiled happily in response.

Meanwhile, Helio was grimacing at the result, but he regained his

calm and started getting ready for the next battle.

Wish he'd learn his lesson. Can't we just call this off? Or did the vice principal order him to do this? I wondered.

The next man who came out was huge, if not as big as Helio. He strode out boldly, clad in sturdy-looking armor, but I appraised him and saw his level was even lower than the last man's.

[**Name:** Fried / **Job:** Adventurer / **Level:** 20 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** –]

Fried didn't spit out any trash talk, but simply chose a club and shield and then took his place at his starting position. Meanwhile, Sera just took an axe for each hand and did likewise. Both fighters fell silent with an eerie atmosphere around them as they waited for the fight to start.

Then, just as I heard Helio's signal to start the fight...

"Ah," I started.

"What is it?" Mia asked, looking over at me in surprise. I found myself looking back at her.

The next moment, there was a crack, followed by a dull thud. I looked back at the stage and saw...only Sera and Helio.

I followed Sera's gaze to find Fried in a sorry state. His shield was bent and his armor was broken. The arena prevented damage to the body, but the same didn't seem to apply to the equipment. He was still conscious, and it seemed to me that there was fear in his eyes as he looked at Sera.

Sera's level was almost three times higher than Fried's. Having appraised him, I was about to advise going easy on him...but it was too late now. The result was what it was.

"No one can beat Big Sis Sera," Hikari said proudly, while Ciel also seemed to be dancing in triumph.





"Mr. Helio, that's enough." Just then, the secretary appeared and put a stop to the proceedings before addressing the students. "These four have been given special permission to attend our school temporarily. As you can see, they are strong fighters, with experience in the outside world. I think there's much we can learn from them. Let's all apply ourselves together and work to get stronger!"

The students all nodded in response. I felt like the show of power had gone over better than expected. A few frowned uncomfortably, though—those who seemed to be close with the two students we'd fought.

It looked like Helio was about to say something, but the secretary silenced him with a glare. *Yeah, that cold smile was pretty scary.* If I felt that way as a mere bystander, Helio must have been terrified as the one on the receiving end of it.

After that, we headed to the changing room and put on appropriately sized and gendered uniforms.

"Oh, Hikari, you look adorable," Layla said. "Mia and Sera, you look excellent as well. Sora... I don't know if the mask really works."

I had to agree with her there. I checked myself in the mirror and thought I looked decidedly odd.

There would probably be very few people who might recognize me at this school, though I couldn't be sure there wouldn't be ones like Yor coming from outside the country. And even if I did take off the mask to attend school, I might have to wear it while in the dungeons, so it would end up the same way.

Still, I thought maybe I should change the design of the mask while we were at the school itself so we didn't stand out as much. But Hikari and Sera had gotten a lot of attention in the arena, so it might have been a bit late for that, of course.

We'd also attracted quite a lot of stares on our way here. At first I thought that was because of Layla, but many gazes were directed at us...at Mia in particular. Part of it was the unprecedented nature of slaves attending the school, but having her there with a suspicious-looking man in a mask probably made it even more noteworthy. If word about what happened in the arena spread, that would just

increase the attention we received.

"Just a minute." I pulled the necessary items out of my Item Box and used Alchemy to make some glasses. I enchanted the lenses with my Disguise skill so that my eyes behind them looked silver. "How about this?" I asked as I put the glasses on.

"Master, your eyes are silver?" Hikari tilted her head in wonder. It seemed my Disguise skill was working just fine.

"You sure can do anything, master," Sera said in near disbelief.

Meanwhile, I got no response from Layla and Mia. I looked over at them and saw them staring at me. Were they blushing, or was it just my imagination? I met their eyes, and they quickly looked away. I couldn't read their expressions with their faces pointed down like that. Did the glasses look that bad on me?

"So, what do we do next?" I asked.

"I'll show you around the school," Layla offered. Unfortunately, she wasn't looking at me when she said it.

"Are you sure?" I pressed her. "Don't you have other things to do?" I remembered how diligently focused she'd been on her studies back in Frieren. She'd already taken so much time off that I was worried about her skipping classes now.

She laughed. "I'll be fine. And if people get the idea that we're close, they shouldn't give you any trouble."

But I definitely felt like the students Helio brought out were hostile toward us?

Layla showed us around, explaining what classes we could take and where. There were plates in front of each classroom, as well as sign boards, so we probably could have found our own way around. I mentioned the towerlike building that had caught my eye, but Layla said it was dangerous and forbade us from going there. I figured the view from it had to be great, so it was a shame.

We then walked out to the forest near the grounds, and she told me that they sometimes did survival training there. She also explained there was a large lake beyond the forest, just as I'd thought. In addition, there were places where herbs were cultivated by people taking the healer course.

"And this is the dining hall."

This was the last spot on the tour. We'd been around so many places before coming here that it was past lunchtime and rather empty. Layla had apparently done this on purpose to avoid the crowds.

The cafeteria had a wealth of choices, with set menus that changed every day. There were no samples on offer, but you could see on the menu what ingredients were used in everything, and they were all designed to provide the balanced nutrition that growing young people needed. Students living in the dorms didn't just eat lunch here, but breakfast and dinner as well.

"Master's is better," Hikari said when she finished her meal, but she still seemed to have enjoyed it. The reason she felt my food was better was probably because the seasoning here was a little more bland.

Meanwhile, Ciel seemed to be in the doldrums because she couldn't have any. But she'd just have to soldier on for the moment, and I'd feed her whatever she wanted at night.

"So, what did you think?" Layla asked, and I reflected on what I'd seen that day.

First, there was the basic academics course, where they mainly taught reading, writing, and math. You needed to be able to read to consult the reference materials, so this was an especially important focus for new entrants. Maybe because the term was already well underway, very few students were currently enrolled in this course.

Then there was the basic magic course. This was split into lessons and practical learning, so students here learned about the fundamentals of magic and then practiced the actual casting of spells. I'd heard some growling sounds coming from this class. Were the students hyping themselves up for it?

If you learned to cast spells in the basic magic course, you could move on to the magic specialty course and learn more specialized things. Generally a student would find their specialty element and work on improving that, but monsters also had weak points, so they didn't focus on any one way of teaching.

For the practical lessons, they mainly shot spells at magic items

that served as targets, some of which were even set up so you had to run while casting, among other things. This was good practice for learning how to use spells while dodging monster attacks.

After that, there was the adventurer course, which focused mostly on combat training and mock duels. By practicing with others, you could find people you might want to add to your party. There were also lectures and reference rooms with lots of documents to read about dungeons, as well as specialized classrooms where people passionately explained the methods for fighting certain monsters.

These constituted the primary courses, and Layla showed us to a few others as well.

The healer course. This one was mainly about making potions and so on, but it included grinding the herbs, adding water, and boiling them to create the end product. I could still hear the bubbling. As someone who used the Alchemy skill to make potions, I felt like my method was a lot simpler, but since alchemy couldn't produce potions as reliably, people had stopped attending the alchemist course at some point and it remained in name only as a club. The more reliable method was more popular because you earned credit for any potions you made and could sell them to earn tuition.

The biologist course. This was a research curriculum based around learning about the biology of monsters and finding out if they could be tamed. A teacher who spoke to us while we sat in on the class said they were researching ways to use slave contracts to see if monsters could be used for labor.

What? That wasn't a teacher, but a student? They must have entered school pretty late in life...

The last place Layla showed us was the holy magic society. Societies were different from courses in that they involved students getting together for self-directed learning, similar to club activities we'd had back in my old world. You apparently needed to petition the school and get permission to form a society. We'd gone because Mia had really wanted to, and Tricia had asked Layla to bring us by. Tricia had gleefully introduced Mia to her clubmates, and Mia had

bowed in response.

After we finished touring all the classes, Hikari decided to follow her initial instinct and enroll in the basic magic course. Sera also said she'd take those classes as her chaperone. Her tail was twitching as she said it, though, so I figured she was looking forward to it too. As predicted, Mia wanted to study at the holy magic society.

What would I do, then? There were aspects of the biologist course that I found appealing, but another facility interested me even more. I wanted to spend as much time there as they'd let me. I thought I might also poke my head in at a few other places as well.

"Are you serious?" Layla asked in surprise when she heard my request.

The place I wanted to go was the library. It held a variety of texts, from history books to other obscure reference materials, and she'd said barely anyone used it. This was because specialized documents about things like magic were managed by teachers of the magic course and the relevant societies, so there was no need to go to the library personally for them. Materials relating to the dungeons, too, were left in adventurer course classrooms when they were needed in lectures.

History books weren't particularly popular because they generally weren't seen as useful in any practical sense. The time you might spend reading them would be put to better use studying magic or working out instead.

"If that's what you want, I don't mind," Layla said. "There is a person who runs the library, but it shouldn't be a problem if I let them know in advance."

And so our lives as students began.

Incidentally, the reason the attendance rules seemed to be more lax for us was because we were just auditing classes. People who were attending in an earnest attempt to graduate had their attendance sharply monitored, and if they missed too many days they wouldn't be able to advance.

That explains why they give so much homework, I remembered, thinking back on the Bloody Rose, struggling so hard with classwork

and duels while we were back in Frieren.

◇The Principal's Perspective

"Why in the world did you say that?" I asked the man standing in front of me, the vice principal.

His frequent challenges to me made others think we didn't get along, but that wasn't the case. I also knew that he didn't have any particular negative feelings about slaves. His own wife had been a slave once, after all.

"A lot of people were going to have problems with it. We had to clear it up in advance," he replied.

"Even so..." I protested.

"Besides, didn't Layla say they won handily? It was a good lesson for Mr. Helio as well." Then I heard him whisper, "I certainly would have liked to see a battle between him and Sora the merchant."

I pretended not to hear that last part, but I would have liked to see it myself. According to Layla, Sora was the reason she'd managed to slay that orc lord. We probably wouldn't have believed it ourselves if not for the report from the guild.

Still, the vice principal was always this way—constantly sniffing out and circumventing possible causes of discord. This time, the discord was Mr. Helio.

That teacher had shown signs of dangerous thinking as of late. In particular, the students he was closest to had been growing increasingly arrogant. In particular, the first student who had fought Hikari had been seen pumping himself up in public, trying to show up Layla of all people. I was glad he'd been growing stronger lately under Mr. Helio's teachings, but it seemed like that would get him in trouble soon enough.

Such an attitude was dangerous. The dungeon devoured people like that first. Monsters weren't the only enemies you'd find there, after all.

So, I was glad that the incident had turned things around for him. Normally I'd have preferred to give the warning myself, but acting

too openly about such things might make people think I was showing favoritism.

"Personally, I wish you would take a firmer hand," he told me. "I hardly have enough time for my research as it is."

Was that a complaint? It sounded like it.

The vice principal really never changed. He was more motivated by his desire to focus on his research than by the pursuit of power. If more people knew that about him, he wouldn't have been seen as such a font of discontent.

"I don't like being scolded by my wife either. Honestly...I think my hair's thinning from stress."

His wife was my best friend, so I was sure she worried about him. It seemed he was as henpecked as ever. *But vice principal, that's a matter of genetics, so please don't blame it on me. You look more and more like your uncle every day...*

◇◇◇

"Master, be back later!" Hikari declared before she took Mia's and Sera's hands and ran into the classroom.

Mia and Sera, dressed in their matching uniforms, looked a little nervous. Indeed, all eyes turned to them as they entered the classroom.

Seeing that, I decided to attend at least the first class with them. I had to admit I was curious about what they'd teach there.

Mia actually seemed to want to participate in the holy magic society, but since they weren't meeting today and it was their first day at school, she decided to go with the others.

The magic class started with a lecture. I was worried that we'd get in their way as newcomers to the class, but apparently this lecture was more of a review to deepen individual understanding, so it wasn't a problem.

In fact, maybe because the students had the material down so well, the teacher picked one of them out to explain things to us instead. The selected student walked up nervously to the podium and fulfilled their duties, occasionally receiving corrections from the

teacher.

The rest of the lecture was learning incantations to use spells. I was surprised by this too, but they explained that the purpose of incantations was to allow those who couldn't usually cast spells to learn how to do so. Having a magical talent—in other words, a skill—was what let you cast spells without incantations.

That seemed to be why I hadn't met any adventurers who chanted spells. Actually, maybe there had been some, but since I didn't spend much time in parties, I just didn't see it happen. I'd gone around solo for the most part, after all.

It seemed to me that having to chant every time you were in combat with a monster would be dangerous, but this was apparently just a beginner thing, and with enough practice even those without the "talent" could learn to cast spells without incantations.

"But I've also heard reports that spells cast with incantations are more powerful. So if you have time to spare, it might be worth it to take your time and chant."

After the lecture ended, we took a break and then moved elsewhere for practical training. Practical training involved firing spells off at prearranged targets, and the students fired off spells one after the other. Still, less than twenty percent of them actually managed to get the spells off reliably.

The students in this classroom had apparently been attending school here for a while, which suggested learning to use magic was not a trivial thing.

"Looks like it won't be easy," I said.

"Yeah. I'll do my best." Hikari seemed to have already memorized her incantations, but unfortunately she couldn't cast a spell yet.

I used Detect Mana to see what she was really doing. It looked like the problem was that her mana wasn't stable while she was chanting, which meant it ended up dispersing halfway through. The students who managed to actually cast spells kept their mana stable from start to finish, so that the moment they recited the keyword—the spell's name—they were able to instantly channel that stable mana in the form of a spell that went flying at the target.

"Ah, it's Big Sis Mia's turn." Hikari snapped me out of my reverie,

and I watched her, still using Detect Mana.

Mia also seemed to have memorized the incantation, and she spoke the words smoothly. Perhaps because she had already used holy spells, her mana remained stable as well. But the moment she actually spoke the spell's name, the mana that had been stable until just then suddenly seemed to disappear. She'd failed.

"It's quite difficult," Mia said, but because I'd watched her mana, I felt something off about it. "What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," I responded. Since I didn't know what might have caused it, I didn't want to just bring it up.

I was the last one up, and I cast a spell without issue. The people around me were surprised, but I said I had a skill and they accepted it. In fact, it made the students look at me in a whole new light. I could see various emotions flitting in their eyes, including jealousy and envy.

It seemed that everyone in the academy had strong feelings about magic, if not to the extent of Yor.

"Well, I'm heading to the library."

I said goodbye to the others after the magic class was over. They were going to try the basic academics course. Of course, Mia and Hikari already knew how to read, write, and do basic math, so they were really just keeping Sera company.

The school taught those basic subjects because so many students became adventurers, and it was important to give them this fundamental knowledge so that they couldn't be swindled.

The adventurer course was after lunch, so we'd meet up again then.

"Let's see. The library..." I assumed it should be on the top floor of the building like the principal's office.

Ciel was riding on top of my head. We'd be going up high, which apparently made flying hard for her. The rest of us kept our feet on solid ground on the way up, so it didn't bother us. But since Ciel flew everywhere, maybe flying on the upper floors of a building was really like flying high in the sky?

I climbed the stairs to the top floor and walked down the hall leading away from the principal's office. At the end of that hall, the

library was on the right.

I'd heard someone was in charge there, so I knocked first, but no one answered. I reached out to slide the door open, and it yielded. *I guess it's not locked, at least...*

"Excuse me," I called out, but there was no response. Detect Presence revealed that someone was inside.

As I dithered over whether to go in or not, I saw a presence approaching from behind me. *I know this one. It's Layla.*

"What are you doing?" she asked me.

"Well, I wasn't sure if it was okay to just walk in..."

"Miss Seris isn't there?" she asked in surprise. Seris was apparently the person who ran the library. "Which means...she's sleeping again, I guess." At that, Layla strode into the room.

I followed her and found my eyes immediately drawn to the shelves full of books around me. Many of the books were quite thin, probably because paper was so rare and precious in this world. The fact that the shelves were still packed full was a sign of how many books they carried, then.

"I knew it. She *is* here."

I'd been so absorbed by the books that I'd lost sight of Layla, but I followed her voice and found her again immediately.

"Wow, who's that?" I found myself asking—understandably, in my opinion.

A woman was sleeping peacefully on a sunny windowsill. Her wavy golden hair tumbled down her back, glimmering in the sunlight. The sight of her peacefully slumbering face made me feel bad about the idea of waking her. Even asleep, her perfectly proportioned features made it clear she was a real beauty.

But Layla shook her to wake her up anyway. "Miss Seris, you shouldn't sleep here. And please do your job."

After two or three big shakes, Seris spoke. "That's not *nice*, Layla..." She stretched and yawned.

Just from the way they spoke to each other, I could tell this was a common interaction for the two of them.

Seris's eyes opened, and she paused when she saw me. Behind her glasses, her eyes were a deep bloodred. She looked surprised at

first, but her expression became neutral again a moment later. "Oh? And who *might* you be?" she asked, her voice slow and lilting.

I was too stunned by her beauty to respond at first. As I stood there in shock, I noticed Layla smiling at me for some reason, though the smile did not extend to her eyes. I felt sure I heard her say, *I'll report this to Mia later*...but maybe it was just my imagination.

"This is Sora. He'd like to use the library," Layla told her.

"Hmm...have I *ever* seen him before?" she intoned slowly and easily.

"He only just joined the school."

"Oh, I *see*...but not *many* people use the library...so I haven't seen *most* of the students *any*way..."

It was an odd thing to say, but apparently she only looked after the books and didn't teach any classes, so she didn't have many chances to interact with students. *But she's so beautiful that I'm sure the boys would love to see her host a class...*

"Sora, you aren't getting any ideas, are you?" Layla said in a warning tone.

Of course not! The way she'd read my mind just then had made my heart skip a beat, though. "I was hoping to use the books here. Is that all right?" I asked out loud.

"Oh, *yes*! Go *right* ahead!" Seris drawled back. "Read just *anything* your heart desires. As for the *rules*...there aren't *any* in *particular*, so go ahead and ask Layla..."

Layla sighed in disgust.

"Oh, *really*... I know you *love* it..." Seris teased. "Oh, but *do* return the books to where you got them after you're *finished*..."

Isn't that actually a rule, though? I wondered. Layla went on to explain that the basic rules were returning books to where you found them and reporting it immediately if you damaged one. That seemed a little lackluster in a world where paper was this precious, but maybe that was just me.

Seris stood up, walked past me, sat down in a chair near the entrance, and began reading a book. There was a sign on her desk that read "Call if you need help!" and "Please be quiet!" While she

was passing me by, I couldn't help but feel her scrutinizing me. *Maybe because it's so rare to have someone visit the library?*

"What kind of books did you want to read, Sora?" Layla asked.

"History books, I think?"

"You *think*?" Layla laughed.

Still, it wasn't like I knew what kinds of books there were. I'd only brought up history books because Layla had mentioned them the other day. Of course, I was interested in this world's history as well.

"History books, then?" Layla asked. "Miss Seris, where are the books about history?"

"Oh, that would *be*...the second shelf by the *wind*ow... Third row and below," Seris responded immediately.

I found the history books in the exact place she'd named. "This is a huge help, Layla. Thank you," I said. I took about five books from the shelf, put them on the table, and was about to start reading when I noticed Layla still standing there. "You're not going to read, Layla?" I asked.

"I have some things to take care of, so I'll be going now. Are you going to be here all day?"

"Until lunch, I think? I said I'd meet up with the girls after." I'd promised to go to the adventurer course class with them. Yet Layla had come to the library even though she didn't have any business here... *Was she worried about me, maybe?*

After she left, I focused on my reading. I couldn't speed-read or anything, but Parallel Thinking had helped to increase my reading speed. None of the books themselves were very thick, so I quickly ended up with a pile of finished books. The more I focused, the more bored Ciel seemed to become, and though she'd initially pored over the books with great curiosity as well, she soon got tired of it and fell asleep on one of the volumes.

Most of the history books were about wars, the Demon King, and the founding and development of the various lands. I was particularly interested in the ones about the Demon King, of course. Mysteriously, there was nothing written about the heroes thought to have defeated him. Most of them simply wrote that it was "due to the actions of the Kingdom of Elesia."

If there was nothing written about otherworlders like me, was it because they were intentionally concealing that information? Hikari had said that she'd been ordered to kill anyone I'd told about my origins, which suggested the existence of otherworlders was a top secret matter. That didn't seem to fit with them setting me free, though. *Could there have been some other reason they did it?*

"Guess there's no point in thinking about it..." I whispered out loud.

"Hmm? Thinking about *what*?" came a lilting voice, just as I'd closed one book and was reaching for the next.

I looked over and saw Seris nearby with a book in her hands. Maybe it was because I'd been focused on my book, but I hadn't noticed her approach at all. Of course, that could've been what happened when I wasn't using Detect Presence.

"You really *have* read a lot, haven't you? Do you *love* books?" she intoned.

"Yeah...I guess so. It's nice to learn things you didn't know before."

"Then...I recommend *this* one..." Seris handed me a black book.

Its title made me do a double take. *How to Make Curry*, it read.

Entranced, I began to flip through the pages. The book contained recipes for different kinds of curry made with spices available in this world. What was most interesting was that it had anecdotes about the author's various failures before they managed to perfect the recipes. It was so funny and entertaining and written like a story. The main character's struggles even brought tears to my eyes, and the scene where he finally finished it had me clapping for joy.

"Well? Do you *like* it?" Seris asked me, but I couldn't tear myself away from the book. I was so enraptured by its contents that I couldn't even respond to her.

In an instant, I was done. I was filled with the joy of knowing I could finally make curry, along with images of Hikari and the others eating it and how they might react when they did. Obviously I was moved by the author's passion for curry as well.

"Hmm, I *see*..." That is, until I heard Seris's next words, when her lilting tone finally ceased. "Sora, is it? You're an otherworlder, aren't

you?”





It felt like time had stopped.

"Wh-What did you say?" My voice cracked. I looked at Seris, hoping not to reveal how shaken I was, but it felt like her eyes were peering straight into my heart.

Seized by an indescribable terror, I immediately used Appraise Person, and the result shocked me.

[**Name:** Seris / **Job:** Librarian / **Level:** Cannot Be Read / **Race:** Elf / **Status:** —]

She was an elf—the first one I'd met in this world. I also wondered what "Cannot Be Read" meant with regard to her level.

I certainly had thought her face was beautiful, but I'd never dreamed she'd be an elf. Elves had pointed ears, but Seris hid hers behind her hair, so I couldn't see them. Perhaps she'd done that intentionally to keep her identity hidden.

"Did you use Appraisal just now?" she asked keenly. She was so on the money that there was no hiding my surprise this time. "Oh, don't worry. I don't mean any harm. I'm just interested..." Seris walked slowly up to me, drew the peacefully sleeping Ciel into her arms, and stroked her with an expression of pure adoration. "...in the fact that you have a spirit with you."

Ciel's body remained still, totally limp inside Seris's arms. She then opened her eyes and briefly panicked when she realized the situation she was in, but Seris gently stroked her...belly? At that moment, she dropped all resistance, her ears drooping in bliss.

Frankly, Ciel's expression at that moment was completely ridiculous. In fact, it reminded me of the pleased look she had on her face when she'd just eaten.

"I suppose it would be true that elves can see spirits, then?" I asked.

"Oh, *my*... You *could* just speak to me the way you speak to Layla, you know..." All of a sudden, her more serious way of speaking was gone, replaced by her usual leisurely lilt.

You're one to talk... I wanted to say, but I managed to bite back

the words. It was maddening. Besides, I had to pay respect to my elders. *Ugh.* I felt a chill run up my spine. *Actually, let's stop thinking about ages right now.*

"*Now*...what made you think I *could* see spirits just because I'm an *elf*?"

"I talked once to a girl who knew about spirits. She told me her granny had taught her a lot about them," I said, thinking of Chris.

Seris seemed to be thinking about something, but she answered my question politely. "Well, let me *see*... Not *all* elves can *necessarily* see spirits. There are matters of *compatibility*... It's like a *knack* for seeing them..."

"And you have that knack, Miss Seris?" I asked.

"Mmm, I'm more or less *normal*, I suppose... I can see the spirit I *contracted* with, at least... Normally I can't see or touch *another* person's spirits, though..."

There was something odd about what she was saying. She was seeing and touching Ciel, after all.

As I watched her in confusion, Seris just kept smiling at me and said, "Ta-daa. It's because of *these*!" She removed her glasses and held them up high. "*These* are a magic item called the Eyes of Eliana, and *they* allow you to see *spirits*!"

I used Appraisal on the item that Seris was holding up so proudly.

```
[Eyes of Eliana] Increase affinity with spirits. They
let you see spirits? Maybe even touch them?!
```

The description text was rather odd, but another thought came first for me: *I want them.*

"Give them to me!" I begged, grabbing Seris's hand before I could think twice.

Seris flushed a deep red and pulled away. "Oh, you scared me!" she said, her lilting tone gone again. "I-It's not nice to take a woman's hand so suddenly..."

She was right, of course, and I apologized.

"Anyway, I'm afraid I can't give them to you," she added. "They're

very important to me."

Seeing her cradle them to herself so lovingly made me realize I shouldn't ask again. *But I can ask her where she got them, can't I?* And so I did. "Where did you get them? Did someone make them for you?" I'd heard that rare items like bags of holding were sometimes found in dungeons. Maybe that was where she'd gotten them?

"Well... Someone gave them to me. But... Yes, I did ask what they were made from. I remember very vaguely..." Seris rattled off a list of monster materials but admitted that there might be more to it.

The monster names in question were all new to me. I'd have to stop by the guild and look up how to get the materials—or rather, where those monsters could be found. *Should I put up a quest like they did at the adventurers' guild in Messa? That might give me an idea of how valuable the materials are.* I checked to see if hearing about the item had added it to my alchemy list, but it hadn't. *Maybe I just can't make them with alchemy? In that case...*

"Hello? Can you *hear* me?" The sound of the lilting voice snapped me back to reality, and I saw Seris looking up at me up close. I found myself reeling back from the sudden proximity.

She smiled brightly in amusement. *She's definitely enjoying my reaction.* I felt my face flush. *Was that revenge for earlier?* "Do you mind if I ask you one more thing?" I managed to say. *Stay calm, man!*

"Hmm, and what *could* it be?" she asked.

Maybe it would put me at her mercy to a degree, but I had to ask while I had the chance. "How did you know I was an otherworlder?" She didn't seem to have the Appraisal skill, and it would probably be best for me to know how she'd figured it out. Of course, if it was just a basic elf skill, there'd be nothing I could do.

"Ah, it's *because* of this..." Seris picked up one book from the stack on my table, as well as the curry recipe book. "You don't *seem* to have realized it yet, but...put *simply*, this history book was written in an *ancient* language, thought to be lost...so not even *I* can read it...and *this* one is written in a language called *Japanese*..."

That explained it. I'd never had any problems conversing or reading because everything had been translated to Japanese for me

since I'd come here, so I'd taken it for granted that I was just reading a common tongue. It was no wonder that Seris would get suspicious of me. This was a library, so it probably had books written in all kinds of different languages, but I realized I should still probably keep that in mind for the future.

"Oh, *but*... I've *heard* that using Appraisal will *tell* you what language a book is written in..." she added.

She just loves drip-feeding that information, doesn't she? Is she playing with me? Yeah, she's definitely enjoying my reactions...

As directed, I tried using Appraisal on the words and received an explanation of the language they were in. *Yes, I'll have to check before I read anything else from now on.*

"Now...there's *so* much I want to talk to you about, but...I'm hungry, so *why* don't we *eat*?"

At those words, Ciel snapped awake. The mention of food never failed to get a reaction from her.

"Hmm? *Ciel*, wasn't it? Does this little one *eat* as well?"

It made sense for her to ask, since spirits didn't strictly need to eat. But my little girl loved it. She was quite a glutton, actually—a fact which I went on to explain.

This news surprised Seris, who explained that the spirit she'd contracted with never ate. "In fact, my little one has *never* even expressed *interest* in eating!"

"Does that mean you can talk to spirits, Seris?" I asked.

"Ohh, just a *bit*!"

I was a little jealous of that. Our journey would definitely be a lot easier if Ciel could talk.

Then again, maybe she'd just get worse with begging me for food all the time? I could imagine Ciel constantly riding my back, shouting *"Feed me! Feed me! FEED ME!"*

"*Well*, will you be going to the cafeteria *now*?" Seris asked then.

The cafeteria, huh? Ciel wouldn't be able to eat if we went there, though. *Ciel, don't look at me with those sad eyes...* Then again, there would be no need to go to the cafeteria if we could eat food from my Item Box right where we were.

I'll just check one thing, then, I decided. "Are we allowed to eat

on school grounds outside the cafeteria?" I asked.

Seris explained that we were. After all, some classes were held far away from the cafeteria and students would rather not have to go all that way. And given the size of the cafeteria, it would be difficult to fit everyone in at the same time, anyway. That meant there were students who packed lunches and ate them in the classrooms—as well as some perfectly indecent couples who preferred to eat alone together, she added.

"So I could eat here if I wanted to?" I asked.

"Well *yes*, but did you bring your *own* lunch?" she drawled.

It would be faster to show her than to explain. I checked my surroundings, made sure that Seris was the only one there, then pulled a few meals from my Item Box and placed them on the desk. "What would you like to do, Seris?" I asked.

"Hmm, do you think I *might* try some of yours? I'll share *some* of my handmade lunch in *exchange*..."

I agreed and gave her some of my food.

Ciel started digging in the moment her meal was placed in front of her. She really must have been hungry. Seris was surprised to see this, but when she took a bite of my food, she stopped.

Maybe she doesn't like it? Everyone has different tastes, after all... I took a bite of my hamburg steak while I watched her sidelong. I'd mainly used wulf meat, which I'd minced with a mixer-like effect using wind magic. The tomato-based sauce was the best I could do with the ingredients I had. *If only I could replicate soy sauce...* I lamented.

"Sora. Did you make this?" Seris asked seriously.

"Yes, I did."

"Then come again tomorrow!" She grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me toward her.

I almost bowed back from her intensity, but she was holding me too tightly for me to get away. Her expression was so intense that I didn't feel I could refuse.

Ciel, help me! I found myself communicating telepathically, but Ciel didn't seem to hear me. Was she just too focused on her meal? Or had she decided not to get involved?

"Besides, don't you want to let Ciel eat freely here?!" Seris added desperately.

Ciel looked up at those words. Interesting how selective that hearing of hers was. But she'd removed all obstacles to her objective! Tragically, I was forced to agree, and Ciel nodded in broad approval.

"Oh, *Ciel*, you're so bright! *And* understanding!" Seris drawled.

Ciel looked quite pleased with the compliments. I'd apparently be eating here for the foreseeable future, then. I couldn't see any way to turn her down.

Ah, but how to explain it to the girls? Maybe if I start by telling them that I've found a safe place for Ciel to eat, it won't be so bad?

"By the way, Seris, what's your spirit like? You said you can't usually see them, didn't you?" The thought had crossed my mind while we were having some after-lunch tea.

"Hmm, my spirit's *usually* elsewhere... I'll introduce you *if* I get a chance... Though I *don't* know if you'll be able to *see* them..."

I ended up spending the whole rest of the day in the library, though I only realized it when Hikari and the others tracked me down and yelled at me.

That's right, I promised to join them at the adventurer course after lunch. I'd been so absorbed in my reading and in Seris's stories that I'd completely forgotten.

We left the library with the brightly smiling Seris waving after us, but the atmosphere around our group was tense. I apologized to Hikari and Sera, who forgave me; however, Mia looked like she was still a little mad. Even when I tried making small talk, she gave only short, curt answers.

But I had broken a promise, so...maybe I should just do what Sera had advised me and give her some space?

◇◇◇

"Welcome home!"

"...'c-come home."

Elza and Art greeted us as we returned. Elza was smiling brightly,

and Art was doing his best to mimic her with his shy, childish lisp.

They'd only just started under Iroha's instruction, but I was already seeing quite a few changes. Elza's previously scraggly hair was now well tended to, while Art's long bangs had been cut back so you could now see his face. Also, rather than the outfits we'd bought with them, they were wearing the work clothes Iroha had prepared —maid outfits.

