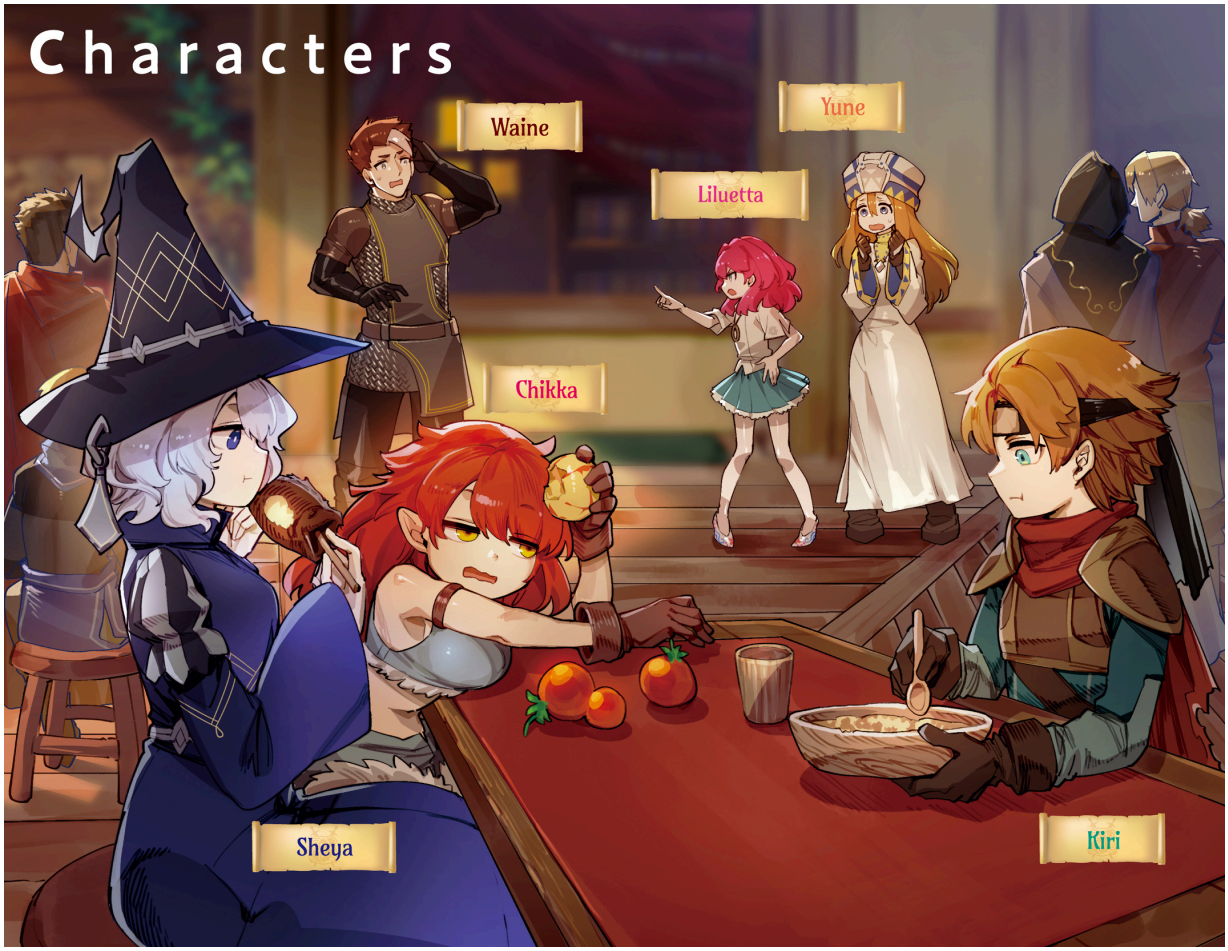

02
Author : KAME
Illustrator : OX
They Don't Know I'm Too Young for the Adventurer's Guild


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Author : KAME
Illustrator : OX
They Don't Know I'm Too Young for the Adventurer's Guild


Characters
Waine
Yune
Liluetta
Chikka
Sheya
Kiri


"Help!"
A hooked, wart-covered nose, sunken cheekbones, and jagged, yellowed fangs... It was a grotesque, green-skinned visage with lips twisted up into a sneer. The goblin's eyes gleamed with cruel amusement in mockery of the weak. It was mocking *me*.
I ran. I ran. I ran.
I crouched low and tore through the undergrowth like a beast, ignoring the branches that lashed against my face.

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Story by KAME

Illustration by ox

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This is something I only learned much later.

Some people say magic spells are either a reproduction or an imitation of words once spoken by the gods. Or they're fragments of those divine words that were analyzed and reconstructed. Apparently, the gods used words to define the principles of the world and magic to create it. Mages, in turn, mimic that process by manipulating the omnipresent magical energy in accordance with the world's laws to produce something useful.