When I first saw it, I'd looked over at Iroha. *Art...in a maid outfit?* I was thinking. Iroha looked back at me and asked me sincerely if there was anything wrong with it.

I couldn't really say there was, and he looked pretty good that way, but... *Art is a boy, isn't he?*

Nobody else seemed to mind it, though, so maybe I was the weird one for caring about it. Art apparently didn't mind it either, so I decided it was probably fine.

Apparently Art liked that his outfit was the same as Elza's. He was still walking on eggshells in the unfamiliar environment, but I could tell he was working hard anyway, so I decided to let him do what made him happy.

"Now then, Sora. You seemed to be enjoying yourself back there. What exactly were you discussing?" Mia asked me once dinner was over, referring to my time in the library.

I did ask a lot of questions, but I wouldn't say I was... Well, okay, I *was* enjoying myself, but I wasn't *just* playing around! And I did feel sorry about breaking my promise... Very sorry indeed.

I told her what Seris had told me, hiding the fact that she was an elf.

Seris had been to a lot of places before finally settling in Majorica. She'd traveled to lots of towns and cities and done some dungeon diving. Elves lived a long time, she'd explained, so she'd known a lot of people in her time and outlived them. An expression somewhere between nostalgia and loneliness had appeared on her face as she'd said that.

Seris had told me exciting adventure stories, and Ciel had been as absorbed in them as I was. When I relayed them back to the girls, their reactions were much the same. Even Elza and Art, who had

been cleaning up, stopped to listen.

"Master, no fair. I wanted to hear the stories too," Hikari said when I was done.

"Well, I suppose I can't blame you for getting drawn in by stories like that." Mia seemed to be in a better mood now, but she wasn't completely mollified. "But leaving us waiting like that...y-you should still be punished!"

I asked what the punishment should be, and she said I'd have to teach her how to cook. It seemed this was part of the reason she'd wanted a house with a large kitchen—and, she added, it would mean we could cook together.

Hey, that's a pretty darn cute reason, I thought. It didn't feel like much of a punishment, though, but I decided to give it my best until Mia was satisfied. I would have taught her if she'd just asked, of course, but maybe she still felt reluctant to make requests because of her slave status.

"When should we do it?" I asked, and she said right away.

There was something I wanted to check, but I hadn't cooked a lot lately and was afraid of my prepared food stocks in my Item Box getting low, so I decided to get started. *Yeah, looks like I still have the ingredients, at least.*

Mia put on her apron, and we began at once. Iroha and the kids seemed interested for some reason too, and they watched us closely.

We began cutting up the different ingredients. Mia was cutting with great trepidation, and she sometimes sliced her own fingers. I'd taught her cutting techniques, but she still seemed scared of the blade. *It's a little scary when you smile and tell me you'll be fine because you have Heal, though...*

I gave up on explaining verbally and instead got around behind her, took her hands, and gently and slowly walked her through it. *Come on, don't blush! You're making me nervous too! Okay, man, stay calm. Calm. And don't tell her that your heart's still pounding even though you're done...*

Anyway, once the setup was done, I prepared the seasoning and made a tomato-based soup. It was so popular I was running out of

it!

"Sora, you're amazing," Mia said at the end.

Her praise was genuinely meant, but I knew that it was all thanks to my Cooking skill anyway. It told me what temperature to maintain and when to add spices and so on. Of course, that had only been at the start. I hadn't needed my "adviser" for a whole lot lately.

"It's just a matter of repeating it until it's second nature," I told her. "You'll get it down soon, Mia." I could only do it because I'd done it so often. It was muscle memory.

Today's entire cooking lesson was just about cutting, but it still felt like time well spent. I took the ingredients she'd cut as well, so they wouldn't go to waste.

After dinner, we took turns using the bath, and then I fed Ciel before bed. She often spent bathtime with Hikari and the others, but she always came back to me before bedtime—mostly to eat, of course. I'd heard that it wasn't good to eat right before bed, but maybe it was fine for spirits?

I watched Ciel happily chow down and called up my stat panel.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Mage / **Race:** Otherworlder / **Level:** None
HP: 430/430 / **MP:** 430/430 (+100) / **SP:** 430/430
Strength: 420 (+0) / **Stamina:** 420 (+0) / **Speed:** 420 (+0)
Magic: 420 (+100) / **Dexterity:** 420 (+0) / **Luck:** 420 (+0)

Skill: Walking Lv. 42
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 680,070/730,000
Skill Points: 5

My Walking skill had leveled up, and I now had five skill points to spend. I was about to level up again, too, so it would probably be

okay to spend a few points.

The real question was if there were any appealing skills available that I hadn't bought yet. I wanted a more advanced version of Alchemy, but maxing that skill out had only given me the chance to select Enchant. Did that mean I had to max out Enchant before the next-level version would appear?

Thinking back, with the Mia assassination plot and the stampede and everything, I hadn't had time to sit back and really peruse the skill selection. Various events had given me more choices, but there were so many now it was hard to sort through.

Now's a good chance. I should look through it carefully and see if there's anything I've missed.

I lay in bed browsing the skill list and wishing for a search function. Looking at skill names and checking their effects was fairly laborious work by itself. I don't know how many skills I checked before I found it, but just as sleep was about to overtake me...

NEW
[Creation Lv. 1]

It was a skill that let you create a variety of things, including weapons, armor, and tools. *How is that different from alchemy?* I wondered, but buying it would cost two skill points. Based on my past experiences, that suggested it was an advanced skill.

After learning it, I realized that it would let you make things that alchemy wouldn't. Significantly, you could also make things for which you didn't have all the ingredients.

I decided to activate the Creation skill. Thinking back on my conversation with Seris, I pictured the Eyes of Eliana and tried making them.

Instantly, my body went limp and my consciousness plunged into darkness.

Chapter 4

"Sora? Sora?!"

I heard someone calling me. Who was it? My consciousness began to lift back out of the dark depths, drawn to the voice.

I opened my eyes and saw a desperate-looking Mia standing over me. Tears hung in the corners of her eyes.

"Mia? What's wrong?" I asked.

Mia's eyes opened wide, and she hugged me tight. I was genuinely surprised by how suddenly she'd started crying when she heard my voice.

Feeling completely clueless, I looked around me, seeking aid. Hikari, Sera, and Ciel were nearby, all looking very concerned. Ciel was the worst off of all; her ears were drooping and she looked despondent.

"Master, you okay?" Hikari asked.

"We were worried. Mia kept calling your name, but you wouldn't wake up," Sera explained.

They went on to say that I'd been sleeping for a long time, showing no response to Mia's calls.

I stroked Mia's hair to calm her down and then sat up. I felt a little sluggish, but I'd been this way before—it happened when I used too many skills and ran out of MP or SP.

I thought back on the night before, when I'd passed out while trying to use Creation. I wasn't sure why it had happened that way, but the first thing I had to do was explain it to the girls.

I looked back at Mia and saw her face was red and downcast, as if she were embarrassed that she'd been crying. I was honestly glad she cared that much about me, but I wasn't about to admit to it.

"Actually, before I went to sleep last night..." I explained to them that I'd run out of MP while using a skill and passed out, though I decided not to mention Creation just yet.

"Oh... I see. But you shouldn't push yourself too hard." Mia had seen me nearly overtax myself with Alchemy before.

Oh, but the reason Mia didn't want to be released from the slave contract before was because she wouldn't be able to see Ciel anymore, so maybe I should tell her about the Eyes of Eliana? I ended up doing just that, but her expression in response was more complicated than I expected. Was it because I'd failed and passed out?

"You still look a little under the weather, master. Maybe you should take the day off," Sera advised.

And so, I decided to stay in bed all day. I thought I'd be fine because my MP had already recovered, but they urged me not to risk it. Apparently I was looking pretty pale, though I couldn't see that for myself.

Hikari and the others discussed taking the day off as well, but Layla came to take us to school again, so they ended up going along with her. I asked them to tell me everything that happened when they got back, and that seemed to convince them to go on without me.

Ciel alone seemed to stay behind to keep watch on Hikari's orders, but she ended up falling asleep. I had a few questions about her work ethic, but I decided to test a few things while watching her snooze. However, I had to be careful about how I used the Creation skill, even for testing. I didn't want to repeat the same mistake.

The first thing I had to investigate was why I'd passed out while activating the skill. If it was similar to Alchemy, using it should've consumed MP, but with my +100 job modifier in place, my MP stat was 530 at present.

"I hope there's some kind of explanation..."

I called up my stat panel and stared thoughtfully at the word Creation. I'd seen lots of adventurer mages casting spells during the stampede in Messa, and I felt like I possessed a lot more MP than they did, so why had I failed to use Creation? I'd initially assumed that using it just consumed a huge amount of MP, but there could have been another reason.

I took in a deep breath and chose the Creation skill again. This

time, a list similar to Alchemy appeared. *I'm pretty sure that the last time I tried to use it, I did it without calling up the list...*

As I thought that, information began flooding my mind. It seemed to be...rules for how to use the Creation skill.

Why now? I wondered, but I decided to focus on sorting through the information I was getting now.

First, Creation cost 10 MP per use, which was actually less than Alchemy. You could try to make an item with no materials, but doing so would consume a massive amount of MP. For instance, if you needed five materials to make an item, you could still make it even if you only had three of them. But the more ingredients you were lacking, the more MP it would consume.

For instance, this was what it said was needed to make the Eyes of Eliana:

```
[Eyes of Eliana]
Needed materials:
Gigant Eye
Treant Branch
***
Gigant Magistone
Treant Magistone
Magistone
```

Six materials in total.

In this case, the only item I had right now was a magistone. To calculate how much MP I'd need, I would take the basic cost of the skill and multiply it by ten to the power of however many materials I was missing. That meant the basic 10 MP I needed would be multiplied by ten to the fifth power (since I was missing five materials)—in other words, one million MP.

No wonder I passed out. With my current MP level, I could only afford to use the skill when I was one ingredient short.

Incidentally, I had no idea what the *** on that list was supposed to be, but the system seemed to be quite accommodating, and it

would update if I learned more or acquired the necessary ingredient. The five ingredients currently displayed had been filled in because they were the ones Seris had told me about. To testify to this, other items' materials were filled in with ingredients from my other lists.

"Okay. I struggled with Alchemy, but Creation might be able to do it."

There were some other useful things on the list that I could make too. Seasonings, for instance. I'd made some attempts at soy sauce and miso with Alchemy, but it seemed I could make them pretty easily with Creation if I had the necessary ingredients. I just hoped they would taste all right.

But there was one thing that I seemed to need for every item on the Creation list, from weapons to spices—magistones. The higher the quality of the magistone, the higher the success rate and the closer the replication of the final product would be to the intended result. Whether or not you had all the materials played a role in this as well.

Incidentally, after looking through the list, I thought some more about why the rules had suddenly appeared in my brain like that, and I decided it was probably because I'd been looking at the Creation list at the time.

Definitely should have looked at the list before I tried creating the Eyes of Eliana...

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The next day, we all went to school together.

Once again, there would be an adventurer course lecture in the morning and a more active class in the afternoon, with things like mock battles. Hikari and Sera had participated in these yesterday as well, but apparently Mia had spent the whole day at her club meeting.

Tomorrow the academy would be closed, but Hikari had mentioned that people had talked about a dungeon excursion on their first day back. This would strictly be a voluntary activity, and since a lot of people would be going for the first time, it would be

led by a group of students with more dungeon experience.

"Master, what should we do?" Hikari asked me. The goal seemed to be to just go around the first and second floors, learning the basics of dungeon diving and getting real experience fighting monsters.

"I think we should go along," I decided.

I checked with the organizers, and they said we were free to come along. We were told to meet up at the site and not to be late, to wear our uniforms and arrange our own weapons. If we didn't have weapons, they said, we could rent some from the school. We were also told that we'd be eating lunch in the dungeon and it was up to us to prepare our own food; water would be provided.

"Hmm? Going to the *dungeon*, are we?"

We were having lunch in the library after the lecture class. Seris had been a little put out about my indifference to her insistence that I come in the next day, and then I'd gone and stayed home, so her anger was understandable.

But what was I supposed to do? I was under the weather! The girls begged me to stay home too.

Incidentally, I'd told the girls in advance that Seris could see Ciel. They hadn't seemed to believe it at first, but they looked convinced after seeing Seris watch Ciel play. Telling them about the Eyes of Eliana played a big role in that as well. Of course, I didn't let them know that Seris was an elf.

Seeing Ciel chow down on a meat skewer that Seris had offered her, Hikari offered one of her own. Ciel seemed very satisfied about all the food she was getting.

"But, hmm...will *you* be all right?" Seris asked Mia. She didn't seem to be worried about Hikari and Sera. Perhaps, as a former adventurer, she could identify their skills at a glance. "Well...I'm sure *you'll* keep her safe, Sora... Do be sure to listen to your guides *very* carefully..."

She gave us various bits of advice. I'd initially sensed that Mia was rather wary of Seris, but by the time we'd finished eating it felt like the walls had come down. Now I was even seeing them huddling together and talking. *Please, just don't put any weird ideas in Mia's*

head! I prayed.

Normally I'd stick around after lunch to read, but this time I'd decided to participate in the afternoon class of the adventurers' course. Mainly, I wanted to meet the person who'd be leading our dungeon dive tomorrow. I wanted to join in, but if the guide turned out to be one of the students we'd fought in the arena, I might have to reconsider.

"Oh? Is that you, Sora?"

But despite my worries, the person who appeared was Joshua, the young man we'd met at the guild the other day. He seemed surprised to see us, and I felt the same way; I hadn't expected to run into one of the few people I knew at the school under these circumstances.

"You'll be taking part in the dungeon dive with us, then?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe it will be our first time. I hope you'll take good care of us," I responded.

We exchanged a bit of small talk, during which I learned a lot about Joshua, including that he was sixteen years old. At first I thought that made him a year older than me, but then I realized it had been at least two hundred days since I'd first been summoned to this world... At least, I was pretty sure it had. That meant I was also sixteen now.

While we were talking, we ended up realizing that if we were the same age we should probably talk more like peers, so I switched to the more informal speaking style I used around Mia and the others. Joshua stuck with his more formal speech, though he did relax a bit.

"I must admit, I didn't expect you to be the students everyone was talking about," he said.

"Talking about?"

"Yes, you fought Mr. Helio in the arena, didn't you?" he asked.

To be exact, we fought Helio's students... But I decided not to argue the point.

"I should add, for the sake of their reputation, that they are quite accomplished," Joshua told me. "The fact that you made such quick work of such superlative students is one of the reasons you're being

talked about, though some people have mentioned that slaves tend to be strong."

"I...see." That last one didn't quite seem right, but I was relieved he wasn't suspicious of us, at least. "Speaking of, your team is supposed to guide us in the dungeon. Exactly how far down have you gotten?"

"We just recently managed to clear the fifteenth floor," he told me.

"Is that far?" I decided to ask, since I had no standard to go by.

"Well...it's probably on the farther side, for students."

"He's just being humble. You should be more confident," someone suddenly interjected.

I turned back and saw Layla giving him a look. Joshua and I spoke up in unison:

"Layla?"

"Lady Layla!"

I looked at Joshua and saw open surprise on his face. Was it because she'd arrived unannounced? The other members of the Bloody Rose were there as well. Tricia had immediately started talking to Mia.

"What brings you here?" I finally said to Layla.

"I heard you were going into the dungeon, so I came to check on you," she said.

"You don't have more important things to do?" I asked.

"O-Of course I do. I just...happened to have a free moment, so I decided to check in. I definitely have a *very* full schedule, you know?"

Her defensive tone made me wonder, but Layla really was a very caring person, so she probably was genuinely worried about us. She'd done the same thing with me in the library, after all.

"So, is clearing the fifteenth floor very impressive?" I asked her, getting back to the subject.

"Quite so, for a team their age," she responded. "Most students end up stalled at the tenth."

This was because the tenth floor was a boss room, and once you entered, you couldn't leave until you beat the boss. Since there was

no way to bail out if things went south, the school prevented most students from taking on the challenge unless they were clearly strong enough to make it through.

Still, there were shortcuts you could take if you just wanted to proceed further—hiring adventurers, for one. But hiring adventurers meant you wouldn't get credit for clearing the tenth floor, and you also had to pay them, so most students didn't go this route. Still, every year there were a few parties who did, mostly because you could earn better money on the lower floors.

Another potential method was to try the boss room alongside students and teachers who'd beaten it before. This would let you give it a try by yourself and then ask for their help if you realized you couldn't do it. Of course, if they beat the boss for you, you once again wouldn't get school credit for it, even though your card would say you'd cleared floor ten. Still, it had become expected for students to choose this method for taking on the boss room, as the benefits outweighed the drawbacks for most people.

Obviously, the main benefit of having someone else beat the boss for you was that you'd have a way out even if you weren't strong enough to do it yourself, but it also gave you a front-row seat to observe how the boss should be fought. The main drawback was that boss rooms had a maximum occupancy, and bringing in helpers could mean leaving the same number of your own party members behind. The method's popularity also resulted in a bit of a waiting list.

The school generally recommended that parties consist of between four and six people. Most adventurers worked in those numbers, because the passages in the dungeon were so narrow that having too many people could actually slow down your progress. The other reason was that larger groups tended to be less attentive to the dungeon's dangers.

This was just a recommendation, though, and groups were allowed to make parties of any size they wanted. Also, it was recommended to work with another party when facing a boss room.

"In addition, well...I don't know if it's true, but I hear that the chance of a chest spawning is higher if you take on the boss room

with a smaller number of people," Joshua said. He stressed that it was just a rumor, though.

I'd heard that boss room chests tended to contain high-quality items. A bag of holding was one potential pull...but I could make those in my own time. You could also snag an item that allowed you to instantly transport out of the dungeon. This item wouldn't work in a boss room, but it seemed they were still very handy to have.

For dungeon diving, I'd like to give my three companions bags of holding—well, maybe pouches rather than bags—but would that attract too much attention?

"E-Excuse me, Lady Layla. Would you like to fight a match with me?" Joshua asked nervously while I was thinking things over.

Layla answered after a moment. "Very well. I'd like to find out how much I've improved!"

Members of the Bloody Rose and Joshua's party had already been engaging in sort-of mock duels and sort-of study groups elsewhere, but the news that Layla would be fighting made everyone stop what they were doing to watch.

Their duel began as everyone watched, with the two fighters naturally wielding practice swords. Joshua moved first, rushing in on the attack, while Layla stayed where she was and dodged all incoming strikes. Then, the moment there was a break in his flurry of attacks, she executed one of her own and struck a decisive blow.

"You really are strong, Lady Layla. I thought I'd gotten a lot better, but I believe you've still outpaced me." Joshua gushed with praise, his excited demeanor having returned. He didn't seem at all frustrated that she'd dominated him.

After that, several other students challenged Layla to mock duels. Casey and Talia were also surrounded by students, apparently receiving similar challenges.

After the mock duels were over and things had settled down, Layla and Joshua talked a bit about their experiences in the dungeon. The teacher seemed a little misty-eyed, watching the students listen so eagerly.

Yeah, people don't act nearly as engaged at the morning lectures, do they?

"Master, want to shop?" Hikari asked.

"Yeah," I said. "We're going to the dungeon tomorrow, so we'll need to prepare."

"E-Excuse me, big brother. Do you mind if we come with you?"

It was Elza who was asking. She wasn't in her maid outfit today, but her regular clothes—as were we, of course. It was the first time in a while I wasn't going out in my school uniform.

"Iroha said you could, so sure," I told her. "You haven't seen much of the area, have you?" I was referring to the student town. We hadn't been here long, and Iroha had only taken them shopping in the area near the house, so they didn't know the territory very well. That said, I didn't really know it either—that was the real reason I wanted us all to go out together and walk around for a bit. In addition to doing the dungeon prep, of course.

Yesterday I'd talked with Layla about the best way to handle meals in the dungeon. This was just going to be a day trip, but we'd still have to eat at least once down there, so I'd asked her if it would be okay to cook.

"I don't think you'll have time to cook. Most people just eat rations...but since you have a bag of holding, you could probably bring a packed lunch. I expect people will start begging you to join their party if you do, though."

I guess I don't really want that? I decided. *But rations...* Remembering Hikari's disgusted reaction when the word came up made the prospect feel less than appealing. Obviously she'd suck it up if I asked her to, but I wasn't exactly eager to eat rations either. *Should I take a pack like a proper porter, then? A merchant carrying the bags while his three slaves fight for him... It seems plausible, doesn't it?*

"Big brother. Big Sis Hikari is..." Elza groaned in distress while I was thinking.

I looked over to see Hikari holding a giant meat skewer in each hand and offering one to Art, whose eyes were wide at the sight. "Eat this. It's tasty," she said, earning a big smile from the stall owner.

Hey, that's the stall we visited when we first came to Majorica, I

realized. I accidentally made eye contact, and the man seemed to recognize us and called out. *Guess we have to buy from him now. What a salesman,* I thought. I wouldn't let him get the better of me entirely, though. I decided to buy a big order and get a big discount. What we didn't eat this time would go right into the Item Box.

"This is for you, Elza." I handed skewers to each member of our party, and we strolled around as we ate. "Well? Have you gotten used to your new life yet?"

"Um, I guess," she said. "There's still a lot I can't do, though..."

"Don't worry, Elza. Nobody can do it all from the start. Just take your time," Mia told her.

Mia, playing the big sister role excellently as usual, encouraged the despondent Elza. Art, meanwhile, was still fighting with his skewer. Hikari had bought him one of the larger ones at the stall, and his mouth wasn't big enough to handle it.

"Eating makes kids big and strong!" she declared.

In my world we had a similar phrase about sleeping. *I guess in this world it's about eating?* Still, it was good to see Hikari acting like a proper big sister, and Art seemed to like her a lot too.

"And it's important to eat your fill," she added, watching as Art bit into the meat.

"Hey, master, where are we going next?" Sera asked.

"I told you there's something I wanted to buy, remember? We'll be doing that next."

We window-shopped at stalls, cooled off at the waterways, and generally drifted around town enjoying the sights. The water must have contributed to the town's greenery, and I saw lots of people chatting in the shade of trees.

That was the atmosphere we strolled through until we finally arrived at an armor shop. Joshua had recommended this place when I'd asked him.

We entered the shop and saw the scary-looking owner glare daggers at us. Elza froze up at the sight, and Art quickly ducked behind her.

The next instant, we heard a whap. "Stop glaring, fool!" Then there was another whap, and the owner leaned over the counter,

shielding his head. A broad-shouldered woman now stood beside him. “Sorry. He’s a jerk. So, how can I help you today?”

A man, three slave women, and two young children... We must be quite the puzzling group to see, I reflected, then said out loud, “I’m looking for shields that even a beginner can use. Joshua from the Magius Academy of Magic recommended your shop.”

“Oh, you know Josh? Are you students as well?” she asked.

“Yes, we’re set to try a dungeon dive tomorrow.”

At this, the woman scowled. “You’re going tomorrow, but you’re only getting ready now?”

“Oh, well... We’re not using them in tomorrow’s dive. I thought we might need them for the lower floors, and we were in the area, so I decided I’d pick them up now.”

That was partly true. I’d heard that you’d face more monsters with long-range attacks as you went deeper into the dungeon. There was only so much I could do knocking attacks out of the air with my sword, so having a shield would make defending much easier. I’d learned how true that was during the stampede—shields were a necessity, especially when you wanted to defend others.

“And after that, let’s see... Do you have a shield that Mia—that this girl here could use comfortably? A light one, if possible.” I’d decided to find one for Mia as well. The teacher of the adventurer course had recommended that people who mainly fought with magic should learn how to use shields for self-defense. Yor and Tricia didn’t use shields anymore, but they’d said they’d used them when they’d first started out.

“Well, let’s see. These should be quite affordable.” The woman cast a glance at Mia and then brought several shields over.

I tried each one in turn, and they all seemed a bit heavy. I couldn’t judge by myself, so I had Mia try them...and let Elza test them out as well. Mia found one that she thought was just about right, but they were all too heavy for Elza.

“What about those?” I pointed at some shields on a shelf in the back.

“Those would be lighter, but they’re expensive too,” the shopkeeper warned.

I asked the price, and they were indeed ten times the cost of the first ones she'd shown us. I picked one up, and Mia and Elza also tried it.

"That's amazing. It's so light." I couldn't help but smile at Elza's genuine surprise. That said, maybe she was a bit *too* excited?

"What about you, Mia?" I asked. "Which one feels most comfortable to you?"

Meanwhile, Mia was having trouble choosing, or maybe she felt reluctant to do so.

"Mia, don't worry about the price," I assured her. "Knowing you can protect yourself will make it easier for us to fight too."

Hikari and Sera both nodded in agreement.

Mia's reticence vanished like a dream when she saw that, and she started earnestly picking up shields to check them. "This one, I think," she said at last, having picked out the second most expensive shield. It was a curious design seemingly made of boards like overlapping spirals.

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[Phtera Shield] A shield enchanted to be lighter.
Unleashes a hidden power when infused with mana.
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Its stats were pretty good. The reason it was cheap despite having a hidden ability was probably because most people didn't know how to infuse things with mana. You couldn't read the item's description without Appraisal either, so the shopkeeper very likely didn't know the effect.

"I'll take two of these beginner shields, and this one, please."

I paid up and put them all in my Item Box. The shopkeeper remained silent the whole time. Didn't say a single word. *Ah, maybe the woman is the actual owner?* I thought.

After that, we bought some cooking ingredients, then got home before dark to get ready for dinner.

For the actual cooking, Iroha gave instructions to Elza and Art as well as Mia, while Hikari, Sera, and I ran some light mock duels. Of course, I also tried out the Phtera Shield.

"Did it get bigger?" Hikari asked.

She was right. The shield had grown when I'd infused it with mana. The overlapping boards had extended outward to change the size.

"Master, wow! How did you do that?" Hikari asked curiously, so I explained how it worked. When I was done, she declared, "Master, I wanna try too!"

And so she took the shield from me and infused it with mana. She couldn't do it as smoothly as I had, but the shield did indeed begin to expand, growing large enough to completely hide her upper body. She tried some moves with it, and it gradually returned to its original state.

"Master, it's hard," she expressed when it was over.

It seemed you had to continuously channel mana into it to keep it in that state, a feat which required a lot of mana and good concentration. I hadn't gotten to test it too deeply, but I felt like it also consumed more mana than a regular sword. So to use it while moving around quickly like Hikari did, you had to have your mana as controlled as your own breath, which would make it quite difficult indeed.

"But you've gotten a lot better at channeling your mana. Are you still practicing?" I asked her.

"Yeah, I'm practicing every day with Big Sis Mia and Big Sis Sera."

The fruits of daily hard work, eh? I patted Hikari's head, and she smiled, looking quite pleased indeed.

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"Master, what are you making?" Hikari asked as she strode up to me and looked over my shoulder.

"Hikari, you're still wet," Mia scolded her, following her with a bath towel. Hikari wriggled as Mia wiped down her wet hair, but that didn't stop Mia.

"I'm making packed lunches for tomorrow," I said.

"Packed lunches?"

"You don't want rations, right?"

Hikari and Mia both shook their heads emphatically.

They'd told us to prepare lunches for ourselves tomorrow, so I was making some simple sandwiches. They would be a little more cumbersome than rations, but that wouldn't be an issue. With that, we had pretty much everything we needed, outside of water and equipment. The only thing left was a carrying pack.

The monsters that appeared on the first floor were goblins, from which you only needed to retrieve magistones and a trophy to confirm the kill. The latter was of dubious necessity in this case, since our dungeon cards would record our kills for us, but people were encouraged to get into the habit in case they ever did any adventuring outside of dungeons.

The real reason I needed a pack was for the monsters that appeared on the second floor—wulfs. Wulfs were a profitable sort of monster from which basically every part of the body could be taken and sold: magistones, claws, fangs, pelts, and meat—essentially everything but the organs and the blood. So the more you killed, the more you had to carry.

In addition to Joshua's party, who would be serving as our guides, there would be three parties participating in the dive, including ours. We'd change formation regularly to let different groups take the lead. I assumed we'd spend most of our time walking and occasionally getting advice from Joshua.

"Master, you aren't gonna use your bag of holding tomorrow?" Sera asked.

"Oh, Sera. I told you not to dress so scantily." Sera had come out of the bath dressed in a revealing sheath, and Mia quickly moved in the way to hide her from my eyes. It was a nice view indeed, but Mia would glare at me if I stared, so I quickly looked away.

Not like I could ever forget what I saw...but that's not really my fault, right? Sera had been a slave for so long that she'd lost much of her sense of modesty. I don't think she even saw us as different sexes. I just hoped she wouldn't give herself a cold.

"I'm planning to try not to. If we collect too many materials, then I'll decide whether to use it or not."

I'd already told them that I'd done a lot of traveling as a

merchant, so maybe it wouldn't seem too suspicious that I had a bag of holding. I hadn't made it public that I had one, though, so Layla's group were the only ones who knew.

"Oh, and don't use the weapons I enchanted tomorrow," I cautioned them. I didn't want anyone spooked by exploding throwing knives, which would be wasted on goblins and wulfs anyway. "And we'll be meeting up on-site, so we'll leave the house earlier than usual. Get to sleep early. No late nights."

This last one was addressed mostly to Mia. Hikari had told me she often stayed up late practicing her mana control. She knew this because they sometimes slept in the same room.

I lay down in bed to get to sleep, but spent a little time thinking first. *I've bought a shield. I wasn't planning on using it tomorrow, but I'll probably use it eventually. Maybe I should buy a skill for it?*

NEW
[Shield Arts Lv. 1]

This skill was basically the shield version of Sword Arts. It made you better at using a shield. I'd spent one skill point to learn it. *Things will be pretty touch-and-go tomorrow, but goblins might be a good opponent to practice against if I get the chance.*

"Open status," I said, deciding to check my skills in preparation for the dungeon excursion before I went to sleep.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Scout / **Race:** Otherworlder / **Level:** None
HP: 440/440 / **MP:** 440/440 / **SP:** 440/440 (+100)
Strength: 430 (+0) / **Stamina:** 430 (+0) / **Speed:** 430 (+100)
Magic: 430 (+0) / **Dexterity:** 430 (+0) / **Luck:** 430 (+100)

Skill: Walking Lv. 43
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for

every step)
XP Counter: 43,391/770,000
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. 8] [Alchemy Lv. MAX] [Cooking Lv. MAX] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 6] [Fire Spells Lv. MAX] [Water Spells Lv. 6] [Telepathy Lv. 8] [Night Vision Lv. 9] [Sword Tech Lv. 5] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 5] [Earth Spells Lv. 9] [Wind Spells Lv. 6] [Disguise Lv. 7] [Engineering/Construction Lv. 8] [Shield Arts Lv. 1]

Advanced Skills
[Appraise Person Lv. 8] [Detect Mana Lv. 7] [Enchant Lv. 7] [Creation Lv. 2]

Contract Skills
[Holy Spells Lv. 3]

Title
[Spirit Contractor]

In preparation for the dungeon, I'd changed my job from Mage to Scout. Learning Shield Arts had left me with three remaining points, which I'd kept in reserve in case I needed any new skills in the dungeon. My skill levels hadn't gone up much, but only because I hadn't been using them too often. I'd spent a lot of time reading books and reference materials since I arrived in Majorica, and I also hadn't wanted to call attention to myself by using flashy magic.

“The dungeon, huh?” I whispered.

Ciel opened her eyes and looked over at me.

“Nothing,” I reassured her. “Let’s do our best tomorrow.”

She just nodded in response and closed her eyes again.

With my preparations done, I closed my eyes as well, but I found it hard to get to sleep. To be perfectly frank, I was excited. Even though we were going to a dangerous place, it really brought back the feeling of when I had a school trip the next day.

I found myself chuckling in excitement, and I guess that relaxed me, because I managed to get to sleep after that.

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“Looks like everyone’s on time. Sora, may I ask what that is?” Joshua asked me.

Everyone else was wearing light equipment, while I alone carried a large pack. I could definitely feel everyone staring at me. I was also carrying the shield which I hadn’t used yet, and that probably made me even more conspicuous.

Ciel was riding lazily on top of my pack—my school uniform’s cape had no hood—and seemed surprised to find herself at the center of attention. Not that any of them could see her, of course.

“I wanted something to carry monster materials in. Is it a problem?”

“No, you do sometimes get a lot of materials in a dungeon that you need to bring back. You’re free to bring a large bag if you like, but it can also limit your mobility, so be careful.”

“Joshua, wouldn’t it be better to hire a porter?” one of the newbies asked immediately.

“There’s no simple answer to that. It’s true that a porter can help you carry more materials back, but you’ll also need to expend resources protecting them.”

Porters generally weren’t combatants, so you’d have to keep them safe if a chaotic fight broke out. Some porters could take care of themselves, of course, but those tended to be in high demand and work for regular clients, so it could be hard to hire them. They

charged high fees too, Joshua explained.

"You'll get a better sense of it once you've been down there a few times," he concluded. "Now, let's go."

Joshua led us into the guild, which was already bustling with activity despite the early hour. There were people waiting impatiently for others to join them, people striding out with arms around each other's shoulders ready to drink, and people negotiating at the material purchasing counter.

"It's always busy here," Joshua explained. Apparently it was a city that never slept.

We passed through the guild building and found ourselves standing in front of a lake with an island at the center, which we crossed to on a drawbridge. From there, a flagstone path led to the island's center, where something a bit like a wayside shrine stood. Trees grew all around it, like a proper shrine ground, and in front of it stood a stone marker which could apparently offer several different services if you moved your dungeon card next to it.

But what is it? I wondered. I felt something like mana emanating from the shrine, so dense that I didn't even need to use Detect Mana to sense it, though actually using the skill confirmed a sharp concentration of mana flowing out of it. It was almost ominous.

"You'll be forming a party with us for today." Joshua and his friends registered us with his party, and then it was finally time to enter the dungeon.

I found myself trembling with excitement.

"The three of us will enter first. After that, follow us one at a time." As Joshua approached the shrine, a patch of darkness suddenly appeared before him and swallowed him up. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say he stepped into it.

Soon, the students followed him in a predetermined order, and our turn arrived at last.

"Okay, let's go." As I approached the shrine, the darkness appeared again. I stepped in without hesitation, and the view around me suddenly changed.

I was currently in a stairway leading downward. After just a few steps, the bottom of the stairs came into view. As Joshua had

explained in advance, this was the boundary between us and the dungeon floor.

In class, they'd taught us that the main thing to be careful of in the dungeon was moving between floors. The scenery around you didn't change until the moment you crossed the boundary, so if there were monsters close to the stairs, you could end up getting hit with a surprise attack as you passed through. The chance of it was low, but there were a few such incidents every year.

As I passed through the boundary, I found Joshua and the other students who had gone before me. They were very close by, but I couldn't see them at all until I crossed over. Ciel had trembled as we passed through, but when the scenery changed she was immediately looking around, wide-eyed.

"That looks like everyone. Don't forget to be careful when passing between floors like that. You may even want to discuss with your party how to handle it in advance," Joshua announced, getting many anxious nods in response.

I was feeling a little nervous as well. Mia must have felt the same way, because she reached out and grabbed my sleeve.

The walls, floors, and ceiling in the dungeon were made of stone. They formed passages that were only about three meters square, so being there with a group this size felt claustrophobic. It was possible to move along two at a time, but to be frank, it was too cramped to properly wield our weapons.

"Oh, Sora. It's all right here, but be sure not to touch the walls carelessly," Joshua advised me.

I'd just been testing the feel of a dungeon wall with my hand, and I'd appraised it as well.

[Unknown]

That was the label that came up, which had gotten me curious.

Joshua had given the warning because you'd start to see walls with traps built into them beginning on the eleventh floor. I remembered reading that in the reference room when we'd visited

the adventurers' guild too.

"Let's have Group 1 take the lead for now," he suggested. "They'll choose our route for us. Group 3, you bring up the rear and guard against attacks."

Joshua's own party split into two groups to walk in front of and behind Group 2, which would let them quickly back up either the vanguard or the rear guard if they ran into trouble. We were Group 2, which meant we'd be pretty far from any combat that started up.

I used Detect Presence to scan for monsters, then called up my automap...and my mind went blank from shock. Ciel was close by, and she looked at me curiously. *It's nothing,* I told her telepathically.

But it definitely wasn't nothing. The automap was showing me the entire layout of the first floor—the whole dang thing. I'd heard the dungeon rooms got bigger the farther down you went, but it looked like the first floor wasn't very large at all. Detect Presence also told me exactly where all the monsters—goblins, in this case—were.

I could definitely use this to lead us to the stairs without running into any monsters. Of course, you wouldn't make any money that way; the system wasn't set up to reward you for floor progress alone. But knowing the monsters' locations would let us set things up so we always fought them under ideal conditions. At the same time, if we were in a situation where we might end up surrounded, I could also figure out a way to avoid combat entirely. It seemed like a very useful resource.

The automap told me that there was a crossroads ahead, and that our lead party had stopped at it. I looked past my map display and saw the two leaders looking cautiously to the left and right. They were repeating that gesture over and over without actually moving, and Hikari was starting to get bored. In fact, it wasn't just her—most everyone's focus was starting to diminish. In her case, though, the boredom probably was because she knew there were no monsters on the branching path to watch out for.

To their credit, Joshua and the others never lost their focus, and they even seemed to be checking on us regularly. Mia remained completely tense the whole time as well.

“Hang in there, Hikari. Mia, try to relax a little bit more,” I said, and they both nodded.

But Ciel looked completely over it all, and she was now snoozing on top of my head. In a way, I was impressed by her balance.

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So far, the only monsters we’d encountered were four goblins, but the students had struggled greatly with them. Indeed, it wasn’t like mock duels at all—the possibility of death presented by a real fight seemed to make them act stiffer than usual.

The same went for the next party that took the lead, who managed to surround the goblin but fought in a way that burned through their stamina quickly, and they only just beat it. Surrounding it was a smart idea, but the narrow hallways, which stopped them from swinging their swords freely, seemed to play a big role in hindering them.

Once we’d made it to about the midway point of the first floor, our turn came up. Hikari took the lead and didn’t hesitate to march on through, which surprised even our guides.

“A-Are you all right?” Joshua asked.

“Yeah. There’s no monsters.” Hikari walked unhesitatingly into an intersection, seeming more worried about which way to go than the possibility of an ambush.

When a goblin did appear before us, she waited for it to come closer. Then, once it was in range, she took it down with a single swing of her dagger. At the sight of her brilliant fighting, Joshua’s party joined the newcomers in letting out a cheer of appreciation.

“Hikari, can I fight with you next time?” I asked. I wanted to test my Shield Arts skill. I used my automap to look for monsters and picked a course that would take us straight to a goblin.

When the goblin caught sight of us, it just charged mindlessly with its weapon brandished. I blocked its downward swipe with my shield, and when the goblin kept on attacking anyway, I continued to block its every blow.

Soon the goblin seemed to tire, and I shoved it off-balance, then

finished it off with my sword. I tried to make it a smooth, clean kill, and I felt the goblin expire beneath my blade.

"Um, Sora, I've never seen you use a shield before. Do you usually use one?" Joshua asked.

I'd only ever used a sword in our mock duels, so his confusion was understandable. But it probably didn't look like it was my first time either.

"It's important to keep safe," I said simply, trying to imply that I had used one for a while.

After that, I recovered the trophy and magistone, and Hikari took the lead again.

"Hmm? Something there?"

After a while, we came upon a wall that looked like a dead end. Some kind of box sat on the floor in front of it.

"That's a treasure chest! Ah, Hikari! Please approach it, but remain calm," Joshua warned her.

The words "treasure chest" almost spurred Hikari into a run, but Joshua's warning slowed her down. The other newbie adventurers looked just as excited as she did. To be honest, I felt a little thrill about it myself—I'd heard before that chests were rare, and I certainly hadn't expected to find one on my first go-round.

As he walked up to the chest, Joshua explained that we should never open one without checking it over first, because they sometimes contained traps. Apparently methods for disarming traps was another thing you learned in the adventurer course. *He mentioned there would be traps on the walls once you reached the eleventh floor too,* I recalled.

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[Treasure Chest] No traps.
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That was all Appraisal told me. It apparently didn't explain what was inside.









Once Joshua and his party confirmed there were no traps, he let Hikari, who'd found it, open it.

Inside the chest lay...a rusted dagger and a few silver coins. It was a disappointing result, but we'd still gotten to taste the thrill of anticipation, at least. It was definitely a bucket list moment. I'd noticed the other students watching with shining eyes as well.

Perhaps inspired by the discovery of the chest, or maybe because they'd gotten used to things, Group 1 moved a lot faster once they were put in the lead again. The stiffness had lifted out of their fighting style, too, and they made short work of the other goblins we ran into.

That actually might have made them a little overconfident, because we ended up in a few scrapes—proceeding blindly into an intersection and getting blindsided by a goblin, carelessly getting ambushed by a wulf on the second floor—but there were no major injuries. Those who did get hurt were cured right away thanks to Mia's Heal spell. Her patients thanked her, and she looked happy to hear it.

After that, we ate lunch. Then, due to time considerations, we made our way back to the first floor with the second incomplete.

We'd slain nineteen goblins and eight wulfs in total. With the goblins, we'd only had to collect their magistones and trophies, but one representative from each party had been elected to carry one wulf body. The rest went into Joshua's bag of holding. The bag didn't belong to Joshua himself; it was school property lent out for dungeon dives.

I imagined it could probably have held all the loot, but carrying the bodies around was apparently part of the experience. Indeed, moving around while carrying the wulfs seemed to prove quite difficult, so everyone but me ended up taking shifts.

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"Now, regarding today's activities..."

After returning from the dungeon, we rented a room at the guild, and Joshua gave us feedback on the dive.

We'd originally planned to find the stairs to the third floor, register there, and then return, but we'd ended up turning back before we finished the second floor. It had just taken too much time. We'd picked up the pace as we went, but we'd gotten too slow a start.

"You started moving a lot better as we went, but you also ended up putting yourselves in danger. For instance..."

He gave a few examples of how we'd handled the crossroads we'd come across. He answered different questions very politely, gesturing as he spoke. Even though he was probably quite tired, he engaged earnestly with all of us.

As far as battles went, we'd done well enough against the goblins, but the wulfs had been trickier. The halls in the dungeon were narrow enough to limit movement, but the wulfs' speed had still caused trouble. The inability to finish the wulfs off quickly meant that most of them (not counting the ones my group had fought) ended up with damage to their hides, which Joshua explained would reduce the price they sold for. He added, though, that we could worry about that more later, after we got more used to things.

For our part, Hikari and Sera had made quick work of them. This surprised the others, for some reason, even though they'd seen how tough they were. Maybe they'd thought that fighting well against other humans didn't necessarily translate to monsters?

"Sora and crew, for you guys... You didn't have any issues this time, but be careful when you venture into a dungeon by yourselves. You're a four-person party, so long-term dives—the ones where you'll need to camp overnight—will be hard. *Really* hard!" I felt like Joshua was speaking from the heart. That last bit definitely made it sound like he knew from experience.

We were used to camping out while traveling between cities, but since we'd always followed the main roads, overnight monster attacks had been rare. However, if you faced multiple monster attacks while camping out in a dungeon, it could deplete your stamina and leave you at risk even if you managed to beat them.

From what I could see on my automap, there weren't enough monsters on the first and second floors for this to be a problem, but I knew larger groups would appear the farther down we went.

Besides, maybe there were usually more monsters there than what we'd seen today. Apparently the mechanism by which monsters appeared in dungeons was still unknown.

After Joshua's debriefing, the others sold off the materials they'd brought back and then left as a group. They all seemed to live in the dorms together.

It was Sera's first time in an adventurers' guild in a while, so she checked for messages from Rurika and Chris, but she found that none had arrived.

"Master, should I tell them I'm attending the academy?" she asked.

"Good question. You should probably say they don't need to hurry back while you're at it." I'd feel bad if they pushed themselves hard to get here and then we left them waiting.

"Are you sure you don't want to write to them yourself, master?" she asked.

"There's always a chance that the messages might leak, so it's probably best if you only mention yourself." It wasn't just for my sake; I didn't want information about Hikari or Mia to get out either.

Just as we were about to leave the guild together, I heard a cheer ring out inside. "The Guardian's Blade is back! They've got a new level record!" came a cry.

Hearing that, Joshua spun right around and marched back to the guild. We rushed after him, just in time to see the Guardian's Blade heading inside. There were large gouges on their armor and shields, but their party itself was still fully intact. Every member of the party held their head high in response to the cheers.

"Amazing, just amazing!" Joshua shouted again and again, his excitement apparently boundless.

We eventually dragged him away and went home, but I couldn't forget something I'd heard as we were leaving the guild behind.

"The special field on the thirty-fifth floor... Apparently it's a forest field."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I heard them say that."

"And?"

"Sounds like they had a really hard time. The treants disguise themselves as part of the forest."

Treants... Those were a source of treant branches and treant magistones, components in the Eyes of Eliana.

The thirty-fifth floor...if we go that far down, could we get treant materials?

Interlude 2

"Hey, are we really going to do this?"

"It'll cut down on our travel time. Walking all the way to the border city would be pretty hard too."

"But Sera said she'd be going to the magic academy, so we don't have to rush." I remembered the message we'd received in the guild and tried to use it to talk Rurika down.

Sadly, my attempt failed.

"Chris, we need to take this seriously," she told me. "Besides, I hear the area we're going through has had to deal with bandits lately. I know they sent out a hunting party to deal with them, but you never know what we might run into."

The reason I was trying to talk her down...was that I didn't want to ride in the wagon.

It would've been fine if it were a normal wagon, but Beastland wagons used magibeasts, which could make them a very rough ride. The one thing all adventurers and merchants I'd talked to could agree on was that riding in them was a miserable experience—for people who weren't beastfolk, at least.

Rurika insisted blithely that they were exaggerating, but I was genuinely terrified. I felt like the dead-eyed stares they'd given me proved they weren't lying.

"Still, the hunting party... You think they were that group we saw a few days ago?" she mused.

I remembered the people we'd met at the guild a few days before. It was a team of wolf beastfolk who looked like a capable group, with a heartily laughing man as their leader. They wore a mishmash of equipment, but those in the know could tell that it was all made from excellent materials.

I remembered the one girl among them—the only fox-eared beastfolk—moving around busily, occasionally taking time to scold

the laughing man.

"You know, Rurika, I thought I heard them calling him the Beast King..." I said.

"You did? Yeah, I heard that too." If Rurika had heard it too, then that confirmed it, right? "Anyway, stop trying to change the subject. Let's go!"

With my attempts to avert disaster in vain, we signed up for the wagon and were told we'd leave the following morning.

"Should we buy a few days' worth of food?" Rurika asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"C'mon, Chris, don't be mad. If we just hang tough for a little while, we can finish a journey that would've taken twenty days in only three! Isn't that amazing?"

It certainly was amazing...for certain definitions of the word.

By the way, it seemed they'd cook for us on the road if we asked them, but because we had certain, er, flavor preferences, we decided to cook for ourselves.

"Chris. Why didn't you stop me?"

Ah, Rurika looks like she's dying.

We'd only been in the wagon for half a day so far. All the people wearing similar dead-eyed expressions were humans as well. The beastfolk among us were still laughing merrily and stuffing their faces with meat and wine.

None of the people hired as escorts were drinking. I was glad they took their work seriously, though they did help themselves to the meat while the humans watched them in utter disbelief.

"Hey, little lady. Want a drink?" someone asked.

I was the sole person who didn't look like death warmed over, but I declined the offer.

I was currently working on a pot of soup. Rurika had insisted that she wasn't hungry, but I knew she needed food to keep her strength up. *The trip has only just started,* I told her. *We have at least two more days of this.*

My words had caused the faces of the already-suffering people to twist further in despair, but their denial wouldn't change reality.

Wasn’t it better to face it head-on?

“Should we walk?” came a voice. “We could ditch the wagon tomorrow and just walk...”

The others were free to do that if they wanted, but I didn’t like the sound of it myself. Even though the coachman had said it was three days’ walk to the nearest village, you couldn’t take that at face value. Beastfolk were naturally more physically fit than we were—by a factor of at least fifty percent, I thought.

I spoke from experience as well. I once took the travel time told to me by a beastfolk at face value, and when I didn’t reach the village at the time I’d expected, I thought I’d taken a wrong turn.

“How are you still okay, Chris?” Rurika asked.

I wish I knew that myself, I thought as I doled out soup to the sick-looking people, who consumed it in slow, careful sips. *It’s not that my soup tastes bad... Is it?*

Eventually, we arrived at the border city as scheduled. I remained hale and hearty to the end and received ample praise from the beastfolk on the wagon. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it, though. It didn’t seem like a wholly good thing.

After our arrival, Rurika ended up falling right asleep, and we stayed there for five whole days before heading out.

I’m sorry, Sera, I lamented in my mind. *We won’t be getting to Majorica just yet.*

Chapter 5

"I see...but Hikari, you really *shouldn't* let your guard down. You *never* know what might happen in a *dungeon*..."

We were eating lunch in the library, telling Seris about our experience in the dungeon. Her warning came after hearing Hikari's thoughts on the matter, and Hikari nodded earnestly in response.

"Still, I *see*... It sounds as if the early floors weren't especially *satisfying* to you..."

We had plenty of experience fighting monsters, so I felt like we'd had a relatively easy time of it. Some of the other students had never fought goblins or wulfs before. It had felt a bit dicey, but then that was why we had a guide. It also seemed like the monsters rarely acted in packs on the first and second dungeon floors. Once they'd had a few fights under their belts, they'd gotten used to it and picked up some confidence. I'd heard some of the parties talking about trying to get in more fights with wulfs as well.

It was true that most hunting quests would put you in situations where you fought multiple monsters at once. It was more common for monsters on the outside to act in packs, after all. That made the dungeon a good environment to get real battle experience.

"Another *delicious* meal!" Seris patted her stomach contentedly, then asked what our plans were for the day.

Hikari and Sera said they were going to take the basic magic course class. Hikari must have really enjoyed it, because she'd apparently stayed awake for the whole lecture.

"I'm going to attend the holy magic society meeting," Mia said.

Her choice was about what I'd expected. She'd said that her experience in the dungeon had made her eager to learn a wider variety of holy spells, and the gratitude she'd received when casting Heal must have played a big role in that. Of course, participating in the club wouldn't necessarily teach her new spells, but she still

wanted to try.

"So...what are *you* going to do, Sora? It sounded like you went *somewhere* this morning as well..."

"I'm going to stop by the adventurer course," I said. "I'm more interested in their reference room than taking part in the class, though."

It sounded like the documents held by the academy's adventurer course were even better than the ones in the adventurers' guild reference room in terms of quality and breadth. More precisely, they were about equivalent. Maybe I couldn't learn about the thirty-fifth floor, since that had been a new record set just yesterday, but I could still read information about the floors leading up to it.

That was what I was looking into—the thirty-fifth floor and the treants who appeared there. They would provide me with one of the ingredients I needed to make the Eyes of Eliana. Two, if you included the magistone. I hoped I could just buy them, but if I couldn't, I'd have to harvest some myself.

It was the kind of place where large clans worked together to make progress. It might not have been possible for our little band, but maybe my skills could fill in the gap. My automap's abilities almost felt like a cheat too.

And even if we couldn't get quite that far, the farther you went into the dungeon, the more money you could make. Having lots of money would open up more avenues for buying valuable materials. I'd originally thought I could just get along making money and getting magistones here and there, but maybe I'd try a little more earnestly.

But...when I thought about it that far, another, calmer part of my mind spoke to me.

Is this really necessary? it asked.

If I could craft the Eyes of Eliana, it would solve the Ciel problem. I could release Mia from her slave contract and the scorn associated with it. It wasn't like she had any other reason to keep it up.

On the other hand, what if I released her from her slave contract and she said she wanted to stay in Majorica? Things had changed since we'd first arrived here, and now she had Elza and Art to take

care of.

Maybe it would be better not to make the Eyes of Eliana and keep things the way they are. I'll miss her if we have to part ways, after all.

I was realizing how much I really liked having Mia with me.

I guess I should gather up the materials for now. I can decide later on if I'm actually going to make them...

"Hmm...I *see* that furrowed brow. What *might* you be thinking?"

The voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I saw Seris in front of me, touching her finger to my forehead.

"I don't know *what* it might be...but you should *know* that the others have all left without you..."

That was when I realized we were the only two people left in the room. Apparently I hadn't responded when the others had tried talking to me, and they'd all had to get to class, so they'd left me in the library with Seris.

"Honestly... You had Mia *so* worried about you. Later—"

Before Seris could finish, I felt a sudden, massive shaking. She pitched over and seemed about to fall, but I reached out and grabbed her to hold her up.

Still, the violent rocking kept going, and we were both about to lose our balance, so I pulled her into my arms and crouched down low. The next thing I knew, we'd moved together under the desk. *I didn't expect my old earthquake training to come in handy like this...* I thought to myself.

It probably only took thirty seconds for the shaking to die down, but it felt like far longer. From our position under the desk, I could see the floor scattered with books that had fallen from the shelves.

"Erm...would you *kindly* let me go now?"

I looked toward the voice and found Seris meeting my eyes. Since I'd pulled her to me, her face was extremely close to mine, and I was near enough that I could make out every individual eyelash.

I sprang back in shock and banged my head. I'd forgotten we were still under the desk.

"Honestly...what were you *thinking*?" she sighed in exasperation.

"Still, you *do* appear to have saved me from harm. I won't tell Mia about it...*this* time. About how tightly you *held* me in your arms..." Seris wrapped her arms around herself and wriggled around a bit.

It's even more embarrassing when you say it out loud, so please stop! I silently pleaded.

"Still, I felt another pretty big tremor once before. Are they common in this area?" I asked. I hadn't thought about it before, but the tremors I'd felt in Lokia were the first time I'd felt them since I came to this world. This was the second, and I'd never felt tremors in Elesia or Frieren. Maybe it was just a region that got a lot of earthquakes, like the country in the world I'd come from.

"Hmm...tremors like those really *aren't* common... Perhaps they've grown more *frequent* lately? But you seemed *surprisingly* calm..."

"The world I came from had lots of earthquakes—lots of tremors like these. I've never been through one quite this intense, though." *Maybe being up higher amplifies the shaking?*

"Hmm, perhaps! I hope the *others* are all right, but everyone seems *fine* from what I can see!"

I had to admit, I was worried too. Would Hikari and the others be okay? I was also wondering if we should leave the building in preparation for aftershocks, but Seris didn't seem worried, so we'd probably be fine.

"*Well*...first things first, I *should* tidy up..."

I interpreted her glances over at me as a silent request for aid, so we split up to gather the fallen books. I'd check them for damage before replacing them on the shelves, following Seris's directions about where they should go. She seemed quite particular about their placement.

"What a *big* help you've been!" she cried when it was done. "*Thank* you."

After we were done cleaning, I left Seris behind in the library. *Maybe I'll stop by the basic magic course before hitting up the reference room.* I was pretty worried about Hikari and Sera. Mia had said the club would be meeting in a different spot than usual, so I wasn't actually sure where to find her.

With Ciel on my head, I headed for the classroom where the basic magic course was held.

◇Seris's Perspective 1

Ah, another exciting encounter. He seemed rather oblivious, though, and he never capitalized on anything. Mia truly had her work cut out for her.

But for now, I had to check on some things. I switched my focus, closed up the library, and headed to a certain location. I could use the technique from here as well, but it would be easier to do it there.

As I left the room, a familiar figure came running up to me.

"What *might* be the matter?" I asked in my usual manner.

"Madame Seris, er..." She spoke my name with a very serious air.

"Hmm, could you *please* not call me that here? You never *know* who might be listening..."

She started in response to my correction, which perhaps was only natural. To her, I was somewhat like an elder sister and instructor.

"You got *worried,* and so you came to see me. Is that *right*?" I asked anew.

She nodded, conveying a certain degree of concern for me. This, too, was only natural, since she knew the reason it had happened.

I kept my distance from her as we headed for our destination: the tower, the tallest structure in the school. I had business on the top floor there.

On the way, other students shouted greetings in our direction—most likely to her rather than to me. So few students knew me, after all. Had I not been with her, I surely would have received puzzled glances instead.

The other students seemed unaffected by the tremors. The sight of them running around, so enterprising, filled me with happiness. I hoped they would continue to grow and prosper.

Now to the tower... Ah, it's exhausting. Has the stairway always been this long?

"Are you all right?" she asked me in genuine concern.

Do I really look that badly off? I wondered. *I suppose I do rarely leave the library...* I was out of shape. *When you get to my age...* I started, then stopped. *No, it has nothing to do with age! I'm just out of shape!* That was an important thing to remember, so I thought about it a second time.

"Ah, the principal and..." An expression of surprise appeared on the vice principal's face as he saw me reach the top floor beside her.

Hmm? Does he object to my presence here? I shot him a glare, and he began to tremble. *That's right, I did rake him over the coals that one time he got into a fight with the principal.* I had been young back then as well. *Of course, I'm still young. I don't know why I thought of it that way.*

"I'll borrow *that*, if you don't mind," I told him as I strode forward.

"O-Of course. It belongs to you anyway, Lady Seris!"

I can hear you. You don't have to shout. I'm not going deaf!

I stood in the tower's magic circle and called out—mentally, of course. Those little ones could hear me even without words. The spirits with whom I'd contracted answered my call.

My next move was to use them to investigate the damage across Majorica. *It seems like there's no major damage— Ah, a tree has fallen at the roadside there. I'll have to report that later.*

Then came the real issue, checking the status of the dungeon. I could feel the fluctuations in its mana. It reminded me of a time long ago.

I'd heard that the Demon King had revived in recent years, and that could be connected to it as well. I'd heard that the Demon King's revival could make dungeons more active, and what I was seeing just then lent further credence to that idea. *I should have been more careful,* I scolded myself.

"Madame Seris, what is it?"

I wondered for a minute whether to warn the principal about her use of language, but since the vice principal already knew of our relationship, there was no need. There was something more important to be done.

"Contact Will. Tell him it's worse than expected," I said.

I could hear them both gulp in response. That must have been the last thing they wanted to hear.

Still, we mustn't avert our eyes from the truth. We need to make preparations and devise countermeasures. I found myself thinking of that boy—of Sora. His first visit to the dungeon seemed to have affected his passion for it. I didn't know why, but there might be a way to take advantage of that. The more monsters they hunted, the more time we'd be able to buy. And also...

I reflected on another dungeon.

The most effective method would be to defeat the boss at the bottom, but surely that would be too great a request? After all, the boss here... Not even we *had stood a chance against it.*

Was I placing such hopes on this otherworlder because he reminded me of another?

If he proves capable of defending this city, I would even give him the Eyes of Eliana.

Perhaps I could use them as a negotiating tool.

After all, this town is precious to me—the final resting place of my comrades.

◇Mia's Perspective 2

We'd been to the dungeon and back.

Seeing monsters up close really was scary. I was slow compared to Hikari and Sera, but I could at least follow their movements with my eyes. My body was much slower, though. I couldn't stop trembling. The moment I'd locked eyes with a monster, I'd lost all my cool. If a monster had gotten in close to me at that moment, I could have been killed.

I have to get used to it. I can't stay with Sora if I become a burden. I have to learn more about how to fight!

I couldn't fight the way Hikari and Sera could, but there were things that only I could do. Holy spells were my one specialty that I had over the other two. But there were only two holy spells I could

use: Heal and Recovery.

I have to become useful by learning more spells.

Tricia had also told me that holy magic became more necessary the farther you got into a dungeon, so I'd have to work hard to rise to the challenge.

Having a specialty will help me with my confidence as well.

I wished I could use other kinds of magic, too, but I'd tried that in class many times and never made any progress. Having learned to control my mana fairly well and knowing how my mana was flowing had made it clear: No matter how well it had been going, the mana I was channeling cut off the moment I spoke a spell name to cast any other kind of magic.

Come to think of it, didn't Tricia say she could only use holy magic too?

Then, when I arrived at our meeting place...

"Mia, let's do our best together!" Tricia heartily encouraged me.

"Thank you for having me again today," I said.

"You really don't have to be so nervous," she laughed. "Everyone's really nice, aren't they?"

They certainly had been very kind to me the last time I had come, but being around strangers my own age made me a bit nervous. Most of the people at the church had been quite a bit older, after all.

This girl—Tricia—had been this way ever since I'd met her. She'd spoken to me so happily when she'd learned that I was the Saint. Her passion often took me aback, but she was a sweet girl at heart. She reminded me of some of the disciples at the church.

"How was the dungeon?" she asked me excitedly.

I told her the story honestly. I knew that it might make me sound weak, but there was no point in lying.

"I thought it might be like that. I was the same way at first. Oh, did Sora say something to you?!" Tricia's wide-eyed intensity scared me a bit.

"O-Of course not. I just feel like I need to get a bit stronger. A-And I'd like to learn to use that spell you told me about that can attack distant monsters. Holy Arrow?"

I was too embarrassed to tell her that I wanted a ranged spell because I was too scared to fight monsters close-up. You might say it would've been better for me to learn how to use a bow...but I didn't think I had the talent. It's not true that anyone who can nock an arrow can use a bow.

"I see. Let's do our best, then. You're so brilliant that I'm sure you'll learn it right away!"

I never knew quite how to react to those adoring looks of hers. I would work very hard to learn it, but I was far from a genius.

◇◇◇

"Thanks for everything. It's been a big help." I let out a deep sigh and thanked Joshua, whom I'd been fighting. He had been in the adventurers' course classroom when I'd dropped in, so I'd asked him for a mock duel.

"Not at all. I learned a lot as well. Honestly, Sora, are you really a merchant?"

"Heh. I get that sometimes." *Come to think of it, I get it fairly often.* I decided to play up the angle of traveling merchants having dangerous lives.

My words must have convinced Joshua, because he just nodded. "It must be hard out there for merchants, yes."





"Does your party intend to make a serious attempt at the dungeon?" he asked me next.

"What makes you think that?"

"You asked me for a mock duel, and I'm told you've been reading a lot about it in the reference room."

I decided not to deny it. It was the truth, after all.

"The others in your party seem enthusiastic as well," he said. "Especially...Mia? She seems more passionate than anyone else."

Mia certainly had had an air of fierce determination about her lately. The mages in Joshua's party had been teaching her how to fight in mock duels. Fortunately, he told me, one of the two knew how to use a shield.

"Her, huh?" I mused.

Joshua explained that the other mage was proficient in hand-to-hand combat and could fight on par with a sword wielder. But she looked like a prim and proper lady at a glance, and when I mentioned that she didn't seem like the physical type to me...

"Don't be deceived by appearances!" Joshua responded immediately. His comrades all nodded in earnest agreement.

I wondered if they'd been through this song and dance before.

"But Sora, you really are good at using a shield," Joshua went on. "Who taught you?"

"Ah... There was a really amazing shield bearer among the adventurers I hired to escort me when I was first starting out. He taught me."

An amazing shield bearer... I really was trying to mimic the technique of Gytz of the Goblin's Lament. But the biggest factor in play was my skill, which made me much better than my beginner status would usually allow.

"But I'd only seen you use a sword up until now. What made you decide to pick up the shield? Because of Mia?"

"I guess that's part of it," I admitted. "Plus I read that the farther down you go in the dungeon, the more common monsters with long-ranged attacks become. I haven't been using the shield lately because I have Hikari and Sera with me, but I thought I should get back in the habit."

I asked how Joshua and the others dealt with it, and apparently their usual solution was to partner up with a defense-heavy party and leave it to them. Their hand-to-hand fighter girl seemed to be an effective defender too.

"I can technically use a shield, too, but I'm not very good at it," Joshua admitted. "When we run into monsters that use long-ranged attacks, we generally defeat them with magic before we get close."

He says it so casually, but isn't that kind of difficult?

"And...one thing I'd recommend is to check if other parties will be on the same floor before you go into the dungeon. If you ask the guild, they'll tell you."

"Why?" I asked.

"You can get into arguments over monster kills. Parties can also sic monsters they're struggling with onto others, so in a way, other adventurers are as troublesome as the monsters themselves."