In other words, this world was created by magic, and the spells mages use are derived from the very words and power used in the act of creation. This means magic naturally has the potential to destroy the world.

Near the peak of a lush, green mountain, a small girl stood before the formation she had just drawn on the ground—two concentric circles with inscriptions filling the space between them. Her lustrous, cherry-red hair rustled in the gentle spring breeze.

She positioned a gnarled oak branch at the center of the circles, steadying it with the tip of her middle finger. From her well-formed lips, a spell began to flow. The words, carried by the wind, melted into the trees around her. I didn't know what the words meant, but her voice was high and clear with a quiet strength at its core like a proud, noble flame. I watched in awe until, before I knew it, the spell had been completed.

Magic was unleashed.

With a soft *thud,* the oak branch toppled over. There was no sudden flash of light, no booming explosion, no tingling sensation of pressure. None of that. The girl simply nodded once as she looked at the branch, then pointed where it had fallen.

"That way," she said.

It was a simple detection spell for revealing the direction of a lost object. It looked like nothing more than a stick falling over, but it was definitely magic. And that was exactly why I thought maybe even I could use it.

Chapter 1: A Lively Newcomer Appears

Adventurers often took on dangerous requests, so the faces in this line of work often changed. Some left after suffering injuries too severe to recover from. Some, paralyzed by fear, could no longer bring themselves to go on adventures. Some threw their hands up and declared, "I can't take this anymore!" then found another line of work. And some...simply died. There were many reasons, but seeing familiar faces disappear was just part of reality.

Even so, it was different after Old Badger died. His absence left the usually rowdy guild quiet for a few days. Though nobody wore black, the atmosphere in the guild felt like a wake, dampened and heavy with loss. But the life of an adventurer moves ever forward. Because when some leave, others arrive.

Anyone could become an adventurer. I mean, even *I* did it. If someone really wanted to take up the mantle, there was nothing stopping them.

Old Badger had only just passed, and the guild was still wrapped in an unusual quiet. That was when a newcomer arrived, like a small storm sweeping into the guild with energy that disrupted the heavy air.

***

It was a bright, moonlit night. I was behind the adventurer's guild with a warrior whose dark brown hair was streaked with a single lock of white. He had called me out here after dinner.

"Here, just wrap this around your head," Waine said, and he handed me something without explaining what or why.

I had no idea what was going on, but he offered it so naturally

that I took it without thinking. That was probably a mistake.

It was wrapped in cloth. I could feel something hard inside, and the whole thing was surprisingly hefty. Curious, I tilted my head and unwrapped it—a thick iron plate shaped like a slightly curved rectangle, with a dull surface that didn't reflect light. Looking closer, I noticed the plate was sewn directly onto the cloth, making them a single piece.

"Uh... What is this?" I asked.

"A browplate," Waine answered without hesitation.

A what now? "What's a browplate?"

"Oh, right. I guess you wouldn't know." The warrior crossed his arms and thought for a moment before explaining. "A browplate is a piece of protective gear you wrap around your forehead. It's not much, but sometimes it can save your life. It's cheap, so I figured I'd give it to you."

With that, I understood. The browplate was basically a substitute for a helmet, though it didn't seem all that reliable in comparison. It was just a piece of iron plate that only protected the forehead. My face would be completely exposed, and the top, sides, and back of my head would all be vulnerable. It really did feel like a *better than nothing* kind of thing.

But after that last battle with the goblins, I had learned firsthand just how important armor was. I'd visited the armorer's shop after getting back to town, but unfortunately a new helmet and metal armor were way too expensive for me. Right now, the only protection I had was the halfling-sized leather armor from Chikka. So, honestly, even this was a welcome addition. It was my first piece of head protection, after all.

I did as I was told and placed the iron plate against my forehead, wrapped the cloth around my head, and tied it at the back. I struggled a little because tying something behind my head wasn't exactly my strong suit, but I finally got it on right. Then, I rotated my neck to test it out.

Huh? This is actually better than I expected.

The plate was thick, but it didn't feel that heavy because it only covered my forehead. Plus, it didn't obstruct my vision at all.

I wasn't sure about this at first, but now... It's not half bad.

"All right, you've got it on. Now, take this." Waine handed me a wooden stick. It looked like a small piece of construction lumber—a long, skinny rectangle about the same thickness and length as my spear. Then, he walked over to a nearby shrub and snapped off a short, thin twig. "As for me... Hmm, that should do." The twig was so short that, in Waine's grip, only a little bit about the length of my index finger stuck out. He held it up under the bright moonlight and gave it a few light flicks in the air.

"Well, kiddo," said Waine, "that goblin fight was pretty sloppy. It was your first battle, so I get it. But from now on, I'm gonna teach you how to fight."

"How to fight?" I repeated.

"Yeah. I'm talking about a mock battle."

A mock battle. I understood that much. It meant I'd be fighting Waine.