Joshua explained that it tended not to happen to students in academy uniforms, but the uniform didn't guarantee that you wouldn't have any trouble at all. You had to be especially careful when a clan you didn't get along with was on the same floor as you.

"If you've got more people than monsters you're usually safe, but..." He explained that that could be a problem too, since it meant less loot for each person. He also seemed to think it could be dangerous to go too far without building up the appropriate experience. "It seems the special fields on the fifth and fifteenth floors and such aren't very popular as well. They're wide-open spaces, very different from the passages, so I guess people find it harder to be on the lookout for monsters there."

My conversation with Joshua was very fruitful. He told me his party was going to try the sixteenth floor after they made preparations, so they wouldn't be at school for a while. Since the floors did get bigger the farther down you went, it could apparently take days to get back from a dive. They needed a lot of supplies for that, he explained, so he was going to hire an outside porter.

As Joshua talked, I saw his expression sparkle with hope.

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"Where are we going today, big brother?" Elza asked me.

The school was closed today, so I'd been spending some time in the morning relaxing on my own. What were the girls up to, you ask? Layla had invited them out. She'd invited me too, but I'd said no, thinking I should let them have a girls' day for once. *It wasn't just because I heard that they were going to a sweetshop that's been popular with the local girls recently, I swear.*

Ciel seemed to want to go along, but she abandoned the idea when she realized she wouldn't be able to eat anything there. Instead, she was currently sulking on my bed. I decided to give her some space. I'd asked the girls to bring back a few treats, and she'd surely feel better once she got a taste.

That meant I was there by myself, and when Iroha told me to take Elza and Art out on an excursion, I went out with them, leaving Ciel to watch the house. There was actually somewhere I had wanted to go, but since Iroha had had to answer an urgent summons from Will, I'd have to take the kids along.

"I'd like to ask you two a favor. Is that okay?" I asked them. *You don't have to nod that enthusiastically. Relax a little bit...* Elza seemed glad to be given some responsibility.

So we left the house together and went to a shop that sold adventuring goods.

"A pouch that would look good on the ladies?" Elza echoed my words.

"Yeah, I don't know what to pick. I want your opinion." I didn't have much faith in my aesthetic sense, so I decided to ask the kids. *I'm not just looking for a line of defense if they hate them or anything, I swear.*

"I think they'll like anything you get for them," Elza said. Art nodded firmly.

They'd just be humoring me, I answered in my mind. As much as I appreciated that, I needed real advice. So the three of us searched around, tried out a few other shops, and finally went back to buy the first set of pouches I'd thought looked good: three of the same shape in different colors.

"Is there anything you want, Elza and Art?" I was thinking of

treating them while we were out, but they turned me down.

"I'd rather have you teach me how to cook," Elza said after some hesitation.

I was about to suggest we head back so I could start the lesson, but then I realized I'd forgotten something important.

Our next set of stops was a series of item shops that sold herbs. This was dungeon prep, but I wasn't buying them for us; they were for Joshua as payback for all he'd done for us. Layla's group had also been talking about going into the dungeon soon, so I thought I should give them some potions too.

A thought flashed through my mind: *It would be free if I picked them myself...* Apparently just my natural frugality at play.

"Hmm? What's that all about?"

After hunting down cheap herbs in different shops, we found ourselves in the dungeon district, where we saw a group dressed in full armor and armed with weapons and shields. Some also carried staves.

"I think...those are knights," Elza said.

"Knights?" *What would knights be doing here?*

"A long time ago, my dad said he saw knights in the dungeon," she added.

Does that mean these knights are going into the dungeon? Some of them were carrying large bags, so it seemed likely. Still, the atmosphere seemed quite grave, almost tense. A crowd of people watched as the knights eventually set off for the adventurers' guild.

We watched them go, too, then headed home and ate lunch. We thought about eating at the stalls, but Elza was against it, much to Art's dismay.

The girls returned soon after, and we talked over various things while we ate.

"I wish I could have cooked with you," Mia said.

But what could I do? You weren't there!

That night, at dinner, I decided to debut my curry. Everyone was shocked by the flavor, and the sight of them shoveling it down made all the effort feel worthwhile. *Of course, I used my Creation skill to make the spices, so I guess it wasn't really* that *much effort...*

"These are for us?"

After dinner we had a bath and enjoyed the sweets the girls had brought back. When we were relaxing after all that, we gave the girls their presents.

"Yes, we picked them out with big brother! Right?!" Elza responded proudly.

"Yeah..." Art agreed awkwardly.

Seeing that, the three girls took the pouches and happily affixed them to their waists.

"So cute! They look perfect on you!" Elza complimented them enthusiastically.

The three looked perfectly flattered by the compliments. Hikari was beaming, and it was easy to see that Mia was delighted too. Sera looked a little self-conscious, but she was definitely pleased as well.

"Good night," Elza said at last when bedtime arrived.

"Night," Art stammered, and both returned to their rooms.

The tea party had been very memorable, with Art showing a rare wide-eyed expression as he stuffed cake into his mouth.

Guess it really is worth shelling out for these things sometimes. The tea party wasn't over yet, though. Iroha had said she wouldn't be back today, but I decided to double-check that with Detect Presence. *Yeah, looks okay. Elza and Art aren't moving either.*

"Here we are, then." I pulled out a special cake just for Ciel from my Item Box and laid it on the table. Ciel saw it and did a little dance, but then she suddenly stopped and began slapping at the table.

I watched her.

I watched her a little bit longer.

And then...

"What, you want curry too?" I asked her. *Seriously, you don't have to nod so intensely... Sera and Mia are laughing at you. Are you okay with that? What? You care more about the curry?* She'd started pounding harder on the table.

I laid out some curry along with some bread, and Ciel was over the moon. I could almost hear her humming as she began to chow

down.

Ciel didn't seem to like spicy stuff either, but I'd made sure to use a mild recipe that even my young companions could appreciate. *I prefer spice myself, but I'll just do that another time.*

When that was done, Hikari started tugging at my sleeve, demanding something with her eyes. *You can't have more curry, but what about cake?* I chose a cake from my Item Box and gave it to her, then felt more pairs of expectant eyes upon me. *What, you guys too?!*

We ended up holding another tea party, but I had no one to blame except myself. Personally, I was sticking with tea.

The three girls and one animal chatted happily as they ate. As trivial as the sight was, I found myself watching them.

"That reminds me. When we were walking around town with Layla and the others, there was a little commotion at the gate."

"Yeah, she went to ask about it."

"She came back and was acting a little different, right?"

Sera said she'd asked what happened, but they'd never told her. They'd hit up the cake shop right after that, so they'd forgotten until just now.

Then, as a small digression...

"Master Sora, would you be willing to sell those spices?" That was Iroha's question when she tried my curry the next day, which surprised even me.

Guess curry's every bit as popular in other worlds too!

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"I see, so *this* is the famous curry..." Seris exclaimed in amazement.

It was lunchtime, and I'd offered her some of my perfected curry recipe. I'd assumed she'd eaten it before, since she'd had that recipe book, but apparently not.

"The *last* person from another world I met couldn't cook at *all*..." she added with a sad smile.

It looked like the otherworlder she'd known was a different

person from that book's author.

"More *importantly*...are you *really* going to the dungeon *soon*?"

"Yeah, just the four of us this time. We learned the basic ins and outs on our last trip, so I'd like to see how far we can get all by ourselves."

"When will you be *going*?" she asked.

"We're going to submit our plan today and try it out tomorrow."

"I see. I'll *miss* you..."

We talked for a little while after that, and then I told the teacher of the adventurer course that we were going to the dungeon. The teacher responded that we didn't have to submit a plan since we weren't having our attendance counted anyway.

Lastly, I stopped by the reference room and read up on the monsters that appeared on the second and third floors, then headed back home early.

This time, we wouldn't have a guide. It would be just the four of us. We had my automap, and the monsters on the floors we'd be exploring were limited to wulfs and goblins. My one concern would be the rarely appearing goblin mages, so if we ran into one of those we'd have to focus on beating them first.

Besides that, I reminded myself to check everyone's level before we went in.

Chapter 6

"Take care on your trip."

"Have a...good trip..."

Elza and Art saw us off as we left.

We were heading out earlier than we usually would, and the city was still quiet, with very few people around. But as we entered the dungeon district, we found a sudden burst of activity. A crowd of people trying to make a living as porters stood in front of the guild, calling to the adventurers passing by. Many were children about Hikari's age. Mia and Hikari just stared at them.

We entered the adventurers' guild and found it bustling with adventurers.

"Okay, Sera, do you want to check your messages?" Since we were in the guild anyway, I decided to suggest that she check.

I briefly channeled mana into my magic transmitter to check the girls' location, and I found that they'd gotten quite close. I remembered that my own receiver had been shattered back in Frieren, so they wouldn't be able to find my location if they checked. *But we're going to see each other soon, so it's probably okay, right?* I'd only created the transmitters because I was worried I couldn't use the guild's messaging functions after faking my death to get away from Elesia's forces, and I planned to stick with them for a while once we were reunited either way.

I also decided to take this opportunity to switch from glasses to a mask, looking around to make sure no one was watching me before making the switch.

While Sera was with the receptionist, I listened to the conversations around me and heard a lot of people mention that the prices for monster magistones and materials had gone up lately. Prices on boss and advanced subtype magistones had particularly

skyrocketed, and it seemed that the monster materials on lower floors got tagged with higher premiums the farther down you went.

This was a good deal for adventurers, but it might have been a small problem for me—I didn't know how much treant materials might go for, but it sounded like they were quite a popular material for mage staves, so they were probably in high demand. The fact that the Guardian's Blade were the only people who could get to the thirty-fifth floor would just make it worse.

It seemed the other clans had only gotten as far as the thirty-first floor. *They know what kind of monsters they'll find, but they still can't make progress. The lower floors must be harder to get through than I thought...*

"Master, we got a message," Sera said happily as she returned. It was unusual to see her so openly delighted.

The letter she was holding explained that Rurika and Chris had reached a border city between the Beastland and the Magic Nation. However, Rurika had taken ill on the road and needed some time to rest before they got moving again.

"You think Rurika's in bad shape or something?" Sera asked worriedly.

I doubted that was the case, though. From a stamina perspective, I was more worried about Chris. "She might just be tired from the long journey," I reassured her. "I'm sure you can ask her for the details once you're back together."

If the situation were serious, I was sure she'd have mentioned it. The fact that she hadn't done so meant it was probably just an issue of getting some rest.

"Good point. I'll do that." Sera seemed to take my words to heart, and we got moving again.

We headed for the island that contained the dungeon entrance and found quite a few people waiting in front of the shrine this time. It was most likely a coincidence; many adventurers in this world liked to start out early, after all.

We joined the line and felt a lot of people staring at us. Not only were we wearing school uniforms, but the small size of our party probably stood out as well.

“Hey, buddy. You, the kid with the mask.”

At first I didn’t realize I was the one being addressed. Lots of people were wearing masks, after all, and I’d been deep in thought. I’d been thinking so much about the letter from Chris and the prices of materials that I’d forgotten about my mask entirely.

“What is it?” I finally asked.

The words had come from a bearded man with a ferocious countenance. “You’re students at Magius, yeah?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You gonna be okay?” he said, his imposing face apparently belying a considerate nature. “Looks like there’s only four of you.” I found myself thinking of Syphon, the veteran adventurer who had also been kinder than he looked. Maybe it was because Gytz had also been on my mind lately since I’d been using Shield Arts.

“We’ll be fine,” I responded. “We’re only going to the second floor toda—”

“Oh, really?” he said quickly, cutting me off. “Say no more, then. Not that I think anyone here’d try something on students, but you never know what kind of idiots you might run into. I should’ve been more careful about how I asked. Sorry ’bout that.”

Apparently there were people who would do bad things to you if they knew what floors you were going to. I’d have to be careful. “Not at all; thank you for the advice,” I said aloud. “I’ll be more cautious in the future.”

“You’re a lot more polite than you look. Well, if anything happens __”

Before the man could finish, someone who looked like his partymate approached from behind. “What are you doing? We can’t get in without you, so hurry it up!” He turned to me. “Sorry. Was he causing trouble for you?” he said, looking back at the man. “If you wanna hit on girls, do it after we get back.” And with that, both were gone. It had felt like a bit of a whirlwind.

“He looked nasty. But he was nice?” Hikari said, and I agreed.

Our turn came up after that, and I noticed two people in guild uniforms standing in front of the rock. I didn’t think they’d been there last time, but there were a lot more people going into the

dungeon lately, so maybe they'd been sent there to regulate entry and prevent trouble.

However, the way they carried themselves made me suspect they were just receptionists. Hikari looked at them with an appraising eye.

"You're going to... I see. Do be careful, then," said one of them.

We registered our dungeon cards as a party, then moved on to the second floor.

Just before the stairway to the second floor, we went over our formation. Hikari and Sera would walk in front, with me and Mia in the back.

I also went over the ins and outs of the Phtera Shield with Mia. It had the useful property that you could channel mana into it to increase its size, but I'd realized that a bigger shield came with the drawback of cutting off more of your sight lines. You could continuously fine-tune its size by channeling specific amounts of mana into it, but it was a hard thing to get the knack of, so we'd have to just practice it little by little.

"Still, in battle with wulfs you'd probably better dodge instead," I said.

"Yeah, Big Sis Mia. Wulfs hit hard," Hikari added.

That was true, especially when they picked up speed. It would probably be too much for Mia at her current level.

[**Name:** Hikari / **Job:** Special Slave / **Level:** 33 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

[**Name:** Mia / **Job:** Debt Slave / **Level:** 7 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

[**Name:** Sera / **Job:** Debt Slave / **Level:** 66 / **Race:** Beastfolk / **Status:** —]

Those were the stats Appraise Person revealed for each of them.

I'd have to see if their levels had gone up at all by the end of our adventure.

"I'll go in first this time," I said. "I'll come right back if anything goes wrong, so if I'm not back in ten seconds, come down in this order: Hikari, Mia, then Sera."

I took a step out, activating my Shield spell and having an attack spell ready on my lips just in case. I carried my sword and shield too, of course, so I was ready to deal with any monsters that might have been lurking at the bottom of the stairs.

The reason I'd asked Sera to come last was in case anyone was coming down from the first floor. No one could go straight from the entrance to the second floor while we were in the stairway, but we might run into people coming from the first floor.

I entered the second floor and didn't see any signs of life around the stairs, even after using Detect Presence and calling up my automap. I waited a little ways past the stairs until the girls arrived in the order I'd given them, with Hikari in the lead.

"Okay, let's get moving," I said when they were all there. I didn't want to stick around too long and risk someone else coming by.

We formed ranks and started walking. Hikari and Sera took the front line but followed my instructions about which way to go. I'd actually told them that I was using my skill to know which direction would let us avoid monsters and which way the stairs were.

"Master's amazing," Hikari said, starry-eyed.

That said, I'd also told them that I might not always be able to detect monsters using concealment skills of their own, so it was dangerous to just take everything I said as gospel. We might even run into floors and traps later on that could confuse my automap. And just knowing where the monsters were didn't necessarily mean we could avoid all of them.

"Hikari, there's a monster a little ways ahead."

"Got it. I'm fine."

I wondered briefly if it would be better to let her follow her own instincts instead, but Hikari said that she didn't mind my input and it was good to have confirmation. The point of saying it out loud was mainly to warn Mia, anyway.

Indeed, Mia heard the words and gripped her staff a little tighter.

"Mia, relax a bit more," I said.

"Yeah. We'll keep you safe. Don't worry," Sera added.

At this, Mia managed to take a big, steadying breath.

"Big Sis Mia, watch how I fight a wulf."

We kept walking for a while until we came upon a single wulf, which came charging at top speed when it noticed us. Hikari took a step forward and faced it, dagger drawn. She looked completely at ease, showing not a hint of nervousness. The wulf leaped the moment it got in range, but Hikari slipped to the side in that same instant and dealt a killing blow with one slice of her dagger.

"Wulfs like to jump when they attack. They're a target in the air, so it's an easy win," Hikari said to Mia.

She made it sound simple, but it was easier said than done. I saw Mia grimace in discomfort.

"Hikari, that might be something to work up to eventually. But you could follow the action, right?" Sera asked.

Mia nodded. Having done mock duels with the two of them, she should certainly be able to follow the movements of a wulf. They were both clearly faster.

"So let's have master block the wulf's attacks and then you attack it. It'll be easier for him than for either of us, since he has a shield," Sera suggested.

With that decided, the next time we fought a wulf I let it attack me, while Mia countered. This was because I could stand my ground even if the wulf hit my shield with a full-on charge.

"Big Sis Mia, don't close your eyes." "Mia, swing as hard as you can." "Big Sis Mia, put your back into it." Hikari and Sera didn't mince words in their advice while Mia fought.

But each time, Mia nodded and adjusted her movements to match their suggestions. The first time she'd hit the wulf, her face had gone pale, but she must have gradually gotten used to it, because now her swing was picking up speed. Even Ciel, who had been watching nervously at first, seemed relieved to see Mia's growth.

"Next time, try one by yourself," Hikari said.

"Don't you think it's too early?" I asked.

"Big Sis Mia can handle it. It's what she wants too," Hikari told me.

I couldn't say no to that. Seeing the determination in Mia's eyes, how could I? I thought about using my Shield spell for insurance, but Mia refused that, too, saying she didn't want to let her guard down without realizing it.

"Big Sis Mia, are you ready?" Hikari asked as we turned the corner and saw the wulf.

Mia gave a firm nod in response.

Then melee between Mia and the wulf began. It ended with a sterling victory for Mia, but getting there wasn't exactly easy going. The wulf's initial charge made her so nervous that her movements slowed. Unable to counter, she just barely managed to block the wulf's attack with her shield. The inertia from it sent Mia stumbling backward instead, after which she just managed to find her footing.

Thinking it was hopeless, I almost stepped in, but I stopped myself. Mia hadn't given in to fear yet. There was still determination in her eyes. Then Mia faced the wulf head-on, and when it spun around and attacked again, she finished it with a critical hit.

I couldn't help but let out a big exhale in response. *Looks like I was more nervous than she was...*

"Great work, Big Sis Mia!" Hikari sheathed the knife in her hand and hugged Mia tightly. Hikari had said that Mia could handle it, but she'd clearly had something ready just in case things went south.

Mia looked a bit stunned by the hug, as if reality hadn't sunk in yet, but she eventually snapped out of her daze and smiled happily. Her expression seemed to show a sense of disbelief that she'd really made it through.

"We got a lot of meat."

These were the shocking first words out of Hikari's mouth as we found the third floor. True, we'd hunted a lot of wulfs, but that seemed to be missing the point. Ciel was dancing happily as well, probably thinking about all the food she'd get from it.

Sera gave a pained smile at the sight, and Mia took on a

momentary thousand-yard stare. Had Hikari encouraged her to hunt so many wulfs not so that Mia could get combat experience, but to get more wulf meat for herself? That was probably the question that had shaken her for a moment.

Her gaze reverted to normal immediately, though; she was probably telling herself not to think too hard about it.

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After eating lunch, we moved to the third floor, where the only monsters we ran into were goblins and goblin fighters. The only difference between the two types was that the fighters' bodies were a little bigger, so it was hard to identify them at a glance.

They hit harder than their counterparts, though. It was barely noticeable to someone with my stats, but Mia said she could feel the difference.

"How did you like fighting goblins?" I asked.

"I think they're easier than fighting wulfs. They move slower than Hikari and Sera too."

Understandable.

"But their faces are rather scary, I guess," she added.

Later, we ended up crossing paths with a goblin mage, but Hikari dispatched it easily with her throwing knives. I wanted to test the Phtera Shield's magic resistance, but I'd realized it might be better to test it against my own spells where I could control the power and other variables, so I'd do that another time.

"Is this all for today?" Mia asked.

Beating goblins didn't yield much, so we'd focused mainly on making progress to the stairs to the fourth floor, which we ended up reaching in just two hours.

"What do you think, master?" Sera asked.

Heading for the fifth floor might let us get out faster since we could use the quick escape function, but I'd heard that the fourth-floor encounters were mainly packs of wulfs. We could surely beat them given our party's abilities, but I decided we'd better turn back for the moment. I'd noticed during our previous excursion that

walking along these narrow halls took a greater psychological toll than walking around normally, and I could tell the other three were more tired than usual.

"Let's head back for today. We'll spend a night here, then leave tomorrow."

I also wanted to spend some time camping in the dungeon. There seemed to be a lot of monsters on the fourth floor, so it was good to get experience camping on the safer floors with fewer monsters.

"But it was just like this the last time we came... You don't run into many people on these floors, do you?" I mused. Considering all those people coming in at the entrance, I'd assumed it would be rather crowded, but it seemed paradoxically deserted. Maybe the other adventurers had moved on ahead to the more profitable floors?

"I'd rather not have company looking down on me, so it's fine for me," Sera said.

"Yeah, and it means Ciel can eat," Hikari added. It definitely was nice not to have to hide her, and that also meant I could use my Item Box without hesitation. "Strange, though. It's always light here."

She was right about that: It was always light in the dungeon. I'd heard that some of the floors down below were always dark, while some of the multiple-of-five floors had proper day-night cycles.

There were a lot of other things about dungeons that differed from the outside as well. How you dealt with dead monsters, for one thing. Normally you'd have to make sure to burn their corpses, but dungeon monsters disappeared ten minutes after you removed their magistones. However, their bodies had to touch the ground for this to happen, so you could prevent this by placing them on tarps or in bags.

The ground and walls in dungeons were also indestructible, which meant I couldn't set up a proper campground for us. If we just lay down, we'd simply feel the cold rocks against our backs. We could start a fire if we had something to burn, and the smoke would hit the ceiling and disperse instead of building up in the tunnels.

People also tended not to bring firewood, since it was cumbersome, though the larger clans or wealthier adventurers would bring magic items for that purpose. Most people didn't like the taste of rations, and if you had someone who could cook, you generally wouldn't hurt for ingredients—at least on the floors with edible monsters.

"In that sense, we're quite blessed," Mia said, looking down at the food in her hands.

Regarding the recovery of monster materials—in addition to my own Item Box, I'd enchanted the pouches the kids and I had picked out with a storage spell to make them functionally similar to bags of holding. Obviously they couldn't preserve ingredients the same way, but that might become possible if I got some better-quality magistones.

"Yeah, master is amazing. I'd follow him anywhere," Hikari added.

I was glad to see Ciel nod in agreement, but I couldn't stop thinking that food seemed to be all they cared about lately.

"Let's take watch in shifts. How about me and Mia, then Hikari and Sera?" I proposed, and nobody seemed to object.

We'd set up camp in the middle of a passage. Camping out at a dead end might make it easier to keep watch, but we chose this to make sure we had an escape route if we needed one. We were back on the second floor, so the only monsters around were wulfs, which wouldn't be much of a threat to us if they attacked. But an attack by fellow humans would be far less predictable, so I wanted to be prepared for that possibility.

First, Hikari and Sera rested on mats I'd pulled out of my Item Box. It was always warm here, so thankfully they didn't have to wrap up in a sheet or anything to keep warm. I also magically created a block of ice and laid it on top of a dish.

"We're safe, right, Sora?" Mia asked.

"Yeah, no signs of monsters on my automap," I told her. Still, we had to be careful to sit in a position where we could keep watch in both directions. We might have to face opponents that could slip through both my automap and Detect Presence.

"What do you think of the dungeon this time around?"

"Well, I thought traveling had built up my stamina, but this is nothing like traveling."

"I think you're right."

"You don't look tired to me at all," Mia said with a pout.

That was thanks to my Walking skill, of course. Still, even if my physical condition was okay, the sight of the monotonous scenery tended to drain my mental fortitude.

Even so, we sat watch until the ice melted and then swapped out with Hikari and Sera. I hadn't seen anything like clocks in this world, and I wished I had a magic tool that would let you know the time. There was no way to keep track of it in a dungeon otherwise, so this time around, I mostly told time based on Hikari's and Ciel's stomachs.

After waking up, we had breakfast, returned to the first floor, and made it outside. And thus, our second dungeon dive was complete.

"Here's our reward," Sera said, returning after tallying it up. The only things she'd sold had been the goblin magistones, though she'd also turned in the trophies we'd collected from the monsters we'd beaten.

"But Hikari, what about the wulfs?" I asked. "You want us to break them down ourselves?" We'd hunted quite a few of them, so I'd thought we might have the guild break them down for us and keep just what we needed, but Hikari had disagreed.

"It's work," Hikari said cryptically. Then she strode off quickly.

We trailed after her in confusion, out of the guild and to the plaza out front, which was bustling with activity this close to noon. Boisterous voices came from the stalls as they sold dish after dish. Children watched from a distance, some drooling, some hunched over with hands clutching their stomachs.

Mia noticed them and seemed to consider stopping, but Hikari was walking fast, so she shook off her hesitation and hastened to keep up.

"Hey, if it isn't you guys again. Here to buy more?"

Hikari's destination was the meat skewer stall whose owner had told us about the orphans before.

“Fifteen...sixteen big ones,” Hikari said.

The stall owner smiled brightly at this, but he also seemed worried. “Can you really eat all of that?” he asked.

“Yeah, taking them back.” Hikari was about to pay herself, but then she scowled and looked at me, apparently not having enough money. I paid for the rest, and she said, “Thanks, master.”

I had no idea why she was buying so many skewers, but she seemed to have something in mind.

The sizzle of the meat tickled our ears as a delicious aroma wafted out of the stall. I could sense many sets of eyes watching me. Feeling a bit uncomfortable, I waited for them to finish cooking. Once it was done, Hikari invited each of us to take a few skewers in each hand, which was probably quite a sight for an onlooker to see.

Then Hikari turned around and started walking in another direction—right for the children who’d been calling out to do porter work. She stopped in front of them and held out her skewers. The children didn’t seem to know how to respond. Many of them didn’t seem like they could stand, so they just looked at her from where they sat.

“Do some work. This is your reward,” Hikari said simply.

The children didn’t seem to know how to respond to that, so Mia talked to Hikari, then started explaining Hikari’s idea to the children on her behalf: She wanted them to break down the wulf bodies in exchange for the skewers.

The proposal brought many of their eyes to the skewers, but nobody volunteered. Hikari and Mia didn’t seem to understand why, but I did, so I stepped in to negotiate on their behalf.

“I’m Sora. I’m a merchant and their master. They hunted a lot of wulfs in the dungeon today. They want you to help them strip the wulfs down. They’ll teach you how to do it too.” At this, I started thinking. *What would be a good place to strip the wulfs down?*
“Hikari, do you have a place in mind for this to happen?”

“I got it, master,” Hikari responded immediately.

Could you rent space at the adventurers’ guild? Or did she want to leave the city? If the children left, wouldn’t they need to pay to get back in? At any rate...

"Do you guys have a leader...someone who's in charge?" I asked.

"That's me."

All eyes fell on the largest boy among them. He introduced himself as Norman, and though he was the tallest, he was still shorter than Hikari.

"How about you and... Pick four more, okay?"

"Four..." Norman looked around, and I could tell the other children were nervous. Was it out of fear, or was it hope? "No. I can't choose," he said at last. "The ones who don't get picked..." His eyes kept flicking between the children and the skewers in Hikari's hands.

The kid clearly cared about his friends, and he was probably worried that the children who didn't get picked wouldn't get to eat.

So I corrected him. "Don't worry. You and the other four you pick will come work for us. All these skewers are your reward, so you can choose how you divide them."

Surprise appeared on Norman's face. "Th-Thank you. In that case..."

Norman chose two kids about as tall as him and two who looked smaller but more agile.

"For the skewers...is this everyone in your group?" I asked.

Norman explained that they lived in a group building with about thirty kids in total. There were only sixteen of them there at the moment, but the others were waiting at home.

"Should we buy more for the rest?" I asked, but he said this would be enough. That seemed plausible—Hikari had ordered such large ones that they were probably too much for a single child to finish off.

"Come with us, then," I said, and Norman's group split up. The first group contained the five who had volunteered to break down the wulf bodies, while the others took the skewers back to their home base.

On our way to the house, Norman told us about his team. As I'd expected, many of their parents had been adventurers as well. The building they were using as a base camp was an inn that had been run by the grandfather of one of their group, but the grandfather

had passed away.

"Occasionally a guy who came from the same kind of life would hire us, but lately his party's been going to the lower levels, and we couldn't keep up. He said it wasn't safe."

I wondered if that also had something to do with the price of materials going up.

"Is this the place?" he asked as we arrived.

"Yeah, just wait a minute."

Elza and Art came to meet us at the door. They seemed a little flustered by the sight of Norman's group behind us, but I decided I'd leave Mia to do the explaining.

I went into the yard and started by building a house from earth magic. *Guess I should prepare a basin for water, a table for dissection and a line for hanging the bodies?* I created the different necessities while talking it over with Hikari.

Norman and the others watched us, wide-eyed. "A-Are you a mage, mister?" he asked in surprise.

I responded that I was a merchant and showed them my guild card, but they seemed suspicious. *Look, it's true, okay?* I thought, slightly flustered, before realizing it was probably because of my magic academy uniform.

"Hikari will teach you how to break them down," I said after that. "Go on, Hikari."

"Yeah, okay. I'll go quick."

Why don't you take it slow? I thought with a wince. *Norman looks scared enough as it is...*

Despite what she'd said, Hikari took her time slowly breaking down the dissection process. The first step was to exsanguinate the bodies. She explained how to hang them up, and they broke up into teams of two and three to get the work done. Sera also went around offering help where she could.

The blood would stain the floor, so I prepared a receptacle to catch it. I'd also seen something I could use the blood to make with Creation, so that was another reason I wanted to keep it.

They'd hung up five wulfs in total, and it would take a while for the blood to fully drain out, so we took a late lunch. Of course, I

made some for Norman's team too.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Help yourselves."

"Yes, Hikari's right. There's plenty to go around," Mia said with a smile so warm and heartening that it made Norman blush. The Saint appeal probably played a role in that as well.

After the kids had eaten their fill, they went back to following Hikari's instructions in breaking down the wulfs. They extracted the magistones and skinned the bodies. Mia watched with bated breath here because they were still so new to the process. She'd probably wanted to go cooking with Elza and Art but remained on standby in case anyone got injured. I told her it was fine since I could use Heal as well, but she told me she'd be too worried to concentrate anyway.

The kids ended up working until sundown, having broken down three of the wulfs in total.

"Okay, I'll walk you back," Hikari said when they were done.

Norman said they'd be fine alone, but we couldn't help but worry about such young kids going off on their own, so she and I both ended up going with them. Hikari had offered to go alone at first, but I'd thought a slave walking by herself could invite trouble. It would've been one thing if she'd been in her school uniform, but she'd changed into her traveling clothes for the dissection process.

"Um, what's this?" Norman said as I offered him a parcel.

"Your rations for tomorrow. You can't work for free, right? I want your help tomorrow as well. This makes you want to come too, right?" When they heard my proposal, the kids looked at each other, then back at me, and nodded with a smile.

"Yeah, got it," Norman said.

"And tomorrow, I want you and two of the others from today, plus two new kids. If anyone wants to learn how to break wulfs down, give them priority."

"Got it. Thanks, Big Brother Sora and Big Sis Hikari." And so the five kids went off into the night.

I watched them go, then looked at Hikari and asked, "Was that what you wanted?"

"Yeah. Thanks, master."

"But what about school tomorrow?"

"I'll take the day off."

"I see."

We walked side by side on our way home talking about different things on the way—mostly why she'd made that offer to the children. Hikari explained that after she saw Mia with Elza and Art, seeing all those kids in front of the guild made her want to do something too.

"It's not easy being hungry," she concluded. It was a typical Hikari sentiment. "And...master, sorry I didn't ask first."

I ruffled her hair a little. "Don't worry about it. Have you been thinking about that ever since we went into the dungeon?" I'd known we were trying to hunt wulfs for Mia's training, but Hikari had also gone after them pretty aggressively.

Hikari nodded firmly in response. I was happy to see her being so thoughtful, but I also felt a little sad.

◇◇◇

"I *see*... Hikari did *that*..."

Seris had asked us why we were one member short today, so I'd explained what had gone down yesterday. A surprised expression appeared on her face. She seemed to think for a moment, then smiled again.

I'd found myself entranced by Seris's rapidly changing expression, which earned me a pinch on the cheek from Mia. It really hurt.

"Oh, *Mia*...are you jealous *again*? You really have *nothing* to worry about!" When Seris noticed, she threw her arms around Mia.

While Seris was bouncing around, Ciel was silently eating. She seemed a little bit down because of Hikari's absence.

After Seris calmed down and Ciel finished eating, we were enjoying a quiet moment when...

"What do you mean, Hikari's not here?!" Layla shouted, breaking the silence again.

I told her what I'd told Seris. At first she seemed truly moved, but a moment later she looked depressed.

"I see...while I, the lord's daughter, do nothing..." she rebuked herself.

"That's not your *fault*... Drawing attention in such a manner could stir gossip from *other* fronts..." Seris said, comforting Layla like a big sister.

"By the way, Layla. Didn't you say you were going into the dungeon again?" I decided to lighten the mood with a change of subject.

"Yes, we're going to try to go farther than we ever have before."

"I'd like to give you these, then. Use them if you're ever in danger." I pulled a collection of good-quality potions from the bottom of my Item Box.

I'd met up with Joshua's party before lunch and given them a potion set as well, as I'd heard they'd be trying for the sixteenth floor soon. Joshua tried to turn me down, but I insisted it was a thank-you for all he'd done for me. He said that if there was anything he could ever do in return, I should just ask.

After that, Layla left the library with Mia, who said she'd be attending the holy magic club again today. Seris called me back when I tried to go with them, so I stayed.

"What can I help you with?" I asked her.

"Ah, Sora. Would you mind if I asked you something?" Seris said, looking more serious than I'd ever seen her. The usual lilt in her tone was gone, and she addressed me in that focused manner of speaking that sometimes reared its head from her. "Have you heard about the dungeon being rather crowded with adventurers right now? And the lower floors being particularly encouraged?"

"Because the buying prices for monster materials have gone up?"

"Yes, exactly. You see, that's being done as a prevention measure. That might also be the reason Layla's party is trying to reach a new floor."

What Seris went on to describe felt almost unbelievable—an event similar to the stampede in Messa could also occur in the dungeon in Majorica.

It was a phenomenon known as a monster parade, in which a dungeon became overpopulated with monsters. During such an

event, monsters would begin moving freely between floors, advanced subtypes would become more common, and they'd eventually overflow to the surface. The dungeon entrance in Majorica was surrounded by walls and water—only accessible by a drawbridge—as a response to such tragedies in the past.

"I think I understand. But why now? If you knew it was happening, why didn't you take countermeasures earlier?" I asked.

"The truth is, we expected more time. The shaking...the earthquakes, as you called them? Those are the first signs..."

Seris said she'd been relieved at first to hear about the clan competitions and people setting new floor records. But in practice, preparing to set new records meant less overall hunting on the lower floors. It was said that if you didn't hunt monsters quickly enough, mana could coagulate in a dungeon, and that could lead to a monster parade when it reached certain levels.

Not even Seris knew for sure if that was true, but the theory was persuasive, and monster parades did in fact seem to have happened more in the past when the hunting in a dungeon lessened out. Defeating strong lower-floor monsters and bosses was more helpful in preventing the coagulation of mana than beating monsters on higher floors.

"You talk like you've seen it," I said.

"I have seen it. Many times. In other dungeons as well... It may be related to the birth of the Demon King. Others have said that his birth stimulates activity in a dungeon."

It seemed a combination of unfortunate factors had brought us to this point.

"So, what would you like to ask me?" I finally said.

"I'd like you to head for the lower floors too. And I'd like you to hunt monsters while surveying them."

"And that will help prevent the monster parade?"

"Yes. I'd like as many people down there as possible. And if you could, I'd like you to defeat the boss on the lowest floor, level forty...though I realize that would be very difficult."

Entering a boss room without knowing the nature of the boss could indeed be very risky. The way the dungeon in Majorica

worked, the bosses tended to be an advanced subtype version of the monsters that appeared on the nearby floors, but...

Wait. Did Seris just say the fortieth floor was the lowest one?

"Will beating the boss on the lowest floor do something?" I asked, but I couldn't stop thinking. They'd said that the Guardian's Blade reaching the thirty-fifth floor had established a new record. *If floors thirty-six and below are unexplored, how does she know the fortieth floor is the lowest one?*

"It will quell the extra activity. That's the most reliable method. But I won't insist that you go that far. In fact, if you're ever inclined to enter the boss room on the fortieth floor, make sure to tell me first. I'd prefer that you focus on clearing everything before that. If as many people as possible are hunting on the lower floors, I think we can buy some time, and it might even settle things down."

I remembered the stampede in Messa. We'd managed to stave off disaster then, but while the dungeon was walled off, it was also at the center of the city. A monster parade bleeding out into the streets would probably cause massive damage.

Besides, it wasn't like it was a problem for us to go into the dungeon. I'd already wanted to go there to get money and materials.

But there was something else about Seris's words that concerned me. Her asking me to tell her before we went into the fortieth-floor boss room felt odd. It was almost as if she knew what was there.

But Seris's next words blew all those thoughts away.

"I know you're concerned about Mia and the others," she said. "So if you agree to do as I ask, I'll give you my glasses."

She meant the Eyes of Eliana. *But aren't those really important to her? And why does she want this so badly she's offering them up?*

"I can't accept those," I told her. "Besides, even if I took them, you'd have no way of knowing I was keeping my end of the bargain, right?"

She laughed. "You wouldn't say that if you meant to deceive me. Besides, I can tell how far down you went and what you hunted from your dungeon card." Seris smiled in amusement.

Her earlier manner—that frighteningly serious, almost desperate

expression—had gotten me a bit nervous, but her smile now sent that all packing.

"Anyway, I'll do it. I was already planning to dungeon dive, so I don't need your Eyes of Eliana. If you want to give me a reward, pick something else. I don't know if we can make it to the bottom, but we'll get as far as we can."

After I said that, I felt like Seris watched me carefully for a minute. Then she said, "I understand. I'll prepare something suitable."

So we agree, then? I thought. Then suddenly...

"Oh, I *know*! What about a *kiss*?" She had gone back to her usual lilting demeanor.

I take it back. We don't agree at all!

I refused that offer too, of course. She'd really knocked me for a loop, but I'd done my best to stay professional. I thought one of us might have been flushing a little bit, too, but maybe that was just my imagination.

◇Seris's Perspective 2

I stared at the door for a while after he'd gone. *Did I go too far?* I wondered. I felt like I might have done wrong by Mia as well.

When I'd said I'd give him the Eyes of Eliana, he'd looked a bit flustered and hesitant and said he didn't need them.

"I meant it, though..." I whispered. I would have gladly given him the glasses in exchange for the favor I'd asked. True, they were important to me—irreplaceable, in fact—but the city was far more important. It was the resting place of the last of my comrades, and so it was a treasure to me.

I experienced time in a way different from other people. I'd seen countless lives come and go—all had died and left me behind—so I'd always thought of comrades as people I simply spent a bit more time with than most.

It was those people who had changed that. They'd laughed so merrily, lived each day with all their hearts. It was as if the brevity of

their lifespans made them savor each day all the more.

How much time had I spent with them before I'd realized things were different? We'd traveled between so many cities and villages, fought, offered service...

It had brought out emotions I'd never felt before. Rather, it had reawakened them—returning things that I'd lost long ago to me.

And then, we'd arrived in a certain land and taken on a dungeon that had been called impenetrable. That dungeon was a fascination for many people, who challenged it in a cycle of death and rebirth.

I'd worked with my comrades to reach the lowest floor and beat the boss there. At the bottom, we'd found something like another door, but we'd investigated it and concluded that it was merely ornamental. Nothing we did would open it, and we couldn't go any further.

And when we had beaten the boss, I'd heard a voice inside my head: *XX Dungeon has been conquered.*

I was sure the others had heard it too. And I believed that when we beat it, we all received a gift—or was it a curse? That was how it felt to me, at least—because on that day, I became all but immortal.

The "gift" seemed to be different for everyone, and my comrades all seemed delighted by it. My own felt like the kind of thing that others wanted desperately, although to me it felt like a curse.

I believe I still might die someday, but I have no way of knowing for certain, or when that day might come.

After that, peace came to that dungeon city. At the very least, I hadn't heard any talk of monster parades occurring there since our conquest of the dungeon.

It was a beautiful memory...and a foolish one. Beating that dungeon had made us overconfident. We'd convinced ourselves that we could do absolutely anything.

And so we'd come here. We'd wanted to clear another dungeon that had never been cleared before.

It was all going smoothly. It had taken us a lot of time, but we'd arrived at the fortieth floor. The reason I thought it was the last was because we saw that decorative door in the boss room once again.

The reason this wasn't on the records was that our attempt had

been so long ago that the records had been lost in the many monster parades since then.

But in the end...it lost us one of our precious comrades. Rather, he'd given his life to save us. It should have been impossible to escape from a boss room, but he'd used his skill to get us out.

"Live in part for me too," he'd said with a smile.

I'd never forget those words or that smile. *Why did he smile then?* I wish I could have asked.

Was it because he was also an otherworlder that I sometimes saw shades of him in Sora? He was a hero to me. Rather...to us.

After that, we decided to stay here, in his final resting place, and prevent future monster parades. Sometimes we failed to stop them, but when that happened, we fought back the swell of monsters to keep the city from being destroyed.

All that time, we swore never to venture into that dungeon again.

And so the town reached its current state.

"Was that cruel of me?" I mused. "To ask Sora to do what we couldn't..."

I thought it over again and realized that it was. Still, fighting styles and equipment quality had improved so much since then. Perhaps I could count on these modern children to beat the dungeon that we couldn't...

If someone were to reach the fortieth floor—then I would give them the documents detailing what we'd seen. If they knew what they were up against, they might know how to prepare and how to fight it.

Of course, there was no telling if they'd actually believe me.

Interlude 3

Rurika's health had recovered, and we'd passed through an urban area to arrive in the city of Pleques.

This city was famous for having a magic academy and a dungeon, and it looked as large and prosperous as Elesia's own capital. Many of the buildings were strikingly beautiful.

But when we stopped by the adventurers' guild, we found a strangely listless atmosphere.

"It's not quite what I was expecting," Rurika said, and I had to agree.

We'd planned to stay here for one night, then move to Altal the next day. Once we arrived there, we'd be able to start the last leg of our trip: the journey to Majorica itself.

The thought of Sera waiting there for us set my heart racing. *What should I say when I meet her? What will we talk about?* Just thinking about it made me nervous.

"You're going to wear yourself out if you start all that now," Rurika teased me, even though I was sure she was feeling the same way.

But just then, a problem came up.

"We can't go to Majorica?"

Apparently the one bridge linking Altal and Majorica had collapsed, and so the route was closed.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"He says there's no way of knowing when it will be repaired, so maybe it would be easier to go through Mahia?" she proposed.

"I guess so. Maybe we should let Sera know, then."

Traveling to the capital city of Mahia would take us on a detour to the north, but I'd heard it had a slave market too, so maybe it would be for the best to stop there anyway?

Still, getting to Mahia would use up all the cash we had on hand,

so we'd have to take at least one quest there. It looked like our reunion with Sera would be postponed a bit longer.

Once we were in Mahia, we had an unexpected encounter.

"Huh? Hey, if it isn't Rurika and Chris!" a man called to us.

"Oh? Do we know each other?" Rurika asked.

"Hey, now, we took that escort quest together!" he countered.

"That's right, the Goblin's— Wait, back off!"

Before Rurika could finish the name, Syphon had advanced on her with his scary face twisted in a scowl. But the next moment, he was rubbing his head in pain after a whack from Juno. All around us, his partymates sighed knowingly.

"Darn it, why's *that* the part you had to remember?" he grumbled once he'd finally recovered.

I apologized internally, because his party's name, the Goblin's Lament, had been the first thing that came to me as well.

"Maybe because it's such an impactful name?" Rurika whispered, and I didn't try to argue.

"Well, never mind all that," he said dismissively. "You were heading to the Las Beastland last I heard, weren't you?"

"That's right," Rurika replied. "We've been and gone."

"Right. Got it..." Syphon's reaction to her words seemed strangely muted.

"What's the matter?" I found myself asking worriedly. "You seem a little down all of a sudden..."

"Oh, sorry," he said with a shake of his head. "Seeing you two here reminded me of Sora."

"Sora, huh? I hope he's doing okay..." Rurika said nostalgically. Then she noticed his reaction. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Syphon seemed hesitant to answer at first. "I guess it makes sense that you wouldn't have heard," he said. "We'd traveled to the South Gate City on the way back to the capital when we ran into him."

"I see. How was he?" Rurika asked.

Syphon's expression contorted as he answered. "Well...he'd just taken a wulf hunt quest solo. I guess he pushed himself too hard,

because...”

“What happened?” I was afraid to ask, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“It turned out the town got raided by orcs, and he played the decoy to save the kidnapped villagers.”

“Wh-What then?” Rurika asked. My chest tightened, and my heart was racing. The look on Juno’s face, just as sad and pained as Syphon’s, made me not want to hear what came next.

“Guess no one knows exactly. But they found his broken sword, his guild card, and a bloody cloak near some dead orcs— Hey, you all right?”

My mind had gone blank. I didn’t want it to be true.

“Chris, you okay?” Rurika asked with a worried look.

“I-I’m fine.” I dug down deep and lied to her. “Did anyone search the area?”

“Yeah, I hear some other adventurers did, on a quest from the villagers. But they couldn’t find the surviving orcs or Sora. Unfortunately, the forest he’d gone into was also in bad shape. There were reports that a demon was seen in the skies above it.”

“A demon?!” Rurika shouted. *One of the Demon King’s vanguards! Human-hating creatures, so lacking in mercy they don’t even leave bones behind in their wake! Or so I’ve heard...*

“Hey, keep it down,” Syphon urged her.

“Sorry. But was there really a demon sighting?” she asked.

“You didn’t hear? It appeared first near the South Gate City, and it killed quite a few knights and adventurers.”

“R-Really?” Rurika said in shock. It was the first I’d heard of it as well.

“Yeah, so they think maybe Sora also got—well, you know—and they called off the search.”

“Ah. Okay. I get it... Thanks,” Rurika mumbled.

“No problem. And um, don’t let it get to you too much, okay? It happens a lot in our line of work. It’s just part of the job.”

While the two of them talked, I stayed mostly quiet. My head was still spinning, and I couldn’t think straight. *Sora...is dead?*

“Right,” Rurika said after a long pause. “So where are you guys going next?”

"Ah, we're headed for Pleques. Juno's got a friend there, and we're gonna dive into the dungeon."

"I see. Take care, then."

"Yeah, same to you guys. Anyway, good luck!"

With that, Syphon's party left.

"There they go," Rurika said softly. "Chris, are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Yeah, I'm...f-fine."

"You don't look 'fine' to me. Either way, let's take today off."

"Sure," I responded after a while. I guess I couldn't hide it from Rurika.

Still, I clung to one little hope: They hadn't found Sora's body, which meant there was a small chance he was still alive. I had a plan to use the magic item he'd given me—the one he'd said I could use to find his location.

I mentioned this to Rurika, and she agreed that we should try it as soon as we could. In that moment, she looked... *No, never mind.*

We got ourselves a room at an inn, and I used the device in front of Rurika.

It gave no response.

That was the first time that I'd cried in a long while. I'd sworn on the day I left to find Big Sister and Sera that I'd learn to be strong, but even so, I couldn't stop crying.

Rurika comforted me silently.

I'll be weak for just one day, I told myself. *Starting tomorrow, I'll be strong again.*

Chapter 7

"We'll be heading for the dungeon again tomorrow. But there are still a lot of wulfs to break down, so I'd like you kids to keep coming by to work on those. Iroha will look after you while we're gone. You don't mind, do you, Iroha?"

"Not at all, Master Sora."

They'd met a few times before, so I assumed things would be fine, but I made sure to introduce Iroha and Norman just in case. I also told them a few things to look out for while we were gone.

Exsanguinating the wulfs had been the first order of business, and that was already finished. The storage of the wulf meat came next. For this, I told them to return the bodies to the freezer box I'd been storing them in—I'd whipped it up hastily for dungeon diving, and it seemed to be working well.

Once the job was done, Iroha would give them a reward for their work that day. The payment would be in wulf meat and money, and that would be that.

The children were very quick on the uptake, instantly absorbing anything they were taught. They'd been quite unsure about taking the wulfs apart at first, but now they could do it even without Hikari's instructions. Of course, they still weren't exactly great at it, but their work was worthy of a passing grade. They were already better than me, at the very least.

Once that was done, I went over our inventory with the girls, and we talked about the fourth and fifth floors we were planning to visit this time.

"Sora. I just have to wear it on my person?" Mia asked. I'd just handed her a new night vision item in preparation for our visit to the fifth floor.

"Yeah, I think that's enough for it to work. If you're nervous, why not go outside and check?"

"Yeah, I'll do that." Mia equipped the item, stepped outside, and came back.

"Well?" I asked.

"There's still quite a lot of darkness in the distance, but I could probably safely walk around at night like this."

"Hopefully we'll be *sleeping* at night, though," I added.

Mia nodded in agreement.

I'd given these items to all three of the girls. Hikari said she didn't need it, but I told her to hang on to it just to be safe. I wished I could've given them a more advanced version, but night vision items were in such demand that they were already sold out.

I'd thought about enchanting an item with the Night Vision skill, but the magistones I currently had on hand wouldn't let me make anything of very high quality. Another problem was that I couldn't make the kind of night vision items that could be worn anywhere on the body this way—they apparently had to be some kind of glasses—so I ended up abandoning the idea.

"Hey, Sora. Are you going to pick herbs if we make it to the fifth floor?" Mia asked me.

"That would be nice, though finding the stairs is our first priority."

She laughed. "Can't you find them easily with your skill?"

"I'm not sure. I hear the fifth floor is really big—it can take over ten days to cross it if you get really unlucky."

Joshua had been the one to tell me that, and his eyes had glazed over as he did. Finding the stairs on the fifth and fifteenth floors had apparently been a terrible struggle for his party.

"Hikari's been really looking forward to this floor too," I added.

"Really?"

"Yeah, she said she saw some fruit mentioned in the reference materials that she wanted to try. I think there were also some monsters she wanted to beat? She heard somewhere that they made good meat."

Mia laughed and said Hikari certainly had her priorities. I agreed with that heartily.

"So we'll try our best to find them," I concluded, "and gather some herbs while we're at it."

“You really do like herb-gathering, don’t you, Sora?”

“Well, with the price of potions going up, it’s a great time to make money as a merchant. But...um, are you sure you’re okay coming into the dungeon with us, Mia?”

“Yes, well... I’d like to make money too. And with everything Tricia’s been teaching me, I think I can do more things now.”

She had been attending the holy magic club quite often, and her level had increased the last time we’d been in the dungeon. Although level wasn’t everything, raising it could only be to her benefit.

[**Name:** Mia / **Job:** Debt Slave / **Level:** 9 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

“Hey, Sora,” she said. “Let’s make sure we all come back safely.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

“Oh, by the way, I know you’ve been busy lately, but did you let the school know? Tricia forgot to write a plan and ended up in quite a panic just before their dungeon dive.”

“A plan? I tried submitting one before, and they said we didn’t have to.”

“Really?” Mia looked surprised to hear that, and I repeated what I’d been told the last time I was at the school.

After saying good night to Mia, I did my own final checks in preparation for the dive.

Tomorrow we’ll be visiting the fourth floor. The reference materials said that wulfs generally appear in groups of five there. We’d faced groups of monsters on the third floor too, but those had been goblins—slow and relatively easy to deal with. *Wulfs are fast, though. Hikari and Sera are tough enough that they can probably keep any from slipping through the front line, but I should learn a new skill just in case.*

NEW

[Provoke Lv. 1]

This skill's effect was to draw the attention of the target, and it worked on humans as well as monsters. If any monsters penetrated our front lines, I could use the skill to draw attention away from my allies—by which I mostly meant Mia—and over to me. But it seemed like the lower the skill level, the smaller the area of effect, meaning more enemies would be able to resist it.

I guess I'll just have to use it a bunch of times to increase my proficiency, right? I thought. It felt like a waste to spend skill points to level it up, and I only wanted to do that if I really needed to.

I decided I'd use this chance to check my stats in general.

"Open status," I said.

Name: Fujimiya Sora / **Job:** Scout / **Race:** Otherworlder / **Level:** None
HP: 440/440 / **MP:** 440/440 / **SP:** 440/440 (+100)
Strength: 430 (+0) / **Stamina:** 430 (+0) / **Speed:** 430 (+100)
Magic: 430 (+0) / **Dexterity:** 430 (+0) / **Luck:** 430 (+100)

Skill: Walking Lv. 43
Effect: Never get tired from walking (earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 756,177/770,000
Skill Points: 2

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. 8]

[Alchemy Lv. MAX] [Cooking Lv. MAX] [Throwing/Shooting Lv. 6] [Fire Spells Lv. MAX] [Water Spells Lv. 6] [Telepathy Lv. 8] [Night Vision Lv. 9] [Sword Tech Lv. 5] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 5] [Earth Spells Lv. 9] [Wind Spells Lv. 6] [Disguise Lv. 7] [Engineering/Construction Lv. 8] [Shield Arts Lv. 4] [Provoke Lv. 1]

Advanced Skills
[Appraise Person Lv. 8] [Detect Mana Lv. 7] [Enchant Lv. 7] [Creation Lv. 3]

Contract Skills
[Holy Spells Lv. 3]

Title
[Spirit Contractor]

My Walking level hadn't gone up, so I couldn't change my job yet, but Scout was probably fine for the moment either way. I'd been using shield-based skills aggressively in mock duels, so Shield Arts had gone up, as had Creation because of all the items I'd been making.

"Guess we should hunt a lot more wulfs for Norman and the others."

I went to sleep in preparation for the next day, thinking back on how excited Hikari had been.

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We'd been walking through the dungeon district for a while when we ran into Norman's gang. They'd known we'd be going into the dungeon today, so they'd come to see us off. Most of them were children whom Hikari and Sera had looked after, and they were talking about something with the pair. Hikari seemed to say

something, and they let out a cheer.

What could they be talking about? I wondered.

"Okay, big bro! You take care too!" Norman called. He was looking a lot healthier than he had the first time we'd met. His face was filling out a bit too, and the same was true for the other kids as well.

After that, I had Sera check for messages in the adventurers' guild, and she found two messages from Rurika. One said that she was feeling better and they'd just arrived in Pleques. The other said they'd arrived in Altal, but the bridge to Majorica was down. They were going to head our way through the capital city of Mahia, but it would delay their arrival quite a bit.

"I think we'll probably get back before they get here, but let's leave a message for them just in case. And since Iroha and the others don't know them, maybe you should write them a letter they can use to prove who they are. Then they'll have a place to stay when they arrive." *Nothing else I'm forgetting, right?* I wondered.

In order to enter the dungeon, we had to line up again. Listening to the conversations around us, I heard a lot of monster names that suggested most of the parties would be hunting on the sixteenth through nineteenth floors. I heard some talk about the boss room on the tenth floor as well.

At last, our turn came up. As before, there were some guild receptionists standing in front of the stone.

"Your destination is... I see. Take care, then," the receptionist said.

We registered as a party with our dungeon cards, and this time we made our way to the fourth floor.

"I guess I'll go first, then."

I entered the floor first and saw a stone corridor stretching out ahead of me. I waited a minute, and the others soon followed. But just as we were about to start exploring...

"Master, no mask?" Hikari asked me.

I realized I was still wearing my glasses. It would probably be fine to leave them on, but for some reason it felt easier to fight in the

mask—which was odd, since it didn't change my vision at all.

I switched to my mask, and we started walking again.

The monsters on the fourth floor were wulfs, but unlike the lone ones on the second floor, these wulfs acted in groups of five. "Let's go around in the usual configuration and see what happens," I told the girls. "We'll encounter more of them at once, but the corridors still aren't very wide. I'd like to see how the wulfs try to fight."

Still, I estimated that the corridors were about fifty centimeters wider here than on the upper floors. I'd heard the floors got bigger as you went down, but it seemed the corridors got wider too.

And so we began our fights with the wulf packs. I found that they all fought in different ways—some lined up the length of the hallway to charge, while others took turns coordinating their attacks. Too bad for them, Hikari and Sera were so strong that they didn't really stand a chance either way. Not a single wulf managed to penetrate the front lines to reach the two of us.

"I knew the two of you were strong, but I didn't know you were *this* strong..." Mia looked a little disheartened about it. They hadn't struggled in the slightest, even against five foes at once. We asked them to let two wulfs get past next time.

The next time we fought, Mia looked a bit nervous to see two wulfs coming our way, but I held one down. When Mia realized she'd only have to worry about the remaining one, this allowed her to fight confidently.

"Ah!" Mia cried out the moment she beat the wulf.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, well... I think I learned a spell?"

Why the uncertainty? I wondered.

Mia explained that the image of Holy Arrow had appeared in her mind the moment she'd beaten the wulf. Half in disbelief, Mia spoke the words "Holy Arrow," and indeed, a shining white arrow fired from her palm, struck the wall, and disappeared.

"Big Sis Mia! Amazing!" Hikari shouted.

"Seriously," Sera agreed.

"Yeah, that's awesome, Mia," I said.

Mia stood there looking stunned by the spell she had cast, but

our words of encouragement turned her surprise to joy.

But she just learned a spell, huh? I decided to appraise Mia with my skill.

[**Name:** Mia / **Job:** Debt Slave / **Level:** 10 / **Race:** Human / **Status:** —]

She'd gone up a level. Was that why she'd learned a new spell?

"Um, Sora. I'd like to try this on a monster," Mia said, and we let her use Holy Arrow on the next wulf we encountered before it closed in.

The shining white arrow flew straight for the wulf. The beast seemed as if it were about to dodge, but the spell ran through it first. Hikari and Sera then cleared out three other wulfs, while the remaining one came after us. Mia shot another Holy Arrow at it, took it down, and that was that.

Mia let out a big sigh when she saw the wulf fall. "I really wish I could do better. I just get so nervous when the monster gets too close."

She seemed to have handled it just fine from where I was standing, and I told her as much.

"My hands tremble too much," she argued. "I need to control my breathing and learn how to act more intuitively." Mia also said that a misfire would leave her helpless in the face of an attack, so she wanted to learn how to defend while also casting spells. I figured that would just come down to practice, though.

Oh, better try out my own skills too... I reminded myself. In our next battle, I decided to test my Provoke skill, and it seemed to work, because the wulfs Hikari and Sera had been fighting turned their attention to me. But because the level was still low, it didn't seem to work more than three meters out.

"Master, try it on me," Hikari suggested. I did so, and she responded, "Felt a weird chill."

"Did you notice me more or something?" I asked, but she just seemed confused by the question.

The target's strength seemed to play a role, so it hadn't worked on Hikari very well. I also tried it on Sera, who said, "Not really," and Mia, who said, "M-Maybe?!" and blushed for some reason.

Each use of it seemed to consume SP, but raising its level would increase its effectiveness and range, so I decided to prioritize its use during the day's dive. It seemed to gain proficiency no matter whether it worked, after all.

Soon enough, the watch-like thing I'd made with Creation told me it was lunchtime, so we had lunch and then took our time exploring the entire fourth floor. We'd come here to get some wulfs to break down for materials, but we also wanted to see if there were any treasure chests to be found. We'd been lucky the last time, so we'd gotten our hopes up this time.

Unfortunately, even after exploring all the passages, we didn't find a single chest.

"Too bad," Hikari sulked.

"We can always look on another floor," Mia said.

"She's right. Having to work to find them is what makes it worthwhile," added Sera.

Ciel made comforting motions as well, and their encouragement seemed to cheer Hikari up. She thanked all three of them.

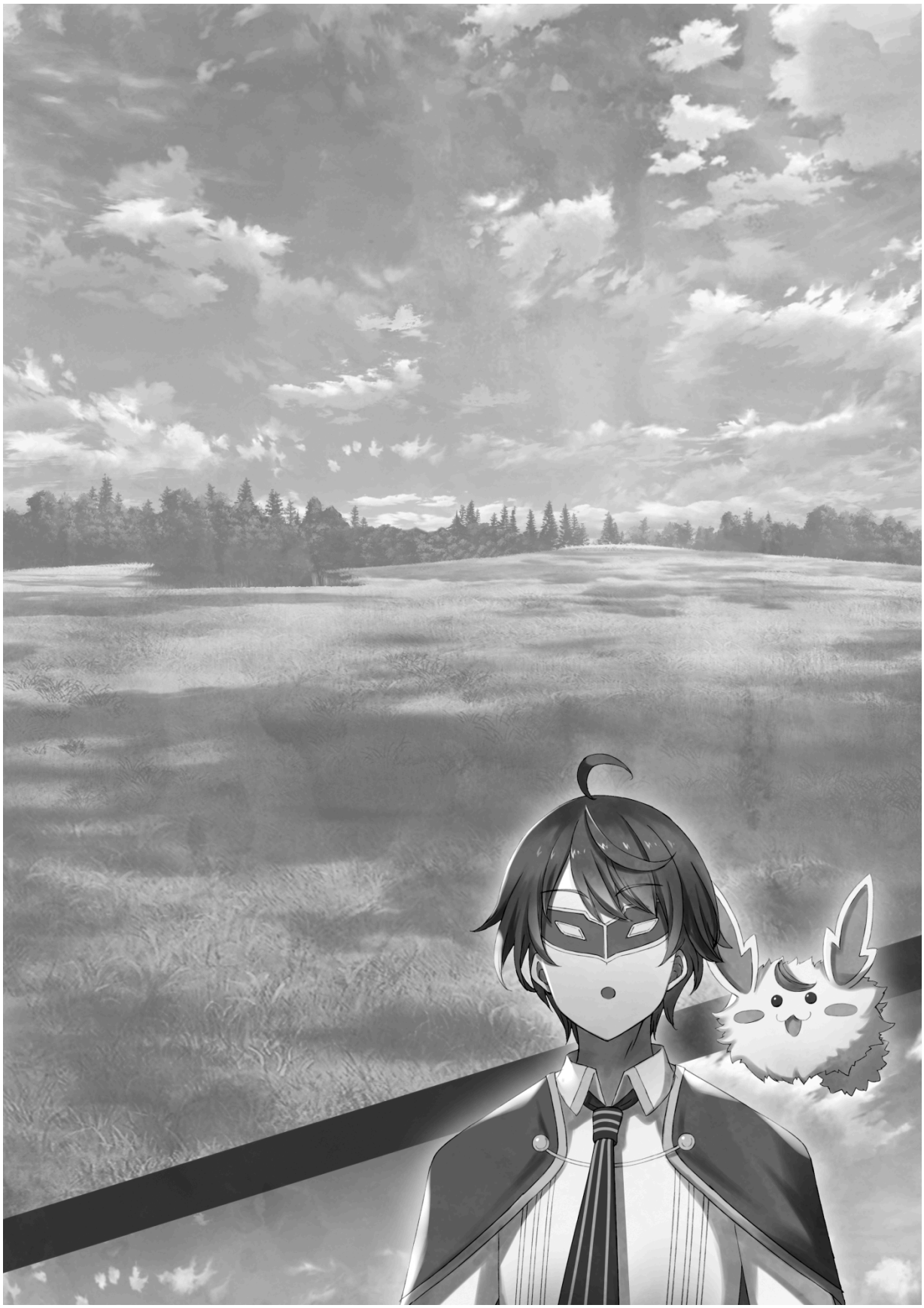
We ended up spending that night camping out on the fourth floor, and we reached the stairs to the fifth the next day before lunch. After fighting so many wulfs on the fourth floor, Mia said she'd learned a new holy spell called Protection. I'd have liked to see what it could do, but I also didn't want to take the risk of testing it here. We could just try it during our next mock duel.

We had lunch, then entered the stairway, recorded our progress on our cards, and descended to the fifth floor.