The thing is, I never asked him to do this. Since he's offering, though, it would be a waste to turn him down.

Honestly, the idea of fighting still scared me. But it was obvious that learning now would be for the best, in case I ever ran into another dangerous monster. That said, was it really fair for me to use a stick as long as my spear, while Waine only had a twig? He couldn't even block an attack with that thing.

"Of course, I'll give you a handicap," Waine said. "Hit me anywhere with that stick, and you win. That's all you have to do. I'm only gonna aim for your browplate. If I hit it hard enough to break this twig, I win. Then we'll call it a night."

I already had an advantage with my stick, and this felt like it tipped the scales in my favor even more. Waine was, without a doubt, a skilled warrior. And as an adult, he was bigger than me and had longer arms. That alone gave him the upper hand. But with my longer weapon, I had a much greater reach. Since all I had to do was land a hit, having a longer range gave me a pretty significant edge. And if he was only aiming for my forehead, I just had to keep an eye on that and dodge when necessary.

This might not be so bad after all.

In fact, I couldn't see myself losing this. He was clearly underestimating me just because I was a kid. The thought irritated me a little. Waine grinned lazily under the moonlight like he was trying to prove me right. His expression said it all: *Even with these conditions, I still have it in the bag.* He was looking down on me like this was just a game.

I *had* taken down a goblin, though. Sure, Sheya's magic had helped, and I would've been in trouble without Chikka's armor. But I'd still fought and won.

I rolled my right shoulder in a slow circle. The goblin's dagger had struck my armor's shoulder guard, leaving me with only a bruise. It had been sore yesterday, but not enough to stop me from moving. And now, even that pain was gone. I was fine. I could do this.

"Got it. All I have to do is land a hit, right?" I asked.

"That's right," Waine replied. "Come at me whenever you're ready."

So, no starting signal, just straight into it, huh?

I gripped my stick, holding it like a spear. Slowly, I stepped forward to close the distance. My target: his stomach. It was the center of his body and the hardest place to dodge. If all I needed to do was make contact, I didn't need power—just speed.

"Hah!" From the very edge of my range, I thrust forward. I kept my step light, making sure not to overcommit, and prepared to react if he dodged—

"Hm." Waine stepped in as he evaded my attack and closed the gap between us instantly.

"Ah!" In that moment, I realized two things at once. My attack wouldn't land, and I had no way to avoid his counter.

I saw the tip of his twig coming straight for me. My eyes squeezed shut on their own. A solid impact struck my forehead—the force knocked me off-balance, and I landed hard on my backside.

"A thrust to the stomach from the edge of your range. Not bad," said Waine. "But you were staring at my midsection the entire time. Way too obvious. If I know where you're aiming, countering is easy."

"Damn it," I grumbled.

I felt my face heat up in embarrassment, and frustration welled

up inside me. Waine was right, but I hadn't expected him to counter my attack so effortlessly. He really *was* strong, and he wasn't mocking me either. I'd been beaten in an instant and deserved to be treated like a kid. On top of that, he was still holding back.

At least the browplate had done its job. My forehead didn't hurt at all. My *butt*, on the other hand, was another story.

"That aside, you closed your eyes, didn't you," Waine said. It wasn't really a question.

"Huh? Yeah..." I'd definitely gotten scared and shut my eyes.

"Yeah, don't do that. From now on, even if you're about to get hit, keep your eyes open."

Wait, what?

Waine said it so casually, but anyone would shut their eyes if something sharp was flying straight at them. Even if it was just a twig. Right? I knew Waine was only aiming for my forehead, but fear was still fear. There was always a chance he could miscalculate and hit somewhere else.

"Listen, closing your eyes in a fight doesn't help you in any way. Even if you're about to get hit, even if you can't dodge, keeping your eyes open gives you a chance to react if something happens," Waine explained.

"Something like what?"

"Like an ally stepping in to help, making the enemy's attack miss."

"I'm solo, though."

The word *solo* was something I had only learned after coming to town. It referred to adventurers who worked alone without forming a party.

I had teamed up with Waine, Sheya, and Chikka for the goblin hunt, but that had been a temporary arrangement. That party had long since disbanded, since I couldn't really go on the kinds of adventures those three did. All I could do was gather herbs.

In other words, right now, I was a solo adventurer.

"Or maybe your opponent trips on a rock," Waine continued, "or they accidentally hit a wall with their weapon. Stuff like that happens all the time in battle. But if you close your eyes, you'll miss your chance to take advantage of it. That'd be a waste, right?"

"Well, I guess that makes sense," I replied. "But keeping my eyes open when a weapon is coming straight at me? That just seems impossible."

"It's not impossible. *I* can do it, and any vanguard fighter can too." He said it so matter-of-factly that I couldn't help letting out a small gasp. That was amazing. And it wasn't just Waine—every warrior who fought on the front lines was capable of something that seemed so absurdly difficult. If that was the case, it only confirmed I wasn't cut out for the vanguard.