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"Wow," I found myself saying as we cautiously entered the fifth floor and looked around. I'd heard that the fifth floor was a vast expanse of forests and grassland, but even knowing that, it felt extremely strange to actually walk out of a stone passage into a sea

of green.





I could see smoke rising in the distance as well. *A hot spring of some kind?* There was no record of that in the reference materials, though. *What could it be?*

Another major characteristic of this floor was that it had a day-night cycle, just like the surface. That seemed perfectly natural to adventurers who came in from the outside, but I'd heard that those who'd started their careers in Majorica and only knew the dungeon could find it a bit disorienting.

Though it did make it easier to tell what time it was, the temperature also changed, and some people didn't like that. You could get firewood in the forest and start a fire to warm up, but adventurers who never traveled and didn't have fire-starting experience considered the fifth floor quite unpleasant. That was one reason Joshua's party had struggled.

"So why...?" I found myself saying as I looked at my automap. It showed readings of almost twenty people just within the map's display range, and they were relatively close to the entrance, at that. When I charged the map with mana to expand my view further, I saw a few signals even farther away.

Taking note of this, I used even more mana to expand it wider. On the floors I'd been to so far, this would be the point where I'd be able to see the whole map, but that wasn't the case this time. I kept expanding it until I finally managed to see barriers on the floor's far side...but given the scale at this point, it suggested a straight day of walking without rest to get from one side to the other.

To be frank, this floor was indescribably huge compared to the fourth.

"Sora? What is it?"

"It looks like someone's close by," I said.

"Yeah. Over there." Hikari pointed, confirming my suspicions.

"Probably people coming to pick herbs? They're selling for a lot now," Sera offered.

That did seem possible, but I saw other signals too. I was about to mention that when one of the signals left the grouping and came toward us.

A scout? I thought. *Should I be on my guard?*

I waited, weapon at the ready, but when the man came into sight, he held out his hands to show he meant no harm. “Um, are you students?” he asked. “Are you here for the quest too?”

“What quest?” I asked warily.

“Oh, you aren’t? Why are you here, then?” He looked at me in confusion. “Well, either way, you’d better come with me. Our leader can explain.”

We introduced ourselves and then followed the adventurer, though I was careful to stay on guard just in case.

The man he led us to had a frightening face. “Eh? Hey, you’re that masked kid!” he called, recognizing us. It was the adventurer I’d talked to in the line to enter the dungeon last time. “What’re you doing here? It’s authorized personnel only on this floor right now!”

The man’s name was Fred. He’d been born and raised in this town, but apparently he hadn’t gone through the Magius Academy of Magic.

After introducing himself, Fred explained that an advanced subtype of a wulf—a dark wulf—had been seen on this floor. Because it was too much for low-rank adventurers and ones mostly active on the upper floors to handle, the guild had put out a quest to form a hunting party to take it out, and the floor was otherwise off-limits.

Too bad nobody mentioned that to me, I thought wryly.

“Well, anyway, it’s dangerous,” Fred went on. “We’ve just spotted the thing, and we were about to go off to hunt it. Kid—Sora, you and your party should head back. I’m pretty sure the group we have now can take it, and we don’t want you fighting it under any circumstances.”

They said they could easily deal with a dark wulf, but such monsters could run away when they were injured, so the process wouldn’t necessarily be simple. Obviously they hoped they could prevent this by surrounding it, but the terrain made it hard to guarantee anything.

“I understand,” I said. “We’ll head back for now, then.”

“That’ll be for the best. We’ll be done in no time, and you can come back then.” Fred grinned broadly, then marched off with his party in the direction I’d seen the smoke earlier, leaving a few of his

comrades behind.

There seemed to be another group, about the same size as Fred's crew, that was also hunting the dark wulf. The smoke must have been a signal from them, meaning the signals I saw farther away on my enlarged map must have come from Fred's colleagues.

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

"Yeah, this seems pretty dangerous. And there's no harm in just bringing back the wulfs we got, right?"

She nodded firmly in response. My Item Box held almost three hundred wulfs we'd defeated on the fourth floor. However, I wasn't sure if that was the regular number you'd tend to see when you were exploring that floor, or if it was connected to the mysterious abnormalities Seris had mentioned.

"We'd better ask someone once we get back."

With that in mind, I was about to enter the stairway, but I bumped my head as I stepped toward it. It didn't...hurt, exactly, but it did make me very confused.

"What are you doing, master?" Hikari asked.

"It felt like I hit something." I reached forward and felt the sensation of something like a wall against my palm.

Hikari saw my strange behavior, reached out as well, and then... "A wall!" she cried out in surprise.

I moved my hand all around, and the stairway was indeed sealed off, as though blocked by an invisible wall.

"A-Are we stuck here? Are we all right?" Mia took my arm nervously.

I was apparently feeling a little flustered myself, but when I looked over at the frightened Mia, I felt my head clearing. "For now, let's get back to where those adventurers were. They left a few behind, and someone there might know what's going on."

"R-Right. You're right. Of course." We turned back, still feeling confused.

We ran into one of the remaining adventurers, who was surprised to see us. "Weren't you heading back?" he asked in bemusement.

We explained our situation, but he didn't seem to believe us, so we ended up walking back to the entrance with him.

“Are you kidding me...?” The moment he confirmed it, he looked shocked, distressed, and panicked all at once. He took a few deep breaths, then muttered, “It’s okay. No problem. No problem” to himself.

Doesn’t look okay to me... I thought.

He noticed our confusion, then said, “Let’s head back for now. I should probably report this.”

With that, he ran back to the people he’d left behind. I didn’t hurry very often, but this time I chased after him.

The adventurer met up with his comrades, exchanged a few words with them, then pulled out his dungeon card and spoke into it. “W-We’ve got bad news here. This floor might have turned into...a boss room.”

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A boss room—if that was what it was, we wouldn’t be able to leave until the boss was defeated.

“Well, no need to worry. We don’t know what caused it, but beating the dark wulf should clear it up. We’ve got a lot of Rank B adventurers here,” the adventurer reassured us after consulting with his partymates. “As for me? Heh, I’m Rank C,” he added with a bragging air.

This earned him a few chiding voices telling him not to act cocky since he was new to the rank. Mia laughed at the exchange, but there was a nervous quality to her tone.

“It’s okay,” Sera told her. “Rank B means they’re on Layla’s level. That dark wulf doesn’t stand a chance. And if they can’t take care of it, I will.” She added that she’d beaten one in the Black Forest before, swinging her axe around to reassure Mia further. Each swing of the axe tore audibly through the air, and I thought I saw the adventurers tremble a bit as they watched.

“Should we take a break? Or help out?” I asked Sera.

“Hey, c’mon, kid. I told you, we can handle this.” The adventurers spoke up quickly against the idea. They said they had a plan, and involving outsiders would just make it messy, which seemed

reasonable enough.

"It was bad luck that it had to show up on the fifth floor, though," one added.

"What is it about the fifth floor?" I asked.

"To be frank, I don't like it."

"It's not just this one. You said you don't like the fifteenth floor either," chimed in another.

"You said the same thing!"

The two adventurers were apparently born and raised in Majorica, which explained why they didn't like the "open field" floors such as this one.

"I mean, you know? You've gotta look out in all directions, and it gets cold at night. It's creepy. And you've gotta buy magic items so you can see in the dark and stuff."

I wasn't sure what to say to that.

"How do you kids feel about it?" he pressed me when I stayed quiet. "Well, I guess you wouldn't know, since it's your first time here and all..."

"We'll be fine. I travel on foot a lot as a merchant. I guess I'd actually say I'm more comfortable on this kind of floor."

The labyrinth floors might have been more convenient to fight in, but I felt more at home in these wide-open spaces. Even at night, I'd be fine as long as I had a fire, and firewood would be easy to grab in the forest. I could also use my skills to keep an eye out for monsters.

Besides, according to my map, the size of the floor allowed for clear delineations between areas with and without monsters. Their active range might change over the course of the day, but I assumed it would be fine as long as I stayed on my toes.

"But why did you guys stay here instead of joining in the hunt?" I asked.

"Ah, we're here to report back if things go south. We won't get as big a reward as the proper fighters, but we'll still get a quest payout. It's just..." He seemed frustrated that the abnormality meant he wouldn't be able to contact the outside now.

For that day, Fred and his team seemed to spend more time

traveling than expected, and they got in touch with the adventurers on our side to let us know they'd go through with the plan in the morning. This was understandable, as they were still quite a ways from their destination.

We gave them our current status, and they told us to wait in place for now.

Soon enough, the plan to take out the dark wulf went into motion. I channeled mana into my automap to expand the range and keep an eye on the party's progress. Scrutinizing it carefully, I could make out a symbol similar to the entrance one way on the other side of the field.

Would that be the stairs to the sixth floor, then? I thought. Also, did it seem like there were way too many monsters here? *No, it just looks that way because I've zoomed out so much.* It would take too long to count them all, so I decided to save it for another time.

What I had to keep my eye on for now was the area the adventurers were converging in. They formed a ring around their target and slowly closed in while monsters along the path they traveled flicked out one after another. I'd heard that lower-ranked versions often gathered around an advanced subtype, so the monsters they were beating were probably wulfs.

There was one especially large reading in the direction they were heading. *Is that the advanced subtype—the dark wulf?* I wondered. Around it was a pack of smaller signals, which suddenly sprang into action as one.

Despite being attacked en masse, the adventurers apparently managed to knuckle under and fight back, steadily reducing the monsters' numbers. Everything seemed to be going as planned at first, as they made progress toward their destination.

All that changed, though, when the large signal—the dark wulf—began moving. Now it was the adventurers' signals that began to disappear. It wasn't just the ones close to it either. Those farther back suffered casualties as well.

The adventurers were clearly on the back foot now—and, as if to confirm that, the ones close to me began to shift uncomfortably.

They turned pale and seemed to start talking to themselves, though in fact they were probably having a conversation through their dungeon cards.

"Not a dark wulf? What is it, then?!" one of them shouted.

Before long, I could see the rout begin, the adventurers' signals scattering in all directions.

Anything targeted by the large monster signal immediately disappeared, but the disorganized retreat seemed to play to the adventurers' benefit, and some still managed to survive. As sad as it was for those who'd died, the fact that it wasn't a total massacre was probably worth celebrating under the circumstances.

"Got it. Yeah, are you okay?" The adventurer turned to us. "Fred and the others are heading back here. Seems they've got a lot of injured folks. Sorry to ask, but do you guys have any potions?"

"We do," I told him.

"All right. We brought some ourselves, but we might ask to buy some of yours if we run out. Sounds like it didn't go so well out there..."

That much was clear from what I'd seen on my map.

It was odd, though, given how they'd acted when they'd first left. Fred had said the hunt would be a simple matter, so the fact that they'd failed suggested they'd run into something unexpected. Come to think of it...

"You said something earlier about it not being a dark wulf," I said. "Did the target turn out to be something else?"

The man paused. "Yeah. The guys didn't realize it until they'd engaged. The advanced subtype here isn't a dark wulf—it's a shadow wulf."

A shadow wulf... I remembered seeing them mentioned in the school's monster field guide. It was the most peculiar subtype of wulf, using shadows for attack and defense and hard to hit with both physical and magical attacks.

Despite that, though, they weren't considered much of a threat. Why? They had a fatal flaw—they were weak against attacks with the holy property, so you could deal with them easily if you had the appropriate equipment. Of course, they were still stronger and faster

than standard wulfs with pelts that were hard to pierce, so you still needed fairly impressive equipment to harm them. Still, they weren't upper-echelon monsters.

The ones who'd survived the shadow wulf attack—Fred was among them—made it back to camp before the sun went down. Most were injured and exhausted, as if they'd run the whole way back. Their equipment was in tatters, bad enough that it was probably useless now. Many were still wounded as well, which suggested they must have run out of potions on the way.

"H-How awful!" Mia gasped, and she quickly began healing the injured. The adventurers on the receiving end thanked her.

However, there were certainly too many people for Mia to heal all by herself—or more precisely, I didn't want her to use up all her mana in case something else happened—so I contributed some Heal spells of my own.

But even though I was healing them just the same, I didn't get as much gratitude as Mia. I wondered why, but dismissed the question from my mind and got back to work. I had to start cooking, for one thing, as it would be evening soon.

Fred and the others began eating rations, while our party ate my cooking. The result was a lot of envious eyes turned in our direction. The gusto with which Hikari ate seemed to be a big reason for this, and her smile was the kicker. Wicked girl.

Hey, mister. You're drooling. I can hear your stomach growling too... I thought uneasily as I watched the adventurers.

Just then, Hikari stood up and strode over to Fred. They talked about something, then Hikari turned back and said to me, "Master, cook for them."

At these words, all of the adventurers turned to look at me. Their eyes were so bloodshot it was kind of scary.

You're going to make Mia scream, you know? I thought, but I pushed it from my mind and said, "Fine...but don't blame me if it's not to your taste."

I pulled some of my preserved foods from my "bag of holding"—actually my Item Box—and cooked up some skewers and soup. Here on the fifth floor, I could have probably arranged a campsite with

magic if I'd wanted, but I'd decided to do it with a magic item from my Item Box instead.

Fred and his men quickly gobbled up the food I'd made. In an almost competitive fashion, Hikari asked for more servings as well. Ciel wasn't allowed to eat with the group, so she lay on Mia's lap to sulk.

The biggest change after dinner was that I got the chance to drop my polite merchant's cadence around Fred and the others.

"No need to be formal," he told me. "All that polite talk gets my hackles up, actually."

That's what you say, but you still talk politely to Mia... Very politely. Indeed, she was gaining quite a fan club among the adventurers, some of whom were even calling her a goddess. It seemed like an overreaction to just healing their wounds, if you asked me.

"So, can we actually beat the shadow wulf?" I asked Fred, concerned. "We can't access the stairs now, so we need to beat it to leave, right?"

His responses were a simple "No" and "Seems that way." He explained that they couldn't beat it because it had already killed everyone in the party who could harm it. "Weapons with a holy attribute are effective against dark wulfs, so a few of us brought them."

The shadow wulf had started by using one of its powers—the ability to jump between shadows and strike unawares—to kill the holy magic users first. It had then killed the three wielders of holy weapons as well as the nearby holy water user.

The reason so many of the adventurers were still injured when they came back was partly because they'd run out of potions, but mostly because the wulf had killed the holy magic users.

"So we just have to stay here?" I asked.

Fred paused, then said, "Well, the guild'll realize something's up if we're gone for too long. But given the size of the area, they'll probably just assume we're having trouble finding the target for a while. So the soonest aid will come...is probably ten days, more or less. Maybe longer, given the time they'd need to put together a

rescue party."

"Do you have enough food to last it out?"

"We've got...rations," he responded, but he didn't sound at all happy about it.

"We hunted a lot of wulfs on the fourth floor," I told him. "If you can break them down, we can cook them." *C'mon, man, don't cry on me...* "And one other thing," I added. "Do you think the shadow wulf will come after us?" The large signal on my automap wasn't moving yet, at least.

"Dunno, but we'd probably better keep an eye out. Let us worry about that. You guys get some rest."

"No, you guys should rest first. I doubt you can keep watch effectively in your condition." They looked a lot better now that they'd gotten a good meal, but they'd still spent most of the day running. They were clearly exhausted.

We decided to take shifts between our party of four and the adventurers who hadn't participated in the raid. Once that was decided, Fred and the others were out like a light. Their snoring was pretty darn loud, and I hoped it wouldn't lead more monsters to us.

After making sure the adventurers were asleep, I fed Ciel and talked to Mia. I was hoping I could use my Enchant skill to enchant weapons with holy magic, but it was still a no-go. *Is it because Heal is the only spell I can use?*

I guessed I'd just have to pin my hopes on Mia's abilities. I remembered her mentioning a spell that could be used to make holy water or give weapons a holy property.

"Blessing, right?" I asked.

Unfortunately, Mia said she still couldn't use it. She was level 13 at the moment, and she'd learned Protection when she'd reached it. *So would she be able to learn Blessing if she gained enough levels?*

Fred had said that Holy Arrow could damage a shadow wulf, but it would be difficult even for an experienced caster to completely defeat it that way. You'd need to land at least a dozen shots, and a shadow wulf was way faster than a regular one, so it seemed unlikely that Mia would be able to do it. I quietly asked Fred and the others if they could keep it locked down to make it easier, and they

said not with their current equipment.

That meant Mia wouldn't be able to beat the shadow wulf on her own. We'd need our attacks amplified with Blessing.

◇◇◇

The next morning, we started moving just to be safe.

"You want to go into the forest?" I asked Fred when he made the suggestion. I would've assumed forests were prime wulf territory.

"I'm not sure which way is better, but we definitely didn't stand a chance on open ground. Most of us who survived only did because we ran into the forest," Fred explained.

The others who'd fought it nodded, and nobody opposed the idea.

It was true that the reference guides hadn't mentioned anything about whether they'd mostly been fought in the grasslands or forests. Still, it might be dangerous to take these men at their word. It seemed to me that the forest would have more shadows than the grasslands, and having more shadows it could jump through would probably make it harder to keep track of.

No, it's pointless to overanalyze, I told myself. I studied my automap to keep an eye on the shadow wulf's activities while searching for a safe zone. I was hoping to gather healing herbs to restock my potion supply. I'd had to hand mine over because Fred and the others had run out of theirs, so I was running pretty low at the moment.

"Hmm. Monsters are here," Hikari said, sending a nervous ripple through the crowd.

The monsters were...blood snakes. The moment they came into view, I could see the anxiety drain out of Fred and the others. They were probably relieved it wasn't the shadow wulf.

When the blood snakes noticed us, they let out their characteristic shrieks and attacked.

Our impromptu party formed ranks, with me (a merchant) and Mia (a healer) at the center for maximum protection. As disorganized as the perimeter was, they managed to keep the

mages more to the inside, so I guessed they had at least given it some thought.

The battle began with us at a disadvantage. The adventurers seemed weaker than I'd expected. I wondered if they were still tired from their flight, even though their wounds had healed.

A blood snake sent an adventurer flying with an attack, then chased after him to finish the job. Fred's group moved to support, but they wouldn't make it in time. I couldn't get there either, having been sent to the back row, and Fred's group would be in the way of any spell I could try to cast. I tried to draw the snake's attention with Provoke, but unfortunately it was out of range.

He's doomed, I thought, and everyone else there probably shared the sentiment.

But the blood snake's venomous bite failed to land, as Sera charged in from the side and sliced through the creature with her blade. With its head separated from its body, the blood snake was reduced to a lifeless pile of meat.

Hikari and Sera teamed up to make quick work of the remaining blood snakes, and we didn't lose a single fighter.

"Any more monsters in the area?" Sera asked Hikari.

"None," she said.

This incident caused Sera and Hikari's stock to rise considerably. The revelation that Hikari had search skills got them asking for her opinion, and they were even calling Sera "Big Sis." Sera herself openly grimaced at this, but she couldn't do much to stop them.

Mia went around casting Heal on the injured. She tried to use it on a more lightly injured man too, but...

"He'll heal on his own. Best to save up your mana," Fred said. He got jeers for his trouble, even though he was right, in my opinion.

I offered to heal the man myself instead and got a hearty "No, thanks!" in reply.

At last, we found an herb patch, and I practically danced for joy. This earned me some odd looks, but I couldn't help myself. It had been so long since I'd last picked herbs, and I was running low on stock.

Eventually, we decided on a campsite, set traps in case of an

ambush, then set up lookouts and started breaking down the blood snakes. I wasn't sure if that was the best use of our time, but we did need food, so they probably had to break something down.

"Master, I asked them to," Hikari said sheepishly. "No good?"

Obviously I couldn't say no when she looked at me that way. Hikari had been wanting to try blood snake meat for some time, and she'd apparently wanted to learn how to break them down too. One look at those bodies and I'd never be able to handle it myself.

I started cooking, watching the scene sidelong. Mia offered to help me cook, a prospect that got the men excited. The weight of expectations got her hands trembling, but she managed to shake it off. Still, it seemed a bit much for them to praise her to the heavens as she served them their soup. *You'd better eat quick or it'll get cold, y'know?*

The blood snake meat itself wasn't ready in time to be eaten that day, which was a tremendous disappointment to Hikari. The sight of her despondent slump plucked at my heartstrings. It was almost easy to forget that we were on the run from a dangerous foe.

Unfortunately our downtime didn't last long. That night, it took action.

I glanced at my automap before going to bed and saw the shadow wulf signal begin to move. *Does it look bigger than it did this morning, or is that my imagination?* Either way, my first task was to inform the others.

Sorry, Hikari, I said telepathically. *The shadow wulf's on the move. Could you tell the others?*

I figured it would be more convincing coming from her, and I also didn't want to show my full hand of skills unless I had to. I'd already cast some holy spells, and I might end up using more magic in the battle to come.

"Be careful. Monsters coming," Hikari told them. With that, the more relaxed atmosphere snapped back into focus.

Seeing that, I looked at my automap once more. It was moving fast, more so than you might expect. *Is that its shadow-jumping ability?* I wondered as I saw its signal blur out, then reappear in a

different location. I must have been too distracted to notice it the first time. Even now, I really had to watch closely to see it happen.

It's coming. This time I gave my telepathic warning not just to Hikari, but to Sera and Mia as well. I could see Mia's hands trembling on her staff. It was understandable, given that this same creature had just routed Fred and his party. I'd used my Shield spell on my party members just to be safe, but sadly, I didn't have enough MP to cast it on Fred and his team as well.

"The wulf is coming. Be careful," Hikari warned.

Somehow, the shadow wulf was heading right for us. Was it tracking Fred's scent or something? It was clearly making a beeline...

Then, suddenly, the shadow wulf appeared right behind Mia!

It came out from the shadow of a tree and attacked her, thrusting out shadows like spears. She was able to block the attack with her shield, but a second strike followed immediately. I managed to cut in between them and held up my own shield to block, but I just barely avoided a direct strike and moved my shield to knock it off of me.

A frightening screech rang out, and I looked to see a deep gash in the surface of my shield. It was a close call. I was currently using my easy-to-wield beginner's shield, which couldn't be expected to defend effectively against the attacks of an advanced subtype.

I readied my sword for another attack, but Sera managed to land one on the shadow wulf first. Fred and the others let out a cheer when she sent it flying, but Sera's face remained hardened. "Don't think that did anything," she said.

At these words, all eyes turned to the shadow wulf. She'd definitely made contact, but there wasn't a scratch on its body. Rather, it had blocked the blow with the shadows that wreathed its body.

Seeing this, the adventurers split into two groups: those who still wanted to fight the shadow wulf, and those who gave in to despair and ran off. Fred and some others tried to rally them, but there was no restoring the shattered morale. A third of the group was already in full flight and couldn't be stopped.

But despite the large mass of adventurers fleeing, the shadow wulf's attacks remained focused on Mia, as if it couldn't see anyone

else. I tried to attract its attention with Provoke, but my level was too low for it to work.

Why? Why is it attacking Mia? I used Parallel Thinking to consider the question while I fought. The shadow wulf was clearly focused on her.

"Protect Lady Mia!" The adventurers moved desperately to block its path to us, but it knocked them away like it was nothing. This dulled the momentum of its incoming spears, so I managed to block them, but I still felt their impact hard against my hands.

I released a Wind Cutter to slice through a blade, but it was undamaged. The spells from the other mages proved equally fruitless.

"Oh no! You're wounded!"

In the middle of all this, Mia ran up to a collapsed adventurer, getting some distance from me. The moment she cast Heal, the surge of holy mana she emitted pinged my Detect Mana skill. In the same moment, the shadow wulf dove into the darkness and reappeared near Mia, its jaws open wide.

Potential tragedy was averted by a knife that flew through the air. It went into the wulf's mouth and immediately exploded, dealing damage for what seemed like the first time. It had been thrown by Hikari, who'd concealed her presence.

"Won't let you," said Hikari, who then followed up by running to the wolf and slicing at it with her dagger. This attack didn't do much, but Sera attacked from the side as well and finally managed to tear the shadow wulf away from Mia. Seeing this, she was about to use Heal again, but I ran up and grabbed her wrist to stop her.

"Sora, that hurts!" she cried. Apparently I'd grabbed her a little too tightly in my panic. "Sora, let go. I have to heal him!" But I kept holding her back hard while I cast Heal on the injured adventurer myself.

At that instant, I felt a wave of hatred wash over me—a gaze focused on me that sent a chill up my spine. It was clearly the shadow wulf.

I pushed Mia at Sera and gave her an order. "Mia, don't use holy magic until I say you can!"

Before I could even finish speaking, the shadow wulf launched its shadows at me. They came flying like arrows. I used the force of explosions from my enchanted knives to send them off track and dodge them, but I couldn't fully avoid all of them and one grazed my cheek. I used Heal to cure it, and the shadow wulf reacted again. My suspicion turned to certainty.

I'll give you instructions now. Hikari—sorry, but I need you to lead the others.

I sent out a telepathic message, tossed my food-filled bag of holding at them, and ran alone into the forest, feeling the shadow wulf pursuing from behind.

◇Mia's Perspective 3

All I could do was watch him go.

"Don't use holy magic!"

The words echoed in my head, and I wondered why he'd told me that.

But Sora soon gave us his telepathic explanation, and it brought tears to my eyes. He'd been protecting me again.

In terms that were easy to understand, he explained why the shadow wulf was acting the way it was, and why it was so focused on me. He also explained why he'd told me not to use holy magic.

He'd said the shadow wulf was weak against the holy attribute and theorized that it was prioritizing attacks on users of holy spells. He'd said it with a great deal of certainty, though, and in fact it had gone after the holy magic users in Fred's hunting party first as well. The next priority had been the ones wielding weapons that could hurt it.

The reason Sora had run off into the forest without us, then, was so that we could perform a particular task.

I'll draw the shadow wulf away. While I do that, Mia, I want you to defeat monsters and level up. He'd told me that slaying monsters increased your level, and that boosting my level might let me learn new holy spells. *So Mia, I want you to try to learn Blessing,* he

concluded.

Blessing was a holy spell that could give weapons the holy attribute, which would let them break through the shadows around the shadow wulf. I remembered Tricia mentioning that using holy water on weapons would temporarily give them the holy attribute as well. She'd explained that both holy water and Blessing could purify a weapon, but you had to use the spell several times to turn water into holy water.

Even though Sora was in danger now, I was happy to have his confidence. That meant the best thing I could do was work to live up to his faith in me.

"Big Sis Mia, let's go," Hikari told me, and we started following her.

While we walked, I explained Sora's plan to Fred. He didn't look comfortable with it at all, but he also knew there was nothing else they could do under these circumstances, so he decided to bet on Sora's idea. We could possibly just wait for aid, but there was no guarantee that the shadow wulf wouldn't attack again while we waited. He seemed to know we needed a way to fight back in the meantime.

Sora had also left food behind in the bag of holding he'd left, so we decided to eat that... *But will he be all right on his own?* I was rather worried about that—quite worried, in fact.

From there, we walked all through the night until we reached a remote location where we set up camp. I started cooking, while the rest broke into groups for helping me, standing guard, and resting. The resting ones must have been very tired out, because they fell asleep immediately.

Sera joined watch duty, but Hikari had gone missing at some point and only returned just as the meal was done.

After we ate, Hikari built up a scouting party beginning with Fred and explained about the monsters in the area. Apparently the reason she'd run off earlier was to scout out the area herself. Fred and the others listened earnestly to her report on what she'd found.

Afterward, I was feeling lightheaded from exhaustion, and everyone told me to rest, so I did. The exhaustion from the shadow

wulf attack, the walking, and the cooking really seemed to have piled up.

I fell asleep the moment I lay down. We had a tarp spread out on the ground, but without Sora's campsite preparations, the ground felt hard and uncomfortable.

When I woke up in the morning, Sera was next to me, but Hikari was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Hikari?" I asked.

"She went out and asked me to look after you."

Apparently that was why she'd given Fred and the others that scouting report last night. She was worried about Sora facing the shadow wulf by himself.

I felt the urge to go after them too, but I got myself to calm down. I had a role of my own to play. I had to stop thinking about silly things and beat as many monsters as possible so that I could learn Blessing.

Ah, but first I have to do some cooking... Even with people to help me, cooking for a large group of people was hard.

◇◇◇

I was running for dear life from the shadow wulf—literally. Every time it broke through my Shield spell, I restored it, then drank a mana potion and kept running.

Yes, the biggest problem was the running. I was out of breath and struggling. I could navigate the forest at full tilt well enough because Parallel Thinking let me make split-second route decisions, but running meant I wasn't getting the benefits of my Walking skill. Between me and the wulf, I was definitely going to tire out first.

While running, I checked my skill list and racked my brain in search of a move that would let me get out of this situation. The monster was weak against the holy attribute, but I didn't have any relevant skills available.

I narrowed the scope of Detect Mana and watched carefully for any stirrings nearby. I was definitely at a disadvantage right now, but I was starting to realize some things.

One of them involved the shadow wulf's shadow-jumping ability. The moment the creature used it, its mana emissions at that location increased slightly, so I could detect its next entrance a moment ahead of time.

The other had to do with the shadow wulf itself. Each jump through shadows seemed to consume a bit of mana, so each time it used shadows to attack or travel, its mana grew weaker.

Was the reason it hadn't attacked right away because it was trying to regenerate its lost mana?

Which meant there was only one option—to stay on the run until I could exhaust all its mana. The skill I needed for that was...

NEW
[Traps Lv. 1]

This not only gave me knowledge of traps but also raised the effectiveness of the ones I used and taught me the best way to use them. It also seemed to teach me how to use items in my possession in these traps. That last line was what sealed the deal for me.

It was like Night Vision in that it could be toggled on and off. As I looked around, pop-ups appeared in the scenery around me. I selected one of them, and a method for making an effective trap—a pit trap—appeared in my mind. I was probably supposed to be standing still and carefully scrutinizing the area, but I was running at the moment. I wouldn't even have been able to see the pop-ups without Parallel Thinking.

I also learned how to make traps with things like vines in the forest around me, so I collected vines as I ran. And while I was using my Trap skill, a certain item flashed into my brain.

[Blood of Rivell]
Monsters hit with it will draw hatred from other monsters.
Effect: Poor.

It was an item I'd made with my Creation skill. The main ingredient was wulf blood—in fact, monster blood was about all you needed to make it, and the stronger the monster you made it from, the better the quality would be.

Basically, the opponent whom you drenched with the blood would attract attention and attacks. *I guess it's a little bit like enchanting them with the Provoke skill?* My plan was to buy time by turning the monsters against each other.

I'd actually already tried using it on the shadow wulf while I was running, but unfortunately it had dodged each time. So when I was thinking about the best way to get it on the shadow wulf, I'd seen the potential of the Trap skill and learned it.

"Come on, please work..."

If a fastball doesn't work, use a curve. With that in mind, I ran along with my Trap skill active. Options for what to do ran through my head, but if I wanted to set up the trap correctly, I first needed to get some distance from the shadow wulf.

I'd thought up a way to do this. I pulled out some of my enchanted knives, put one between each finger, and threw them in a spread, not expecting any of them to hit. Two of them almost got lucky, but the shadow wulf still dodged them. A second later, though, all the knives exploded. The chaining of multiple explosions increased their power, and the burst of flames blocked the sight line between us.

In that instant, I dove behind a tree, activated Hide Presence, then moved swiftly away. Detect Mana told me that the shadow wulf had stopped. It might have been taking out its aggression on the nearest trees, because I could hear some telltale snaps and crashes. Failing to finish me off must have really gotten under its skin.

I kept using Detect Mana to keep an eye on its position while I set up the Blood of Rivell the way the Traps skill instructed me, also laying a few other traps on the side. I made pits with my earth magic, being sure to make them very obvious. Meanwhile, I disguised the vines so that the shadow wulf wouldn't see them. This was the design that the Traps skill had told me would be best.

Once my preparations were complete, I dropped Hide Presence...then cast Heal to call it right to me!