"Well, no amateur would be able to do it. Even I couldn't at first," Waine admitted. "So it's not exactly surprising that you can't either."

"Really?"

"Yeah, that's why we're doing this browplate-smashing training."

Can't you think of a better name?

"By smacking your forehead over and over and over and over again, you'll eventually get used to the fear of being hit. All right, let's continue."

Uh, wait. Wait a minute. Isn't this one of those really *brutal kinds of training?*

Waine had said he'd teach me how to fight, but instead of teaching my *brain*, he was about to drill it into my *body*.

"Wait, didn't you say this ends when the twig breaks?" I asked.

"It's not broken yet," he said.

I glanced at the twig in Waine's hand. Sure enough, it was still perfectly intact.

How?

He had hit me hard enough to knock me on my butt, but the twig still hadn't snapped. Wouldn't it actually be *harder* to hit me *without* breaking it? Most likely, he had carefully controlled his strength and pressed the branch against my browplate instead of striking outright, which meant he had that much room to hold back. The difference in skill between us was massive.

At that moment, I realized something. Winning was impossible. Even with a longer weapon. Even with a rule that let me hit anywhere while he could only aim for my forehead. I *still* had no chance.

And I was right.

"Get up already, kiddo!"

"Stop staring at your target! Watch your opponent as a whole and look for openings!"

"Your timing is way too obvious! You're practically *asking* to be countered!"

"I *told* you to keep your eyes open! Even if someone gouges them out, you better keep them open!"

"Your spear swings are too sluggish! Just because you're moving doesn't mean you should rely on your arms alone!"

"Don't run away! The twig's *still* not broken!"

In the end, Waine's little twig never did break. Not even after my body gave out and I collapsed from exhaustion.

***

"Ugh..."

I woke up to the morning sunlight streaming through the stable window. Even after sleeping through the night, my exhaustion hadn't faded. That wasn't really surprising, because Waine had worked me until I'd literally dropped. I really didn't feel like moving. Slowly, I reached up and placed a hand on my forehead. It stung from being hit so many times, even though I'd had that browplate on.

Where had I even collapsed last night? My memory of the end was hazy, but one thing was clear: I had been put through hell. What had started as a mock battle supposedly in my favor ended up being a brutal endurance drill. It'd been a training session designed to keep my eyes open while an opponent hit me over and over again.

Basically, I had just stood there and let myself get smacked endlessly. Unbelievable.

Being a warrior is tough. Being a vanguard fighter is even tougher. No matter what, it's impossible not to flinch and shut your eyes.

"How did I even get back here?" I asked myself, and I let out a

heavy sigh. I couldn't remember coming back to the stable at all. I was exhausted, my entire body ached, and my muscles were sore in places I didn't even know could be sore. But morning had come, which meant I had to get up.

Waking up early had been my routine since my days in the village. The moment I woke up, I would fetch water. That had been my daily chore. I pushed myself upright. Despite the fatigue, nothing hurt too much aside from the lingering sting on my forehead.

After a brief stretch, I picked up the leather armor Chikka had given me and slipped it over my head. I tightened the leather straps on the sides to make sure it wouldn't shift around. By now, I was so used to wearing the armor that I could put it on even while still half asleep. Next, I grabbed my spear, its tip covered with a leather pouch, and slung it over my back. Then I picked up the basket I used for gathering herbs and strapped that on too.

"Hmm."

Normally, I'd be ready to go at this point. But there was one more thing today. After a moment of hesitation, I reached for the browplate lying on the straw-covered floor. I dusted off a few stray pieces of hay, then wrapped it around my forehead. I fumbled twice while tying it behind my head, but on the third try, I got it right. I gave my head a small shake to check the fit.

Not bad. I had been worried about a headache after last night's training, but surprisingly, I was feeling better by the moment.

"All right, I'm off," I told the occupant of the neighboring stall. But, as always, the thick-skinned horse was still fast asleep. After it had eaten my valenwort the other day, I had secretly started calling it Valenwort in my head.

***

As I stepped into the adventurer's guild, I immediately sensed a buzz of activity. A loud voice rang out from the center of the commotion, with a group of onlookers gathered around.

This feels different from usual, I thought. But then I reconsidered. *No, this is how it normally is.*

Things had just been unusually quiet lately because of Old Badger's passing. He had been the oldest veteran among the adventurers, and his absence had left the place feeling somber. But the guild was usually loud and lively like this.

Scanning the room, I spotted the source of the argument near the space between the reception desk and the dining area. There were three people, including the warrior who had put me through hell last night with that brutal combat training.

"Waine and... Who are those two?" I wondered out loud.

One stood out with her loose, flowing white robe and an oversized hat. The other was small in stature, dressed in an elegant springtime outfit that looked breezy and high-quality too. I thought the smaller one might be a halfling at first, but since she didn't have pointed ears, they were probably both human women.