As expected, the wulf activated its shadow-jumping ability, and I threw a knife at the shadow it would be coming out of while I ran. It exploded right as the wulf came out of the darkness, but its shadow wall ensured the attack didn't damage it at all. It continued rushing after the traces of my holy magic, but it saw the pit trap in front of it and quickly dodged out of the way. I'd put Blood of Rivell in there too in case it did fall in, but it seemed it wasn't stupid enough to fall for such a simple setup.

The real trap was elsewhere. There was a hidden vine just in the direction it had dodged, and tripping it activated the trap. There was a small explosion and several trees began falling toward the shadow wulf. It protected itself with its shadows, but the receptacles of Blood of Rivell burst and rained down on it.

In a sense, it was thanks to Norman's team that I had so much Blood of Rivell on hand, and I had more in my Item Box as well.

Not even the shadow wulf could avoid something coming at it from all sides, so quite a lot of the blood got on it. The fallen trees were both a distraction and helped to limit its evasion options.

[**Name:** — / **Job:** — / **Level:** 28 / **Race:** Shadow Wulf / **Status:** Baiting (Weak)]

Its level was lower than I'd expected, considering how much trouble it was giving us. Apparently its shadow skills were just that strong.

After confirming that the Blood of Rivell was working, I turned around and headed for a new location: a nearby den of monsters. As I approached, I saw that it was a band of goblins, with a few blood snakes nearby. I used Provoke to lure them to me, then sicced them on the shadow wulf. Although monsters generally had a concept of "turf," weaker ones wouldn't usually attack an advanced subtype under most circumstances. Because of its Baiting status, though, the goblins and blood snakes charged.

Once I'd confirmed they were fighting, I activated Hide Presence and hightailed it out of there.

"I haven't been this exhausted in a while," I said with a big sigh as I looked behind me after getting some distance.

My vision was obscured so I couldn't be sure, but the monster fight seemed to still be going on. I could see signals popping off the map one after another. At the same time, Detect Mana showed mana receding from the shadow wulf's signal.

"I guess I'd better focus on recovery too." Now that I was far enough away, I could get more distance by walking. The shadow wulf wouldn't move again that day, perhaps recovering its mana after killing all the monsters in the area.

"Is it good?" I asked Ciel. Watching her enjoy the food so heartily was a balm to my ragged spirit.

Even while on the run, I made sure to get a good meal—one of the ready-made ones in my Item Box, of course.

Ciel looked up at me in concern, so I put on a brave face and said, "I'm okay. I've got a lot more energy left." This was a lie, though. Unlike traveling at my own pace, being pursued was exhausting, even when I knew where my pursuer was. Every time it found me, it took forever to shake it off, and yesterday had been another such difficult day. Knowing I'd have to run away again as soon as it saw me just left me feeling even more ragged.

Yesterday I'd used some of the ore I'd forgotten was in my Item Box—the stuff I'd gotten in the mine with Rurika and Chris—to create a bear trap with alchemy. I'd set that in a conspicuous location to draw the shadow wulf's attention, and when it stepped in the direction I wanted, it triggered another trap that covered it in Blood of Rivell again.

I'd have felt a lot more confident if I had a way to defeat it outright...but there was no sense in worrying about that now. I just had to focus on buying time for Mia to learn Blessing. Trying to fight it when I couldn't win would just drain me further.

Using the Baiting status was allowing me to keep it at bay. However, it was killing most of the monsters on the floor as a result,

so its level was going up the whole time. Before now, I hadn't known that monster levels could increase too.

I expanded my map to see how Mia and the others were doing and saw monster signals disappearing in their wake. It looked like they were getting some good hunting done.

"Good night, Ciel," I said, gazing at the spirit slumbering beside me.

Using Parallel Thinking let me get some proper sleep, but I could tell I was still tired when I woke up. Even with the skill that increased my recovery speed, I felt like I wasn't keeping up. The psychological exhaustion probably played a role in that as well.

My only salvation was knowing that the shadow wulf had to rest for reasons other than mana recovery. Not that I was going to risk attacking it in its sleep.

Before getting some shut-eye, I checked in with Hikari and the others. I'd told them to contact me if Mia learned Blessing, but before going to sleep I made sure to get in touch with them again. Hearing their voices would motivate me anew for tomorrow.

On the third day of my...flight? I awoke with a start.

I checked my automap immediately, but the shadow wulf wasn't moving. I hadn't used any holy magic in a while, which seemed to make it harder for it to find me. I was hoping it might have given up on chasing me, but that didn't seem to be the case, based on the way it seemed to be moving on the automap—it was clearly following the route I'd traveled.

Is it following my scent? Apparently the Cleanse spell I was using to keep clean didn't cover everything.

Next, I expanded the area of my map and checked the positions of Mia and the others. Their group seemed larger now. Had they met up with the people who'd run off before?

"Ciel, you want some food?" I asked.

Then I realized that Ciel wasn't there.

Ciel, dinnertime! I called out telepathically, but there was still no sign of her.

Ciel still hadn't returned by the next day.

◇Seris's Perspective 3

How long had it been since Sora and the others last came to visit? I honestly found myself missing them dearly. Really, when was the last time I'd done so much socializing? I was a bit of an introvert by nature, and people rarely came to visit the library.

It's been "like a ghost town" in here... Ah, did he teach me that saying as well?

They'd said they were just going to the fourth and fifth floors of the dungeon, but perhaps they were having trouble finding the stairs. The fifth floor's layout changed frequently, and it was easy to get lost in it. There was a lot of area to cover as well.

Ah, and Hikari had said that Sora's hobby was gathering herbs, so perhaps he'd gotten overly absorbed in the task? It really was a fine place to gather them. I loved how beautiful and natural the view was there.

While I was thinking that over, Ciel suddenly appeared before me. She seemed deeply exhausted, with her ears drooping limply. But her expression brightened the moment she saw me, and she instantly began darting around as if she were trying to impart something to me.

Unfortunately, I had no idea what it was. Those with the right affinity could even understand spirits they hadn't forged contracts with, but my affinity was a bit lacking in that regard.

I asked her various questions to gauge her response, but none of them seemed close to what she was trying to tell me. This inability to communicate seemed to make Ciel very depressed. Hoping to comfort her, I quickly called a certain someone, thinking that perhaps a fellow spirit could understand her.

The water spirit Maru seemed overjoyed to see me for the first time in a long while. I was equally pleased by the reunion, but resolving Ciel's problem came first.

"Maru. I want to know what this little one...what Ciel here is saying. Can you understand her?"

Maru nodded, turned back to face Ciel, and said something to the spirit, who shook her body and her ears as if she were pleading.

Maru nodded firmly in response. I hoped it really was working, but I was nervous.

At last, Maru told me the shocking truth.

"Sora and his friends are trapped? A shadow wulf?!" I found myself shouting.

"What are you talking about?" came a voice from behind me.

I turned around and saw Layla standing there. I'd heard she'd gone to the dungeon. Had she returned?

"Seris. Who were you... No, you couldn't have been talking to anyone. But didn't you say Sora's name? And that he was trapped? What's going on?" she inquired.

Ah, I've been careless. I had assumed I was alone.

I thought for a minute about what to do, considered lying...but then looked back at Layla. Her party might be capable of beating a shadow wulf. They had a great deal of experience and had done well in dungeons. They'd fought the stampede in Frieren as well. Perhaps I could even have her report to the guild and put a party together.

I summarized the story Ciel had told Maru: An advanced subtype, a dark wulf, had been seen on the fifth floor, but they found out it was actually a shadow wulf when they went to hunt it. The hunting party had tried to leave but couldn't because the fourth floor had become a boss room, and Sora and his friends were trapped there as well.

"Layla. Can you get to the guild and put together a rescue team?"

"But how did you..." She stopped herself. "No, saving them should come first. I'll do it, of course." With that, Layla turned and left.

What *would* I have said if she'd asked me how I'd known? *Hmm... I suppose I'll have to give that some thought for when the time comes. Or I could just leave it up to Sora to explain...*

"Don't worry. I'm sure they'll pull through. And thank you, Maru."

Maru nodded at my words, then left with a wave of farewell.

But it turned into a boss room, eh?

Abnormalities in a dungeon were a sign that a monster parade was coming. I'd been working to keep it at bay, but channeling any more power into the process would be rather difficult. I was already pushing my limits as it was. I thought about calling adventurers from

other towns to increase the efficiency of the hunts, but sending down people who didn't know the dungeon well might just make things worse.

"For now, our priority is ensuring that Sora and the others are safe."

Perhaps relieved that her words had gotten through and Layla had taken action, Ciel had now gone to sleep.

She was a mysterious little one. Not only had she forged a contract with a human, but she could act independently of him. This was always possible at a certain distance, of course, but there was quite a long way between the inside and outside of a dungeon. And yet, here she was. I was also surprised that she'd managed to escape a floor that had turned into a boss room.

I moved Ciel to my room and let her sleep, then locked the library and headed for the tower.

Chapter 8

It was my fifth day away from the others when I finally heard the words I'd been waiting for.

"S-Sora! I learned it! I learned Blessing!" Mia called through the dungeon card, so excited it was hard to get her to calm down. She must have been really happy about it. I was just glad the shadow wulf wasn't in active pursuit at that moment.

Once she'd calmed down, Mia must have been embarrassed about the way she'd acted, because she clammed up entirely.

I opened my automap again and started thinking about the best place to confront the shadow wulf. It would be easy to set traps in the forest, but considering how that first attack had gone, I couldn't really endorse it. Fred and the others might get caught in my traps if I wasn't careful.

Given the size of our force, I ended up deciding that our best option would be to meet around the fifth floor entrance. Help still might arrive, after all—if they weren't here now, maybe they'd show up while we were fighting. The comparative openness of the space was in our favor too.

"Okay, got it. I'll tell Fred too. Take care, Sora."

"You too, Mia."

Distance-wise, Mia's group would probably arrive first.

"Hikari, did you hear all that?" I said, connecting just to her.

"Yeah," she responded after a minute.

Initially I'd been too busy to notice, but at one point I'd caught—by total coincidence, I'm afraid to admit—a flickering signal on my automap hanging out relatively close by. It was keeping a measured distance from me the whole time, as if it were monitoring the fight between me and the shadow wulf. Halfway through I realized it had to be Hikari—being capable of concealing her presence, she was the only one who would register on the map that way.

I could have spoken to her earlier, but I'd found myself holding back. Since she hadn't actively approached, I'd figured that she had meant to remain hidden.

"Sorry, master. I broke the rule," she said.

These dungeon cards are incredible, I thought as an aside. *It's almost like a phone call.* "That's okay," I told her. "I know you were worried. Did you manage to eat?"

"Yeah. I ate the gross stuff."

The rations, then? If she'd been on her own, that made sense. "Okay. I'll treat you to something tasty when I'm back, then."

"I want curry and snake meat."

The people do love curry, don't they? She really seemed eager to try that blood snake meat too. "We'll fight the shadow wulf the way I told Mia. Head back ahead of me and get ready to fight."

"Master, are you okay on your own?"

"Yeah, I'll use my traps to help me get back. In the meantime, I want you to tell Fred and everyone the plan and have them check something."

I told Hikari that there might be a way for the mages to lock down the wulf's shadow-jumping skill. I wanted them to check if using light-attribute magic or the lifestyle spell Light could get rid of shadows completely, then practice the maneuver.

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"Master, we're all ready here," Hikari said through her dungeon card.

"Got it," I responded. "Once I get a little closer, I'll use a holy spell. Mia, that's when you'll cast Blessing. The bad news is we won't get to practice beforehand. You okay with that?"

"Y-Yes. Leave it to me."

I certainly wished we could've practiced it, but I didn't want the shadow wulf getting sicced on Mia's group before it was time.

I kept an eye on my relative distance by checking my automap. I hadn't used a holy spell yet, since the shadow wulf would probably close in really fast if I was in its search range.

I'd been walking as much as I could so far—if things got dangerous I'd run for a bit, then go back to walking once I got a little breathing room. Since that meant I'd probably spent most of my time walking, I wasn't as tired as you'd expect. It also meant I could rack up plenty of experience while I went along.

But I couldn't even have thought about things like that if Mia hadn't learned Blessing. That had really taken a load off my mind.

"I should be able to join up with you soon," I told her. "How are things over there?"

"Good. We practiced a lot," Hikari responded.

"Don't worry," Sera put in. "They confirmed what you asked about, master."

"Great. How about Mia?"

"She's talking to herself a lot, but I think she's okay."

Is she really okay, then? Well, she would have an important role, so it was natural she'd be nervous.

"Mia, you don't have to be so nervous. If it doesn't work the first time, just keep at it. Relax and take deep breaths."

"R-Right. I will."

While we were talking through the dungeon card, I got close enough to see the silhouettes of the group, though I couldn't make out faces yet. They were standing in the grassland, with the mages broken up into a few small, detached groups. Mia was in the middle, of course.

I couldn't get too close, but if I was too far away I couldn't join in the battle. It was hard to judge a good compromise distance, but that was what I tried to maintain.

"Okay, let's get started. On my signal... Three, two, one, now!"

While walking, I cast a holy spell. The shadow wulf took off and used its shadow-jumping ability. Mia must have used Blessing a second later, because I saw a shower of light followed by a sparkling white radiance that came to wreath the weapons held by Sera, Fred, and the others.

The shadow wulf came out of my shadow, but it seemed to detect the more powerful holy spell as soon as it happened. It immediately tried to blow past me and jump back into a shadow, so

my first job was to stop it.

While using a spell to send up a signal flare, I executed a Sword Slash with a mana-infused blade. This was blocked by the shadow wulf's shadows, which made it feel like my sword had slammed into a brick wall.

Having tanked my attack, the shadow wulf simply activated its shadow-jumping ability again. The distant mages saw this and cast the Light spell, causing the shadows of Mia and the adventurers around her to vanish.

The shadow wulf immediately reappeared with a scream. It seemed that canceling its shadow jump midway must have hurt it. The vanishing of the shadow it meant to travel to apparently caused the skill itself to fail, making the shadow wulf reappear in an awkward position. I'd just been hoping it would help us keep the shadow wulf away from Mia, so this was an unexpected bonus.

"Let's go!" Fred shouted.

At this, the adventurers charged at the shadow wulf, weapons high. Of course, not all of them joined in the charge. About half stayed back to protect Mia and reinforce as necessary.

Mia immediately cast Protection to increase the attackers' defenses. The shadow wulf kept trying to make its way to her, but it must have judged the weapons carried by the attackers to be a threat, because it launched shadow spears at them. The shadows were immediately dispelled by their swords—more specifically, they disappeared the moment they made contact.

That explains why it hates the holy attribute, I thought.

In addition, knives thrown by Hikari from its blind spots and slashes from Sera sliced through the wulf's shadowy defenses and struck its hide directly. One swing from Sera came so fast and hard it ripped audibly through the air, but the shadow wulf just managed to escape a mortal blow. Still, she had clearly done real damage. While the wulf was staggered, Hikari approached and sliced through the back of its leg with her dagger, then quickly retreated before it could counter.

Fred and the others saw this and piled on, but their blows seemed to barely scratch the hide. Some of their slashes were

deflected outright. Apparently it was tough even without its shadows—something Fred and the others seemed not to have anticipated, because it left them shaken.

[**Name:** — / **Job:** — / **Level:** 36 / **Race:** Shadow Wulf / **Status:** Disabled]

I appraised the shadow wulf while I ran. Maybe the attacks from Fred's party weren't as effective because it had gained so many levels fighting monsters while pursuing me. I felt a little bad, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

"Mia, bless my weapon too," I called to Mia as I finally reached her side.

Mia tried to cast Blessing but stumbled. I quickly reached out to support her and noticed she was breathing unsteadily.

"A-Are you okay?"

"I-I might be out of mana. Just give me a minute." Mia quickly downed a mana potion and cast Blessing again.

Now that I was nearby, I could feel the shadow wulf's hostility turning back toward us. I thought it might still target Fred and the others, who were closer, but not this time. It let out an intimidating howl and launched its shadow spears at us, charging as it did.

Fred and the others must have been on the alert for this and so they blocked the shadow spears, but the shadow wulf had learned that their weapons weren't very effective against it, and it charged right through them. Still, I had to admire its perfect sense of the state of the field, as it managed to choose the perfect path to avoid Sera.

The way Fred's party had tried to surround the shadow wulf played against them this time. As they formed a wall against it, the distance between Sera and the shadow wulf kept growing.

"It's coming!" one of the adventurers defending Mia shouted.

I shot off some Fire Arrow spells, but even as they landed, the shadow wulf wasn't fazed. Taking that as a signal for some reason, the adventurers charged. I wanted to shout at them to stay on

defense, but there was no stopping them now. Only three stayed behind, which was far from enough.

"Mia, get ready to fire a Holy Arrow for now!"

A Holy Arrow wouldn't beat it in one hit, but it could keep it at bay. Still, it might be hard for Mia to use it on a charging shadow wulf. I'd thought about setting a trap to keep it at bay just in case, but I was afraid of catching the adventurers up in it, so I'd given up on that idea.

The shadow wulf immediately dodged past the charging adventurers, and then...instead of jumping at us, it approached cautiously. It had probably come so quickly at first because of the threat it felt from Sera.

I cast Shield on Mia while infusing my sword with mana. The material wasn't as good as mithril, but it still had a holy attribute, and that combined with the mana channeling would probably let it deal some damage to a shadow wulf.

The moment the creature was in range, I planted my feet hard and sliced at it. The use of Sword Slash should have made it a very fast strike, but the shadow wulf still managed to jump back and avoid it. This left me slicing through thin air, but it also ended up putting it closer to Sera.

It seemed like the best plan at this point would be to pin it between the two of us. We'd catch it off guard sooner or later.

I leaped forward to close the gap even more and tried to attack the shadow wulf in coordination with Sera. We left it with nowhere to run, and Sera as well as Fred and his gang all began to see the shadow wulf's death as inevitable.

But just then, it activated its shadow jumping. Our attacks struck thin air as the mages immediately cast their Light spell. This flushed the shadow wulf out, but it appeared in the worst location possible—right next to Mia, just within one jump's range. It had been hurt by the aborted jump, but it nevertheless leaped directly at her.

"Over here, dummy!" I tried to get its attention with my Provoke skill, but it resisted it.

Mia immediately fired a Holy Arrow, but the beast dodged it and slammed into her. My Shield spell blocked the blow, but I could tell

from the flow of mana that its repeated attacks had taken the spell down.

I spun around to run back to her, but each step felt like a million miles. Though the shadow wulf seemed to have slowed a bit, it was just too far away.

Mia must have felt the Shield spell drop too, because she immediately readied the Phtera Shield to defend against the shadow wulf's attacks. However, the body slam sent her and the shield flying through the air.

Shadow spears shot out to finish Mia off...but hit Hikari instead. She had pushed Mia out of the way in midair and taken the hit for herself. The shadow wulf must have been angry at being denied its prey, because it turned its attention fully toward Hikari now.

I felt its mana spike and assumed it was about to use a shadow spear. I ran trying to close the distance and again used my Provoke skill. The shadow wulf looked over at me for just a second, taking its attention off Hikari and the others.

That was its fatal mistake.

The next moment, Mia's voice rang out. "Holy Arrow!" From her place on the ground, she launched a shining white bolt, which shot straight at the shadow wulf.





The shadow wulf hurriedly invoked its shadows to defend against the unexpected attack, but the arrow tore through them and embedded itself into the creature's foreleg. It let out a scream. Breaking through the shadow shield had slowed the arrow just enough to send it off track, so the blow wasn't fatal. But it was enough to give us an opening.

Now I'd gotten close enough to swing my sword. Because the shadow wulf's movements were slowed (probably thanks to the holy arrow attack), I managed to land a deep cut through its chest. I had to give it some credit for avoiding a fatal wound once more. However, even though that blow didn't finish it, it did send it running.

In that second, Sera brought her axe down and sliced the shadow wulf's head off, finally ending it once and for all.

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First there was a moment of silence. Then Fred and his adventurers erupted into cheers, filled with joyous celebration and praise for all involved. Some of the adventurers were even crying.

Hearing those voices made the victory sink in for me too. Now that I thought about it, the days I'd spent on the run setting traps just to keep alive really had taken a toll on me.

A panicked cry from Mia brought me out of my reverie.

I looked over and saw Hikari collapsed on the ground. I remembered what had happened and ran up to her, with Sera joining us soon after. Fred and the others came running as well.

I examined her and saw her uniform stained with red. Her eyes were closed, and her face was contorted in pain and covered in cold sweat.

"Sora, the potions aren't working," Mia said. Beside Hikari were several empty bottles.

I took out my highest-quality potion and sprinkled it on her, but she remained in pain. *Why?* I wondered. I inspected the wound and cleared the blood away with Cleanse, which made it clear that the wound hadn't closed. I used another potion, but it didn't help, even

when I made her drink it...

No, actually, the wound has healed quite a lot, but the healing isn't very effective. It's as if we're using low-quality potions.

"What's going on?" I wondered. The potions weren't working well, even though I was using the highest-quality kind.

Could something else be causing this?

I decided I'd think about it later. If the potions weren't working, we'd have to use Heal.

Mia seemed to realize that just as I did. She held out her hand, took a deep breath, and then intoned, "Heal." Previously she would have cast the spell in more of a panic, but this time she was calm.

The wound finally began to close properly. Mia cast the spell again and again until it was done.

When they saw Hikari completely cured, Fred and the others let out another cheer.

"Ngh, so loud..." Hikari muttered in annoyance, her face screwing up.

She spoke softly, but Fred and the others seemed to hear her and quieted down appropriately.

"Hikari, are you all right? Does anything still hurt?"

The wound had closed over, but Hikari's face was still contorted in pain. "Master..." she said weakly.

We all held our breath and waited for her next words.

At last, she whispered, "I'm hungry..."

I wondered what my expression must have looked like in that moment. Fred and the others just stared in disbelief.

She'd said that they'd given her rations to eat while she was on her own, but she hadn't eaten many because she hated the taste.

"Yeah, not fit to be eaten," she confirmed. She'd truly formed a discriminating palate, though Fred and the others nodded in agreement.

I was about to take some food out of my Item Box, but I realized it was a mistake to pull out something premade in front of Fred and the others. I heard someone's stomach growl.

Guess we'd better get cooking, huh? I thought. So we divvied up roles and were about to get started when...

“H-Hey, is that a treasure chest?” one of the adventurers suddenly whispered.

There was a chest lying beside the dead shadow wulf. It felt almost odd that none of us had noticed it before now.

“Do you usually get chests for beating monsters?” I asked.

“No, not for normal ones. I guess that shadow wulf really was a boss,” Fred responded. “Anyway...it could be trapped, so let’s set a team for that too. I think poor little Hikari’s dying of hunger.”

On Fred’s suggestion, we formed a few teams: one for cooking, one for breaking down monster bodies (including the shadow wulf), one to keep watch, one to check stairway access, and one for analyzing the treasure chest. Then we moved into action.

Me? I was part of the cooking team, accompanied only by Mia. Sera was on lookout duty, while Hikari, who was interested in the treasure chest, watched that team at work.

For ingredients, I pulled the remaining wulf and blood snake meat from my bag of holding, as well as vegetables I’d preserved in my Item Box. I just prepared the meat as simple steaks. I didn’t put them on skewers because it was an annoying thing to do for so many...or rather, because I didn’t have enough. I made the soup on the salty side, as adventurers tended to like it.

“Say, Mia,” I said while we cooked.

“Hmm? Yes?”

“I’m really, um, glad you came with us. You’re the real reason any of us made it out of this alive. Thanks.”

I figured it was best to tell her while we were cooking side by side. I’d have been too self-conscious to say it straight to her face.

Mia, who had been asking me questions about cooking up to that point, suddenly went silent. I looked over in curiosity and was shocked by what I saw. Tears were streaming down her face.

“Wh-What is it? Did I say something wrong? Or are you still hurt?” I asked, panicked.

In response, Mia rubbed her eyes and said, “No... I was happy to hear that from you,” with a beaming smile.

I could have stared at that smile forever, but a sudden interruption tore me away.

"C-Ciel?"

Yes, at that moment Ciel came flying up to us. I probably shouldn't have called her name out loud, but thankfully, nobody seemed to hear me.

She flew happily around me and Mia for a while, but her attention eventually turned to the meat sizzling on the pan. I'd been incredibly worried about her disappearance, so seeing her back to her usual self brought a sigh of relief to my lips. I found myself sharing a look and a laugh with Mia.

Ciel, I told her telepathically. *Sorry, but there's not a serving for you.*

This seemed to come as a heavy blow to her, but she couldn't have eaten with all the adventurers around us anyway. I just wanted to add the nuance that it was punishment for making me worry. I felt bad for her, with her shell-shocked expression and drooping ears, but I didn't budge. She had to accept some boundaries.

Soon after, the cooking was finished, and we got to eating. The people who'd gone to the entrance hadn't come back yet, but most people agreed that we couldn't force the starving Hikari to wait for them.

"Yeah, it's good," she said as she ate, and the other adventurers nodded in agreement.

Ciel spent the whole time sulking on Mia's lap.

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"Wh-What are you doing?!"

This outraged exclamation came from Layla, who had just arrived.

I was certainly surprised to see her too. I'd been able to tell with Detect Presence that someone had been approaching, but I'd assumed it was the adventurers who'd gone to check the entrance.

Layla was so outraged because she'd been told we were in danger, so she'd packed up and rushed here only to find us enjoying a leisurely dinner.

"I was hungry..." Hikari told her by way of explanation, which

mollified her somewhat.

Someone else addressed me then. "So you're Sora? Layla told us to come quick to help you with a shadow wulf. Did you really beat it by yourself?"

The man was looking at the shadow wulf currently being exsanguinated. His armor looked familiar... *Ah, he's a member of the Guardian's Blade.* It was the person Joshua had said was a recent graduate of their school.

"We all worked together, actua—" I started. But my attempt to explain was immediately drowned out by a chorus of passionate voices.

"It's because of Lady Mia!" cried one.

"Mia is wonderful!" exclaimed another.

"Mia is a true goddess!" shouted a third.

Mia turned bright red in embarrassment, but there was no point in denying the truth. Tricia nodded in satisfied agreement.

The people who'd gone to check the entrance explained that the stairs were now usable, which meant the best thing to do after we ate would be to head home.

By the way, Layla and her team had sat down to join us in our meal for some reason, which meant I had to make more steaks. I'd prepared a lot already—Mia had mentioned that Fred's party had a big appetite—yet what I'd made still wasn't enough.

Apparently the new arrivals had been in such a hurry they hadn't had time to prepare food of their own. The members of the Guardian's Blade, in particular, had just been on their way back from the dungeon when they'd had to join in with the rescue team.

"Thank you for coming," I told a middle-aged man who was part of the Guardian's Blade.

"The lord's daughter seemed all worked up about it. Ash insisted we go with her and wouldn't take no for an answer," he responded in a tone touched by mild exasperation.

Ash was the person Joshua had called his senior.

"What are we talking about here?" Layla asked.

"Oh, the people from the Guardian's Blade are telling me about Ash," I said.

"Ash was the leader of a party that worked with us for a while, and now he's the subleader of the Guardian's Blade. It was an impressive feat for such a recent graduate."

Yeah, that squares with what Joshua told me.

"Hah, I didn't want to do it," Ash said ruefully as he walked up to us as well. "Seemed like a lot of trouble. But I guess it was my turn." I didn't know quite how the clans were organized, but a complete newcomer being chosen for such an impressive post suggested he had great skill.

"That's all too humble of you," Layla added on.

"But Layla, how did you guys hear about the shadow wulf? Or did you just come running because the hunting party was gone for so long?" I was wondering how Layla knew to come help us. Was it a quest from the guild?

"Seris told me about the shadow wulf. Then I heard that you hadn't returned from the dungeon and saw the record at the guild of you going to the fourth floor, and, well..."

She'd mentioned this all to the guild and had just been suggesting the formation of a rescue team when Ash's team had passed by and agreed to come with her.

"Really, I'm just glad you're safe." She truly looked like she'd been worried sick about us. "All that said! I know better than anyone how strong you are, Sora, but that's no reason to be so reckless. A shadow wulf is one of the easier advanced subtypes to beat, but that's only for people who have a plan. Do you know how worried I was?" She had switched on a dime to a lecturing tone.

I did feel quite sorry about that. Things had worked out in the past, so I couldn't deny I'd just assumed things would work out if Mia learned Blessing. But another factor was that it was hard to wait for salvation we couldn't be sure would come. I'd been lucky enough to learn the Trap skill I could use to buy time too.

"Yeah, I understand," I told her. "I can't promise I'll never push myself like that again, but I will try to be careful."

"Honestly, you're hopeless," she grumbled. "This is why I..."

"Hmm? Did you say something?" I asked.

"Nothing. Anyway, I'll need you to file a thorough report with the

guild. And Sora... I wasn't sure if I should say this, but the mask really is a poor match for your school uniform." All the members of the Bloody Rose nodded in agreement with her.

I'd thought Fred would handle the report to the guild, but I would apparently have to attend as a person of interest as well.

However, even after we finished the meal, we couldn't head back just yet. There was one more task to get through.

"We can open the chest now!" Hikari called out, her eyes shining.

The investigation had revealed that the chest didn't have any traps, though it had been locked. They'd taken care of that by now, though.

"You sure?"

Apparently it had been decided that Hikari should open it. Unlike the chest we'd found in the dungeon corridors, this was a boss drop. I'd also heard that the chests dropped by bosses got more valuable the more people there were around the boss room.

"Open!" Hikari declared as she lifted the lid of the chest. Hopeful eyes fell on the contents.

And we saw...an old rock, a shiny silver hunk of metal, and three platinum pieces.

Fred and the others hugged each other in excitement and cried out for joy. The platinum pieces were certainly worth a lot, but they wouldn't amount to much divided among this many people. They'd probably barely make a profit after repairing their broken equipment.

"Hey, let's see a little more enthusiasm," Fred encouraged me. "We've hit the jackpot here. Especially this Returner Stone. It's seriously valuable!"

A Returner Stone... It was a magic item that would instantly take you outside from anywhere in the dungeon other than a boss room. Clans who flirted with danger by exploring the lower floors would typically pay through the nose for them, so they apparently fetched at least ten platinums on the market. Indeed, I thought I saw a gleam in Ash's eyes as he stared at it.

"And this metal here...is that mithril?" Fred asked.

"It appears so," Layla affirmed, causing another eruption of excitement.

With that, our third trip into the dungeon came to an end. We decided to work out the distribution of rewards after getting home; first, we returned to the guild to file our report.

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Our visit to the guild was fairly trying.

The group designated to make the report consisted of a few people from the rescue team, including Layla and Ash; representatives from each party on the hunting team, including Fred; and finally myself and Mia.

Once that was decided, the adventurers who'd defeated the shadow wulf with us and had become kind of like groupies for Mia—the people who'd been calling her "Lady Mia" and "Goddess"—said their reluctant goodbyes. Tricia nodded in approval of their behavior.

Hikari and Sera would be going home before us, but Hikari stayed to quickly discuss something with Fred again.

"Master, I'm gonna go see Norman. Can they come tomorrow again?" Hikari asked.

We'd been gone far longer than we'd originally expected. Would they already be out of wulfs to break down? Fortunately, I had even more wulfs and blood snakes in my Item Box than last time, so we could probably do with more work from them.

"Yeah, please ask them," I said. "And take some of this leftover food to them."

There wasn't much left, so it was good to get it off my hands. We wouldn't be going back into the dungeon anytime soon anyway, and I could just make more in the meantime.

We were led to a room to meet with the guild master of this adventurers' guild. With pale, waist-length purple hair and shrewd, sparkling yellow eyes, she was a beautiful woman dressed snappily in men's clothing. As for how I knew she was a woman...

Ow, that hurts, Mia! I can't help that my eyes were drawn to her chest. You don't have to pinch my cheek!

"A pleasure to meet you—some of you, at least," she began. "I am Reese, adventurers' guild master here in Majorica. I'm sorry to

drag you in so soon after your ordeal, but I'd like to hear your report."