"Why do I have to listen to some total stranger tell me what to do?!" The small one—the girl who was only slightly taller than me—snapped at Waine.

Meanwhile, the girl in the big hat just stood behind her, looking flustered.

The smaller girl reminded me of fire. Was this color called *cherry red*? Her wavy hair was so vivid, so strikingly beautiful, that it was almost mesmerizing. It swayed with every sharp movement she made, almost like it reflected the intensity of her emotions. But what stood out even more were her eyes. They were deep jade green and filled with an unmistakable strength of will.



"Look, I'm telling you, just drop it." Waine looked troubled, and his voice carried an exasperated edge. "I'm saying this for your own good."

Well, I could pretty much guess what was happening. He had probably said something unnecessary again. The girl had gotten mad and started shouting. That seemed like the most likely scenario.

I brought a hand to my chin and considered the situation for a moment. Then I took a wide detour around the commotion and went straight to the dining counter to order breakfast.

"Excuse me, could I get some oatmeal and some cooled water?"

Even though I hadn't been coming to the guild for long, I'd already seen plenty of scenes like this. It wasn't anything special. The people around them weren't trying to break it up either. They were just watching, amused. There was no reason to get involved. If anything, butting in would only delay my own plans for the day. Besides, Waine had probably brought this on himself.

Breakfast arrived quickly, and I thanked the staff before picking up my bowl and cup. I looked around and spotted two familiar faces. There were still open seats at their table.

"Morning, you two. Mind if I sit here?" I asked.

"Morning, tiny. Go ahead." The first to reply was Chikka, the halfling scout with fiery-red hair and dandelion-colored eyes.

Beside her sat Sheya, the mage with shimmering, bluish-silver hair. "Please, join us," she added.

The three of them, Waine, Chikka, and Sheya, had formed a peculiar morning routine. Ever since our goblin hunt, they would meet here every day, laze around for a bit, then part ways without taking on any new quests. Apparently, they had made a decent amount of money from a sewer-cleaning job a while back, so they were now on an extended break.

"Oh yeah, tiny! Wanna go fishing today?" Chikka asked. "I found a great spot."

"Sorry," I told her. "I'm heading out to gather herbs."

"So serious..." Chikka groaned, slumping against the table. She popped a roughly peeled piece of fruit into her mouth.

I mean, I am *broke...* Sure, fishing could provide food, and I

could even sell some if I caught a lot. But gathering herbs was the more reliable way to make money. Besides, I was looking for something specific.

"Being diligent is a good thing," Sheya commented as she ate her grilled fish. She was always sparing with her words. Apparently, everything was too much effort for her, including talking, so she only spoke when necessary.

At first, it had thrown me off, but I eventually realized she wasn't being cold or unfriendly. She would always communicate what was important. When she felt like it, she'd even make small talk, like now. Though sometimes, her brevity could be really confusing.

"Oh yeah, I heard your adventurer rank is going up, Sheya. Congrats," I said.

"Thanks," Sheya replied.

"I heard Waine's rank is rising too. What about you, Chikka?"

"I've been Rank C from the start. I'm not quite ready for Rank B yet."

If I remembered correctly, Waine was also Rank C, and Sheya was moving up to Rank D. The three of them had taken on multiple guild quests together, and since their performance met a certain threshold, they had applied for rank promotions.

As for me...

"Tiny, you still don't have your license, right? Keep at it."

"Yeah, I will."

I was still stuck at Rank F.

To reach Rank E, you had to make a meaningful contribution to a successful quest involving monsters at least as dangerous as goblins. But I hadn't been in the guild for long, and I had relied entirely on Waine, Sheya, and Chikka during my last adventure. So I didn't qualify for a promotion.

Not that it really mattered. Even if my rank went up, all I could really do was gather herbs. It wasn't like I would become a powerful adventurer all of a sudden.

"I don't accept this! I *won't*!" The angry voice from earlier cut through the background noise. "You think you're so superior just because you're taller!"

I turned toward the source. Yep, that same girl was still arguing with Waine.

"What's going on with them?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Apparently, Waine thought she came in looking to hire someone for a quest, so he treated her as a potential client. Turns out she's actually here to join the guild," Chikka answered while casually tying the stem of her fruit into a knot using only her tongue. It was a useless trick, but it was impressive too.

That actually looks kind of fun, I thought. *I'll have to try it later.*

"Looks like he gave some unnecessary advice," Sheya added, clarifying the situation.

Ah. Yeah, that wasn't going to end well. I could fill in the blanks from the bits of their conversation I overheard. Waine had noticed how small the girl was and, out of concern, told her not to become an adventurer. To be fair, that made sense. Adventuring was dangerous. But judging by how she was still loudly arguing with him in front of everyone, it had clearly not gone over well.

"Even a little girl like that wants to be an adventurer, huh?" I muttered, glancing at the commotion while spooning oatmeal into my mouth. Oatmeal had become my go-to breakfast lately. It was cheaper than bread and kept me full longer.