Reese looked into each of our faces as she spoke. She paused briefly at mine, and then again at Mia's. I thought maybe she was just trying to commit our faces to memory, as it sounded like she'd met the others before. *No...there's no way she'll remember my face with me wearing the mask and all. Maybe she's trying to remember "a masked man in a student uniform," then.* Or maybe, like Layla, she thought it was an unbecoming combination.

Fred gave most of the report, sounding nervous to be talking to a guild master.

"I see. So the witness reports were wrong," she responded.

"Yes. I wish we could have reported the correction immediately, but..." Fred said sheepishly.

"So the floor turned into a boss room?" she pressed him. "It seems hard to believe, but I suppose it must be true."

"We arrived after it was already slain, so we weren't able to confirm," Ash added. "But the monster did drop a chest, so it seems plausible."

"Understood. I apologize for giving mistaken information to the hunting party, and I'll increase your compensation accordingly. That includes you, Sora, as I understand that your party contributed a great deal too. And thanks to the parties that came to aid in the rescue."

After that, Reese and the other guild personnel took their leave, and the rest of us began to discuss distribution of the monster materials as well as the contents of the treasure chest. Layla's group stuck around to advise us on the materials' value.

As far as the monster materials went, we'd be receiving the shadow wulf magistone and a lot of its meat, and the remaining portions would be sold off. The magistone was given to us rather than bought, partly because Mia was the main reason we'd defeated it.

The rest of the monsters were divided up equally. Hikari and I hadn't participated in the monster hunt, but we were given a portion for distracting the shadow wulf while it was going on. We got seven

blood snakes, which we took as is.

"So, what about the rest?"

That just left the contents of the treasure chest. Fred and the others kept stealing glances at Ash, perhaps hoping he'd pay a lot for the Returner Stone. Ash seemed to have stayed with us for just that reason and bought it for double the market price. As expected of a frontliner clan, they were loaded. I personally wished I could have it for insurance as well, but I didn't have the money on hand to put in a bid.

I managed to negotiate for the mithril by cashing out my share of the gold, plus a little extra. I was about to pull the rest from my savings, but Mia said she'd pay. The reason such a precious commodity had been offered at a price I could afford was that even after you had it, it cost quite a pretty penny to have weapons made of it.

Once the meeting was over, I could finally relax. I really just wanted to get home, have a bath, and sleep.

"Layla, thank you. You really saved us." I thanked Layla for dropping everything to come help us, since I hadn't had a chance to do so before.

"You should thank Seris too. She's effectively the one who told me about it," Layla responded.

"That's right. I'll do that."

We got the money the guild owed us for the quest and then went our separate ways.

"But what do you think Fred wanted?" I mused. The old adventurer had asked where we lived before we parted ways. I remembered Mia emphasizing that she'd only tell him if he didn't tell the others. Did Mia's new groupies seem like the kind of people who'd try to break in to see her? It was a scary thought.

"Sora... Was I useful?" Mia asked me as we walked home side by side.

"Of course you were. Like I told you in the dungeon, we wouldn't have made it out alive without you."

"I see... I'm glad to hear it."

I glanced over and saw Mia smiling to herself. There was something I wanted to say to her, but I wasn't sure if I should.

Still, I decided it was now or never. "Hey, Mia. Like I told you before, I'm going to be traveling for quite a while. For now we're searching for Sera's childhood friend Eris, but I want to keep exploring this world even after that's done."

She paused for a moment. "Right."

I could feel myself sweating awkwardly. I clenched my hands and found that even my palms were soaked, but I'd regret it if I didn't say it now. When else was I going to get a chance? So I put it into words.

"So... I'd like you to come with me, if that's what you'd like. Not because your holy magic will be useful or anything like that. I just genuinely want to have you with me. Is that okay?"

Maybe I should have used more forceful language, but I just couldn't talk that way to her. The thought of being rejected gave me a strange pain in my chest.

I looked to my side and saw Mia's face close to mine. When our eyes met, I could see her cheeks grow redder and redder.

Did that mean she was willing to stay with me?

We walked for a while longer in silence. I felt like we were going a little slower than usual.

"Hey, Sora. Are we going into the dungeon again?" she asked around the time the house came into sight. We were just walking normally, a little ways apart, okay?

"Yeah, there's some things I want to do there. And I want to make money." I wanted to fulfill Seris's request and give more work to Norman and the kids, and also to gather materials for the Eyes of Eliana.

The reason I'd bought the mithril, too, was that I hoped to make weapons in anticipation of visiting the lower floors. Fred and the others had said it was hard to find an artisan who would make weapons out of mithril, but I could make something with my Creation skill. I wasn't completely set on making weapons yet, though. There was another thing I could potentially use it for.

Still, even with all that, it wouldn't be enough to conquer the

lower floors. The first issue to address was still the size of our party. The monsters would get stronger the farther down we went, and they'd appear in greater numbers too.

"I think we need more allies," I told her. At the school they formed parties of four to six people, but most of them usually went into the dungeon with at least a few other parties. It was apparently rare for a single party to go any deeper than the twelfth floor, which meant our group of four was probably too small.

"Should we recruit at the school?" she asked me.

"That might not be easy. Everyone in the adventurer course will have already joined a party, and we probably won't be staying until graduation." Cobbling together a new party every time we went into the dungeon would be hard, and even if we managed it, it would be hard to coordinate properly with an impromptu party each time. At the same time, forming a committed party could lead to conflict when it was time for the rest of us to move on.

That made me think it would be best to search among existing adventurers. I proposed that Mia's groupies would probably jump at the chance, but she firmly vetoed the idea. I'd been joking, of course; I didn't think I could survive much more of their intensity either. Hikari was probably the only one who was unbothered by it—her and Sera, maybe.

"It sounds like we should talk about it with Sera and Hikari, then," Mia said. "And you mentioned that Sera's, um, childhood friends would be coming soon too. Maybe we could ask them."

That was true. Asking Rurika and Chris would probably be our best option. They'd written to say they were taking a detour through the capital city, but I wondered how far they'd made it since then.

I used my magic item to try to find out where they were, and the light indicated they'd reached Majorica.

At that same moment, the tracker audibly cracked.

◇Chris's Perspective

We arrived in Majorica before lunchtime. Since we'd spent the

money we'd earned on a transport wagon, we were low on funds again. I just hoped there would be an inn we could stay at with the money we had on hand...

I looked over at Rurika and saw that she was looking nervous as well. *Are we really going to find Sera at last?* I wondered.

I should have been happy, but gathering my emotions was harder than I'd expected. It was probably because of what Syphon had told us about Sora back in Mahia—I still hadn't worked through my feelings about it. The reason we'd taken a wagon without having the money to spend was because I couldn't work up the will to walk. Rurika was trying to act cheerful, but I had a feeling she was just as sad as I was, deep down.

"Let's go, Chris," she said, pulling me along as usual.

I knew it wasn't good to be so dependent on her, but I couldn't help myself. I was such a coward, always trailing behind someone else. I always had been, I still was...and I probably always would be.

I'd wanted to change for so long, but it never seemed to stick.

Our first destination was the dungeon district where the adventurers' guild was apparently located. I found it very noisy as we entered, and I wondered if something had happened. I felt lots of eyes on me. I was used to getting a lot of attention when I entered a new place, so I pulled my hood low over my face again and continued to follow Rurika.

We showed our guild cards at reception and asked if there was a message for us. They then gave us the location of a house which seemed to be where Sera was living. *What could it mean?* I wondered. They also gave us a letter to attest that we knew Sera, in case she wasn't at home. Apparently we were supposed to give this to someone named Iroha who lived at that house.

We followed the map they gave us to a large residence. It appeared to be a rental, and I wondered how much it cost. We'd only ever stayed in inns, so I couldn't begin to guess. It had a yard and what looked like a storehouse, so it was most likely expensive.

"This isn't a scam, is it?" Rurika seemed hesitant about it as well. It would take a lot of courage just to knock on the door. *Give it your best shot!* I prayed on her behalf.

Instead, I felt a push from behind, and suddenly, the door was in front of me. I turned around and saw Rurika smiling at me—only with her lips, but not her eyes.

It looked like I'd have to do it.

I gave a few raps with what looked like a knocker. *This* is *the right place, isn't it?* I wondered. I glanced back at Rurika, and she looked away.

I waited for a while, and then the door opened without a sound. I saw a small boy in a maid outfit peeking out from a gap in the door.

"Weccom," he lisped. "How can I help you?" He seemed shy, but he was trying the hardest he could. It tugged at my heartstrings.

"W-Well. My name is Chris," I said kindly. "I heard someone named Sera lives here. Is she at home?"

He tilted his head, then closed the door. I heard the sound of footsteps rushing away.

This felt like a problem. I wondered if it was the wrong house after all.

While I was rolling that over in my mind, I sensed someone approaching again behind the door. It opened slowly to reveal another maid standing there. We gave our names, and the lady introduced herself as Iroha, so I handed her the letter from Sera.

"Miss Sera is not with us at the moment. I'm not sure when she'll return, but this says that you may stay here until she arrives. Please wait inside."

All of her mannerisms were impeccable, and I couldn't help but stare. *S-Such an adult...* I found myself looking at her chest... *Wait, no!*

We entered the house at the maid's urging. It looked spotless, and it must have been regularly cleaned. Did Sera live in a place like this?

But is this okay? What does she mean that she's not sure when she'll return? I wasn't sure whether to ask for more information or not.

"Please wait here."

There was a set of chairs around a large table. *Will we be eating*

here? We sat down and she served drinks, brought by the little boy from before. I won't mention my panic over how unsteady he seemed.

I took a drink, and a sweet aroma filled my mouth. It was delicious.

"Hey, Chris," Rurika said.

I knew what she meant—the little "maid" was still staring at us from behind a piece of furniture. He was likely trying to hide, but I could see him. I smiled and waved and he hid again, but he quickly came back to his original position to stare at us once more.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but suddenly the little "maid" looked up and ran out of the room. Soon after that, I heard chattering voices.

"Weccom home."

"Hey, I'm back. I met Elza out front."

"Where are Big Bro and Big Sis Mia?"

"They'll be back soon. You said there's someone here?" came an exchange of voices outside the room.

The little "maid" from before came back with someone's personal belongings in his arms, accompanied by a slightly older maid with even more items in hand. They were followed by a young girl a little older than the second maid, and behind her...

"S-Sera?" It looked like her. But was it really true? I couldn't say.

As I whispered the name, the beastfolk girl looked surprised. She tilted her head at me, looked at Rurika next to me...and then threw herself at me.

C-Can't breathe! Her chest had blocked my nose and mouth. *That's a lethal weapon!* I panicked and struggled against her until she finally let me go. *Ah, wonderful fresh air!* I gasped in relief.





"Rurika...and is that you, Chris?"

It was an awful thing to ask after she'd just been hugging me. *You should have hugged Rurika, then!* But her appearance and voice... It was a little lower than I remembered, but there was no doubt who she was.

"That's right. Sera... I'm so glad you're okay." I started to cry. I worked hard to stop myself, but I couldn't. I wasn't quiet either. *Finally... We finally found her!*

She came to embrace me again, this time more gently.

She's warm. It's really Sera, right here with me. The friend I'd searched for for so long was here with me. I'd almost given up time and again, but now here she was...

I looked over at Rurika and saw her crying with me. I looked toward Sera, and she was sobbing too.

We'd reunited with our friend after nine long years.

◇◇◇

Together with Mia, I returned to the house from the adventurers' guild and found Elza and Art waiting for me as usual. Art looked suspicious of me at first. Maybe I'd been gone so long he'd forgotten what I looked like?

Elza looked like she was about to say something, too, but then she seemed to remember something. "Ah, big bro, guests are here."

"I see. Thanks." As I approached the room, I heard merry voices. *That atmosphere... It has to be Rurika and Chris.*

Hikari and Sera greeted me the minute I came inside.

"Master, welcome back."

"Hey, master, welcome back."

Rurika and Chris also stood up and thanked me. They seemed nervous and restless, though I wasn't sure why. They introduced themselves too. *Ah, right, because they haven't met Mia.* Mia introduced herself as well.

A moment later, Ciel arrived, flew around Hikari, then plopped onto her head. Hikari noticed that Ciel was there, but she couldn't interact with her in front of Rurika and Chris. Interacting with Ciel in

front of people who couldn't see her would get her pegged as a weirdo—like a crazy person petting an animal that wasn't there.

Still, an expression of surprise appeared on Chris's face just then. I wondered about it, but out loud I just said, "I'm glad you guys made it. Did you get to talk much?"

"Yeah," Sera answered, seeming a little bashful. "Seems like they've been through a lot, looking for me." She looked happy, though. Her eyes were a bit red, surely from crying. I'd told her the story before, but apparently hearing it straight from the horse's mouth must have hit differently.

I assumed they had a lot of catching up to do and was about to leave them to it, but for some reason they encouraged me to sit. We sat down in empty chairs, and Elza immediately set out tea for us—her training with Iroha was paying dividends. Then, perhaps to give us privacy, Iroha took Elza and Art back to their room and told us to call them if we needed anything. Elza must have been curious, because she seemed reluctant to leave.

"So, um, I'd like to discuss our next steps," Chris said once Iroha was gone. "Sera is...your slave, I believe? How do we release her?"

She looked so serious—desperate, even. I hadn't meant to ask for anything, of course. In purely contractual terms, as a debt slave she was supposed to pay me at least five hundred gold to be freed. On top of that, a slave master could require payment of the slave's room and boarding fees, so these things could change depending on the master.

This meant that a slave master who really didn't want to let a slave go would demand outrageous fees for their release. Theoretically, in the most extremely exploitative cases you could sue to have the contract nullified, but there was no precedent for this going through. Since you could order a slave to keep their mouth shut, they would have no real way to make the petition.

So it was no exaggeration to say that a slave's prospects changed significantly based on who happened to buy them.

"Well...I didn't really think about it that hard..." I began.

That much was true. My plan had been to go journeying with Rurika and Chris after we met up to try and find Eris, but I hadn't

thought about it much beyond that. I'd just thought it went without saying. Of course, things might change once we did find Eris.

Besides, we'd made quite a lot on that recent dungeon dive, so even if it cost five hundred gold to free Sera, she'd be able to reach that amount soon enough.

"Hey, master. We're going to the dungeon again, right? We can ask them to help us," Sera proposed.

Talk about a windfall! I'd definitely love to have them. I'd just been talking to Mia about that, in fact.

Still, Eris obviously wasn't in Majorica, and conquering the dungeon might end up being a long detour. When I thought about it calmly, I felt less sure about whether it was the right thing to do.

"It's okay. They both need to make some money too. And if Big Sis Eris is a slave, we'll need to save up a lot to buy her."

Sera's words made both girls blush a deep red. Were they that low on cash? It sounded like they'd taken multiple wagons to speed up their journey and were really almost broke. They apparently only had enough for a few days at an inn. I'd thought they'd be strategically saving money, but they must have spent a lot rushing to Majorica.

Then there was the question of what to do if Eris was a slave when we found her. I thought back on my conversation with Dredd at the slave traders—I'd asked how much Eris would cost if his company were selling her. He'd said that it would be hard to put a price on it, but it would be at least a platinum piece.

"Well, we have a few spare rooms, so you can stay here," I told them. "I'm sure you've got a lot to catch up on, so make yourselves at home. We'd also love to have your help in the dungeon, if you're up for it."

Did I say something weird? Chris and Rurika were looking at me in surprise. Sera looked happy, though. I was glad about the idea of getting to adventure with them again myself.

"E-Excuse me," Chris said after a moment. "Why are you being so nice to us?"

I was confused. *Why would she say that to me?*

While I was thinking that over, Mia whispered something in my

ear.

Ah, that explains it, I realized. I'd gotten so used to it that I'd forgotten all about it.

The girls hadn't recognized me because I was wearing my mask. Come to think of it, I hadn't introduced myself either because I'd assumed they recognized me.

"Because you've done so much for me," I said, removing my mask at last.

I heard a clattering sound. Chris had bolted to her feet. Beside her, Rurika looked on in shock.

"Sora...is that you?"

Mia had been right. They hadn't recognized me because of the mask.

"Yeah, it's me. It's good to see you guys aga—"

My words got cut off halfway as Chris threw her arms around me.

What, did she miss me that much? I thought, taken aback. *I'm a little embarrassed...*

As I thought that, she began to cry. *Tears of joy? Doesn't look like it...* In fact, she was wailing like a small child.

Someone help me, please! I looked over at Sera, who just seemed confused. Hikari...was acting like her usual self, as was Ciel. Mia just looked uncomfortable, like she wanted to say something but couldn't.

"Um, what's going on?" I asked Rurika, who must have known the situation.

Rurika was crying too. She must have realized it right away, though, because she quickly wiped away her tears and looked a little embarrassed. "It's just... We ran into Syphon on the way here and asked him about you. He said you died on a quest."

That's a name I hadn't heard in a while. I hope the Goblin's Lament guys are doing well, I thought nostalgically. *But I see... So that's why.*

"So she's really happy to see you alive, I think. I-I'm happy too, of course," Rurika clarified.

"Looks like I really made you guys worry. I'll tell you the whole story later."

“Yeah, we’d really appreciate that.”

“Oh, also, Sera. Sorry, but could you take Chris to a room? I think she’s asleep.” She was indeed fast asleep, as if she’d cried herself out.

Sera carried Chris off in her arms, and Rurika followed her.

The rest of us decided to start making dinner. It was our big reunion, after all, so it was important to go all out. Hearing that, Ciel flew around happily, even though she wouldn’t actually be allowed to eat with us...

But first, I had to get the okay from Iroha. I wouldn’t want to go around stealing her job without permission.

Epilogue

That night, we had a feast. About seventy percent of the table's surface was taken up by all kinds of foods.

I made a variety of dishes myself, and Iroha, ever the eager learner, peppered me with questions about it each time I asked her to taste. When I mentioned that Layla hadn't had some of them, an extremely nasty smile appeared on her face for a moment, but she returned to normal soon enough.

Rurika and Chris gave my cooking high marks, and they seemed to really enjoy it. Art ate with gusto for once, apparently loving the meatballs. Mia and Elza both asked me to give them another proper cooking lesson.

Most importantly of all, though, Hikari also asked me to teach her to cook. Mia and Sera both looked shocked about this, which confused both Rurika and Chris.

The one who changed the most, though, was Sera. Reuniting with her friends seemed to have caused the last of her prickliness to vanish and the last of her rough edges to sand off.

The party ended with after-dinner dessert and sweets. Elza and Iroha went back to their rooms with the sleepy-looking Art, while Hikari and Mia visited the bath together.

The rest of us stayed in the sitting room, drinking and catching up. I told them everything I'd been through since we'd parted ways. I also told them I was an otherworlder and explained why I hadn't told them in the first place.

Rurika and Chris talked mainly about their experience in the Beastland, including how Rurika had ended up getting sick. It was a wild land of untouched nature, and they told me about the different tribes of beastfolk they'd seen. It made me really want to visit at some point. Other than the feline Sera, the only beastfolk I'd ever seen was of the canine persuasion. Chris talked blissfully about how

cute the bear beastfolk children were, while Rurika preferred the foxes.

"But knowing you're not from our world explains a lot," Rurika said at the end. "I'd had a feeling you were kind of low on common sense, and maybe hiding something too."

"But it makes sense under the circumstances," Sera chimed in. "Anyone would be on guard after being treated like that."

"Yeah, it sounds awful. But we wouldn't have met each other otherwise, so I guess I'm kind of grateful?"

"Well...I suppose," Chris agreed.

I could agree with that too. I wouldn't have become who I was now if they hadn't kicked me out in the first place. "Hey, can I ask a question?" I said. "I was brought to this world through 'summoning.' Do you know of any other way for people to come to this world?"

"I'm not sure," Rurika said. "It was Granny who told us about it too. She was a mysterious person with a lot of mysterious knowledge."

The other two nodded firmly in agreement.

"But I for one am curious why you have such cute girls with you, and slaves at that," Rurika added.

That's juice they're drinking, right? It felt like the kind of question you asked when you were inebriated. I'd also told them about Hikari and Mia already. Had she not been listening?

"What do you expect?" I said defensively. "I didn't have a lot of options. It was the only way for Hikari to get an ID, and Mia was...well, it was complicated."

I'd explained about the two of them while I filled them in on my own story—with Mia's and Hikari's consent, of course. Hikari had seemed indifferent about it, while Mia had seemed a little uncertain, but she gave permission because they were Sera's friends.

Rurika and Chris had been more shocked to hear that Hikari had been monitoring me than that Mia was the Saint. But they'd heard news of the Saint's death when they entered Magic Nation territory, so maybe they were more surprised that she was actually alive and here with us now?

Mia and Hikari came back from the bath, so the other three girls

took a turn, and I had a long soak when they were done with Ciel joining me this time.

Rurika had originally teased me with an offer to go in with them, but she'd stopped when Chris started turning bright red. Sera seemed fine about it. Even Rurika who'd said it turned a little pink. *Backfired, I guess.*

Later, when they left the bath, Rurika and Chris both looked a bit dead-eyed. I wondered what had happened.

I returned to my room and let out a sigh. It had been such an overwhelming day.

As I lay down on the bed, Ciel flew up to me and started slapping me with her ears, probably asking for food. She seemed to cheer up only when I lined different dishes out on the table. Once she started eating, she completely forgot about me.

As I watched Ciel enjoy herself, I thought about Rurika and Chris. I'd been so happy to see them again. I hadn't expected them to cry like that, but that must have reflected how worried they'd been about me.

If they hadn't run into Syphon they wouldn't have known about my "death," and there wouldn't have been a misunderstanding. The main reason they'd believed I'd really died was that the magical tracking item I'd given them had stopped responding. I'd explained to them that it was because my receiver had been destroyed during the stampede.

Mainly, though, I was just relieved to hear that the Kingdom had declared me dead.

While I was thinking all that over, I heard a knock at the door. Looking out, I saw Mia...and Chris as well. I wasn't sure what to make of that particular pairing. I didn't remember them talking very much at dinner.

"Huh? What's up?" I asked.

I got no answer at first. Then, after a while, Mia gave Chris a nudge.

"U-Um, do you have a minute?" Chris finally said, looking quite nervous.

I nodded, and Mia was about to excuse herself, but...

"Mia, I'd...like you to hear this too," Chris said to stop her, and I invited them both in.

It felt a little weird having all three of us sit on the bed, so I left that to them while I sat on the only available chair.

That was when I realized something important: Ciel was eating nonchalantly on the table behind me.

I moved to try to block the view, but Chris just laughed and said, "Heh, I'm glad." I asked her what she meant, and she took a deep breath and explained. "After what you said, I thought about a lot of things. I talked to Rurika and Sera about it, and they told me I should follow my heart. That was what I wanted them to say, but...I didn't have the courage. But Mia talked to me while I was waiting in front of the room, trying to figure it out, and it helped me to make up my mind."

She looked over at Mia and bowed in gratitude. "She and Hikari have only just met us, yet they've opened up to us and entrusted us with their secrets too. That means they must really trust you, Sora. So I feel like I should also tell you... I mean, would you mind if I told you my secret?"

I waited for her next words. The long silence probably showed how hard it was for Chris.

"I'm actually not human," she admitted at last. "I'm...well, an elf."

The first change I noticed was the color of her hair and eyes. Previously golden, they now turned a stunning silver color. And her ears, which had been round before, suddenly became pointed.

The next thing I felt was the mana she exuded. Maybe it was because I'd learned Regulate Mana, but the fact that I could feel its intensity when I wasn't actively using Detect Mana...was that a sign of just how much she had? Then, when I did use Detect Mana, I felt a higher density of it than I'd ever felt before. Mia must have felt it too, because her eyes opened wide.

"You don't seem too surprised," Chris said when her transformation was fully revealed.

"Oh, actually...I guess I'm so surprised I don't know what to say..."

Mia nodded in agreement.

"Ah, does that mean you can see Ciel too?" I realized.

"So her name is Ciel?" Chris asked. "I see. So you managed to make a contract."

In response to the question, Ciel paused in her eating and nodded firmly.

This was a pretty big development in some ways. Ciel wasn't even shocked to see the change in her appearance. *Hmm? And if Chris already knew about Ciel, then...* "Is that why you wrote down all that information about spirits?" I asked.

"Yes, because I couldn't tell you directly," she confirmed. "And because she— Ciel came to me for advice. She wanted to be with you, to be closer to you."

So that was what had happened. "I see. So you can talk to Ciel, then..."

"I can hear her voice, yes. Just a little bit," she clarified.

So unlike Seris, Chris had a close connection with spirits.

"Um, but are you sure this is all right?" Mia fretted. "You've been hiding that you're an elf for a long time, right? And now you're telling me, someone you just met today..."

"Well, I decided I could trust you," Chris told her. "You told me you were the Saint, after all."

"That's true. We can both trust each other, then. It's good to meet you, Chris."

"Yes, it'll be nice to work with you, Mia."

I was glad to see them get along so well.

"I do have one question. Is that all right?" Chris asked her then.

"Yes, what is it?" Mia said.

"You say that you can see Ciel?"

"Yes. Come here, Ciel."

Ciel was lying down happily having finished her meal, but she drifted over toward Mia when she was called. She was moving a bit clumsily. *It's probably because you ate too much!* I chastised her mentally.

"You really can see her," Chris said. "But how..."

"Oh, I don't know if this is it, but..." I explained why I thought

they could see her, though I said up front that I wasn't sure about it.

"That's the first I've ever heard of that." Chris was shocked to learn that Hikari and Sera could see her too.

"But if you guys will be traveling with us, it might mean Ciel can't eat with us."

"Why is that?" Chris asked. Ciel looked at me in confusion as well.

"Well, Rurika can't see Ciel, right? So she'd be surprised to see the food just disappear."

A despairing expression appeared on Ciel's face.

Chris laughed. "I'm sure she'll be fine with it if I explain. Rurika knows all about spirits."

At this, Ciel breathed a sigh of relief and her drooping ears perked right back up again.

When we saw that, the rest of us looked at each other and laughed. While we did, I decided to check something I'd been curious about.

[**Name:** Chris / **Job:** Adventurer / **Level:** 22 / **Race:** High Elf / **Status:** Nervous]

This was the result of my appraisal of Chris. She had said she was an elf, but Appraisal revealed her to be a "high elf." I'd never seen that label in anything I'd read or heard so far. Sometimes in this world I'd come upon races that I knew of from fiction, but I surely would have read about this somewhere if it were common knowledge.

Was Chris simply unaware of it? Or did she just call herself an elf because that was the term for the general species? For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to ask.

Still, elves were a race with high mana, and I'd read in the library that they were also skilled magic users. Indeed, when she'd taken her disguise off, Chris's mana had been off the charts. It would only apply when the disguise was off, but it seemed to be a huge boost to our combat potential.

The two girls also had knowledge and experience as adventurers.

Having them on our side would be a real shot in the arm. At this rate, we wouldn't just be able to gather materials on the thirty-fifth floor, but maybe even make it to the final floor that Seris had mentioned. If we could beat the boss on that final floor, we might be able to stop the monster parade in its tracks.

Thinking about that as well as the mithril and new skills I'd acquired, I dreamed about those unseen dungeon depths.

Afterword

It's nice to meet you (or see you again). I am arukuhito. Thank you so much for reading *Isekai Walking 3 Magic Nation Eva - City Arc*.

Volumes 1 and 2 of the series didn't have too many changes from the web version of the novel, but volume 3 here might inspire some shock for those who know the web version. That's how big the changes are.

When I was first asked to revise the Magic Nation arc, my first thought was that I could come up with some big changes to make it a lot more interesting. So I had them attend the magic academy (which they didn't do in the web novel) and interact with the students. I also dug deeper into a particular character who didn't do much before, and I made major changes to the shadow wulf fight on the dungeon's fifth floor. I feel like I changed about seventy...maybe eighty percent in the end.

With so much revising to be done, I was afraid I might not meet my deadline, but I discussed it before I started and we adjusted the deadline and submission method to match. This was also my first time requesting a two-part story, so I was relieved that I didn't end up going too far over my page limit. However, I still ended up over my page limit after discussing various other things, and I had to cut it down again. But I think it was all worth it in the end, because I'm very satisfied with how the story turned out. I hope you enjoy reading it.

I also have an announcement to make. By the time this volume comes out, I think the manga version will have started its run in *Magazine Pocket*. It's being drawn by Kei Ogawa, and I hope you'll all check it out.

Now, here at the end, let me thank O-shi, my editor, who gave lots of advice and suggestions while I was writing and offered keen

analysis to make this a great book; Yu-nit-san, who drew beautiful characters and illustrations from my difficult concepts; and all my proofreaders who pointed out typos and grammatical errors. I was able to put another volume out into the world because of the support you all gave me.

And to you, the reader, who read this book to the end, and to those who are always sending in messages about the web version, thank you so much. You're the reason I've been able to keep writing. I hope we'll get to meet over another published work sometime.

arukuhito

Current Stats



Fujimiya Sora

[Job] Scout [Race] Otherworlder
[Level] None

[HP] 450/450 [MP] 450/450 [SP] 450/450 (+100)
[Strength] 440 (+0) [Stamina] 440 (+0) [Speed] 440 (+100)
[Magic] 440 (+0) [Dexterity] 440 (+0) [Luck] 440 (+100)

[Skill] Walking Lv. 44
Effect: Never get tired from walking
(earn 1 XP for every step)
XP Counter: 444902/810000
Total XP Earned: 10939902
Skill Points: 2

Learned Skills

[Appraisal Lv. MAX] [Prevent Appraisal Lv. 4]
[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. 9] [Boost Recovery Lv. MAX]
[Hide Presence Lv. 9] [Alchemy Lv. MAX] [Cooking Lv. MAX]
[Throwing/Shooting Lv. 7] [Fire Spells Lv. MAX]
[Water Spells Lv. 7] [Telepathy Lv. 9] [Night Vision Lv. MAX]
[Sword Tech Lv. 5] [Resist Status Effects Lv. 6]
[Earth Spells Lv. 9] [Wind Spells Lv. 7] [Disguise Lv. 7]
[Engineering/Construction Lv. 8] [Shield Arts Lv. 5]
[Provoke Lv. 6] [Traps Lv. 3]

Advanced Skills

[Appraise Person Lv. 9] [Detect Mana Lv. 8]
[Enchant Lv. 8] [Creation Lv. 4]

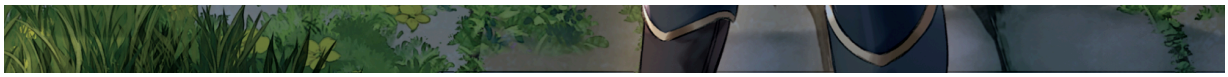
Contract Skills

[Holy Spells Lv. 4]

Title
[Spirit Contractor]




author
arukuhito
illustrator
Yu-nit
3
Isekai Walking
Walking around the Otherworld
Magic Nation Eva • City Arc



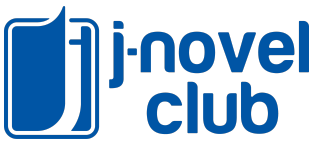

“Welcome home!”
“...’ccum home.”
Elza
An orphan they meet in Majorica. She works for Sora as a maid.
Art
A boy who works for Sora with Elza.
ISEKAI WALKING 3
Magic Nation Eva • City Arc




Exploring the city of Majorica, with its academy of magic and a dungeon!
Joshua
A student at the academy who deeply respects Layla.
Layla
An adventurer Sora met in Frieren, leader of the Bloody Rose party.
Sora
A high school student summoned from another world, now exploring the world he finds himself in.
Ciel
A spirit who travels with Sora. Only certain people can see her.
Sera
A beastfolk who makes for a strong fighter. Rurika and Chris's childhood friend.
Mia
The Saint of the Holy Kingdom of Frieren. She cut her hair when she escaped from the Holy Capital.
Hikari
A former spy for the Kingdom of Elesia.
Seris
A mysterious librarian at the academy of magic. Who is she really?


Meanwhile, in the Las Beastland...
Rurika
An adventurer who works with Chris. They're looking for their childhood friends.
"I can't take any more!"
"Don't talk like that. Hang in there, Rurika!"
Chris
A mage who traveled with Sora in the Kingdom of Elesia. She's searching for something.





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