"You're one to talk."

"You're even shorter than her."

I grumbled in protest at Chikka's and Sheya's remarks. I mean, they weren't wrong. But I was pretty sure that girl and I were completely different.

"Both of those girls are wearing nice clothes," I pointed out. "Doesn't seem like they're struggling for money."

"That's probably why Waine told them to quit while they're ahead." Chikka nodded before taking a small sip of water. "Those two aren't cut out for this. It's obvious," she added, like she couldn't care less.

"Aren't cut out for this," Chikka had said. Could seasoned adventurers really tell someone's potential just by looking at them? Had Waine given that unnecessary advice because he'd already judged that she wasn't a good fit for this life?

I looked at the two girls again, but I still had no clue whether they were cut out for adventuring or not.

"Huh..." Something nagged at me. If experienced adventurers could tell whether someone had potential at a glance, then what about me? Since the day I arrived at the guild, not a single person had told me to give up. Not even once.

Sheya's quiet voice cut through my thoughts. "Everyone has their own circumstances."

Right. Different people had different reasons for becoming adventurers. There were even rumors that Sheya had joined just to get out of magic training.

"Adventurers live freely. Just leave them be," she added.

I understood what Sheya was trying to say. Even if those two weren't cut out for adventuring, it wasn't our place to stop them. At most, we could offer a warning. But we couldn't interfere. It was their decision, and we couldn't get in the way. If we didn't let them choose their own path, adventuring would no longer be about freedom. Even I could understand that much.

"Besides! There are even smaller kids than me! What about *him*?!" The girl's voice rang out louder than before.

I glanced toward her, purely out of reflex. That was my mistake.

Our eyes met.

So when she'd said there were kids even smaller than her, she'd been talking about me. For a brief moment, I wondered if maybe she'd meant Chikka instead. But halflings were naturally small, so that wouldn't count.

Chikka, meanwhile, just flicked her pointed ears. There was something smug about that gesture, like she was telling everyone she wasn't involved. The fiery-haired girl was focused on me now.

Why? I hadn't done anything wrong. I had noticed the commotion at the entrance, decided *not* to get involved on the spot, and even went out of my way to avoid Waine.

Unlike the other adventurers, I hadn't been gawking at them like it was some kind of entertaining spectacle. I was just eating my breakfast. I just wanted to hurry and go gather herbs. This was definitely Waine's fault.

"A-Ah." Waine fumbled for a response. "That kid's okay."

I could guess what had happened. He had said something to her about her height, and now that she had found someone even smaller, she was throwing it right back at him.

Waine, you idiot, I thought. *You need to try harder*. *Maybe act more like some villain from the first chapter of a story, the kind of goon who exists just to get beaten early on. Draw everyone's focus onto yourself.* Because right now, as someone who wasn't even supposed to be involved, being the center of attention felt really uncomfortable.

"What do you mean he's okay?! You're telling me that short, wimpy-looking kid is fine, but *I*, a trained mage, am not?! I want a proper explanation!" the girl demanded.

"No, it's just, y'know..." Waine hesitated and stumbled over his words. "He may not be able to do much, but he does what he can..."

"That makes no sense!" she yelled.

The girl had a point. Waine's explanation was nonsense. No one would be satisfied with that vague reasoning. If he didn't give a proper answer, nothing would be resolved.

"Tiny's different. His eyes aren't the same," Chikka chimed in.

"My eyes?" I asked.

"Yeah. You and that girl have different eyes."

I tilted my head in confusion. What kind of difference could she mean? Obviously, our eye colors were different, but that didn't seem relevant.

"Your eyes don't sparkle," Chikka added.

"Are you insulting me?"

"Of course not. I'm saying you have the *perfect* qualities to be an adventurer. Basically, you have the potential to be a failure of a human being."

"That *definitely* sounds like an insult!"

While Chikka and I were having this ridiculous conversation, Waine and the girl were still loudly arguing in the background. Meanwhile, Sheya, who didn't care about either of them, finished eating her fish and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief.

"Sleepy," Sheya murmured.

That's all she has to say?

"Mornings are a formidable foe," she explained.

Sheya did look genuinely exhausted. Well, not that it mattered. It wouldn't be a problem if she decided to just pass out here. Adventurers lived freely. If she was *that* sleepy, then she might as well sleep. That probably wasn't the point she was trying to make, but it was close enough.

I sighed. This entire situation was meaningless from start to finish. Waine had brought this on himself by stepping on a metaphorical cat's tail. Chikka was just amusing herself with idle chatter. Sheya had long since lost interest.

Yeah. Time to hurry up and finish eating so I can get to herb gathering.

"All right, fine! I get it already!" At last, Waine gave in to the girl's relentless persistence. And then, of course, he said something unnecessary. "Then why don't you team up with him and follow him around?"

How did it come to that? I thought about this for a second and figured it out right away: Waine was trying to shove the problem onto *me*. I was not happy about that. This whole mess was *his* fault, but he was just tossing it aside like it was someone else's problem. And now I felt like I had to prove myself somehow, which made everything worse.

"Are you mocking me?!" The girl's fury exploded like an inferno. "Why would I ever team up with someone who looks that weak?! Are you saying we're on the same level?!"

Honestly? I couldn't blame her for being angry. Saying we were on the same level was like calling her one of the weakest adventurers in this entire guild.

"What are you talking about?" Waine asked. "I'm saying you're *below* him."

Waine.

Stop.

Please, just stop. I don't care about who's stronger or weaker. Just stop *talking.*

I focused on finishing my meal as fast as possible because I

needed to escape this nonsense. I shoveled oatmeal into my mouth, gulped water to wash it down, and kept going. Adventurers' meals were known for their massive portions. I had never eaten anywhere else in town, but I knew that for a fact. No matter how fast I tried to eat, there was still *so much* left.

"Two unregistered kids who haven't even gone on a single quest yet—there's no way you're above him. He's already been on multiple adventures and made it back alive. You're underestimating both adventurers and him way too much," said Waine.

The girl's expression darkened, and her face contorted with anger. She was about to shout again. But before she could, a voice cut in.

"O-Oh, my lady! Please, let's not do this!" The girl in the oversized hat—the one who had been fidgeting behind her companion this whole time—suddenly stepped forward and grabbed the smaller girl's shoulder, holding her back. She'd looked younger at first glance, but she was probably the older of the two. Her demeanor made her seem far more timid, though. Her long, wavy, chestnut-colored hair rustled as she turned to look at me. Her eyes were slightly teary, like she was pleading for help. "This man is right. Let's just follow that boy today and see how it goes."

"Yune! Are you seriously siding with *him*?!"

"E-Even if you don't like it, he *is* more experienced. Didn't we learn that new recruits should at least *pretend* to listen to the advice and warnings given to them, even if they're completely ridiculous?"

Wow. I thought she was timid, but she has a sharp tongue.

A few of the nearby adventurers watching the scene burst into laughter. Waine's face twisted like he had just swallowed something extremely bitter.

The smaller girl, meanwhile, still looked *very* unhappy. But she seemed to acknowledge Yune's reasoning, as much as she hated it. She shut her mouth for a moment then crossed her arms and glared at Waine. Finally, with an exaggerated air of reluctance, she spoke.

"Fine. I'll do as you suggest. But if I find out you were just spewing nonsense, there will be hell to pay."

"That's your idea of how a newbie should act?" Waine pressed a

hand against his forehead and shook his head like he was trying to ward off a headache.

I, too, held my head in my hands. Even though I'd really tried to finish my meal as fast as I could, there was still a little oatmeal left in my bowl.

***

Deciding whether someone was cut out to be an adventurer just by looking at them... I didn't think it was that simple. Take Old Badger, for example. He'd never worn armor. His clothes had been tattered, and his only weapon had been a kukri meant for hiking. At a glance, no one would even guess he was an adventurer. If anything, he'd looked more like some wandering mountain hermit. But he had survived longer than anyone else in this business.

Unlike soldiers, adventurers didn't have standardized equipment. Adventuring attracted all kinds of specialists who took on very different jobs. Of course, their appearances varied just as much. And since adventurers were free spirits, many were stubborn about their personal styles. So there was absolutely no consistency in what an adventurer should look like. Being big and tall and having expensive weapons and the best armor still didn't guarantee survival. That was the reality of adventuring.

Even if people had some kind of innate adventurer's talent, there was no way you could tell just by looking at them. But if I took Chikka's words at face value, that every adventurer was fundamentally "a failure of a human being," then maybe there was something to the idea of having "different" eyes. The fiery girl's jade-green eyes *did* shine with fierce determination. Not just for today, not just for tomorrow, or even the next day. It felt like she was looking far, far ahead.

Having a vision for the future and looking ahead instead of just at the present wasn't a flaw. If anything, it was admirable. But... When my eyes met hers, I felt something coarse settle deep in my chest—a vague, uneasy feeling.

"I bought a basket. This one's fine, right?"

“This shop really sells everything, huh?”

The small girl wearing a mage’s robe draped over her frilly red dress and the taller girl in an oversized hat and loose clothing stepped out of the store, each holding a brand-new basket. The armorer’s shop near the adventurer’s guild didn’t just sell armor. It stocked all sorts of useful tools for adventuring. I had bought my own gathering basket there too.

Must be nice to have money for proper gear from day one. When I first started, I had to make my own basket out of an old jacket and some sticks.

“This place is like an all-purpose shop for adventurers. You can buy stuff and sell anything valuable you have too. You’ll probably end up coming here a lot.” As I explained, I glanced over the baskets the two girls had bought.

The girl with the hat had a pack basket just like mine, but the girl in the robe had a shoulder-slung basket instead. Shoulder baskets were smaller and couldn’t carry as much, but they didn’t get in the way when you tried to draw your weapon. Since I carried my spear on my back, a pack basket could be a hassle. But the robed girl only had a short wand hanging from her belt, so it probably didn’t matter that much to her.

The hat girl was the one with the bigger weapon. It was a rough, solid chunk of iron with a long handle attached. Getting hit by that would probably really hurt. I didn’t know what this weapon was called, but it was like a mace with an extra-long shaft. The whole thing was still shorter than my spear, but if she planted one end on the ground, the other end would reach her chest.

“Hmm.” Something about this felt mismatched. But was it really that big of a deal? Probably not. If they ended up gathering herbs on a regular basis, they could always swap baskets later. “All right, before we head out, there’s something I should mention—”

Wait. Now that I think about it, I have no idea what their names are.

“We never introduced ourselves,” I said. “I’m Kiri. What about you two?”

The robed girl was the first to respond. “Liluetta Magnan. I’m a

mage."

The girl in the oversized hat followed with a bright smile. "I'm Yune Izus. I can use healing spells. Nice to meet you!"

And so, it was official. I ended up forming a party with them.

***

"So yeah, take those two with you."

That was what Waine had said. I had stomped on his foot hard enough to make him yelp in pain right after he'd said it, but I still couldn't refuse in the end. I owed him for the goblin hunt, and that meant I was stuck. So, even though I didn't really want to, I had agreed to team up with Liluetta and Yune for the day.

Now, we were preparing for our little "adventure." Having a debt to repay was rough. And the worst part? This wasn't nearly enough to settle it, so Waine could probably rope me into more of his nonsense later. I didn't even feel like I could actually meet his expectations. I was still a rookie with almost no experience. And my rank? Still stuck at F, without a single promotion.

Well, even if listening to Waine turned out to be a bad idea, that wasn't my responsibility. I decided to just do what I could and stick to my usual herb-gathering routine.

"Liluetta Magnan and Yune Izus, right? Uh, is it okay if I just call you by your first names?" I asked.

Liluetta gave a curt nod. "I don't mind."

"Of course! Please call me Yune, Master Kiri!" Yune clasped her hands together and smiled sweetly.

They had completely opposite personalities. At least now I knew how to address them. Being called "master" *did* feel a little weird, though, because I was probably the youngest one here.

And they said they were a mage and a healer... That was surprising. Liluetta had said she was a trained mage back at the guild, but I hadn't realized Yune was a cleric until I noticed the pendant around her neck—the sacred emblem of the Earth Mother. Both of them could use real magic, then. I had heard that spellcasters were rare and valuable, so why were *two* of them

coming along on a simple herb-gathering trip with me?

"All right, Liluetta, Yune. We're about to head out," I announced. "But before we do, there's something important I need to tell you."

Waine had dumped them on me. But since we were in the same party now, I needed to be responsible and do things right—even if it was just a temporary party, and even if I wasn't all that motivated. *I can't handle everything, but at the very least I should do what I can and share what I know.*

Except I wasn't thrilled about what I had to say next. It was going to make me sound arrogant, and I really didn't want to deal with the reaction it might cause. Honestly, I was dreading it.

I glanced at Liluetta. She seemed calm *now*, but the way she had snapped at Waine earlier still lingered in my mind. That kind of intensity was intimidating. It made me hesitate, but I took a breath and spoke.

"Uh, for today, the three of us will be acting as a temporary party. And as the party leader, I need you both to follow my decisions."

Liluetta's voice instantly sharpened. "So you're saying we have to obey your orders?"

Great. I sighed to myself. I'd made sure I phrased things politely, and this was still the response I got. From the moment I first saw her, I'd known that she would be like this. I *really* didn't like dealing with people like her.

But I nodded. "Yeah. That's what I'm saying."

Liluetta wrinkled her nose. She was clearly unimpressed. I was a little scared, but if I was going to lead this party, this was something I couldn't back down on.

"If you don't like it, you're free to leave now," I told her. "Even after we get going, you can leave at any time if you're unhappy with my decisions. But what I *won't* allow is you ignoring my instructions and acting on your own."

I had heard those words before. At the time, I'd just figured that was how party leaders worked. But I understood it a little better now.

"I'm not saying this to be difficult. I'm saying it because if something goes wrong, I'm not strong enough to protect you. I can't

take responsibility for you. That's why I need you to promise to listen. If you can't, then I can't take you with me."

Yune called me "master," and yeah, I guess I really am more experienced. I'm the leader of this party too. So if something happens to them, it's my responsibility. And that terrifies me. It really does.

I just needed them to promise they wouldn't do anything reckless. That was less of an order and more of a desperate plea.

"Got it!" said Yune. "I'll follow your lead, Kiri-o."

"Yune! You can't be serious!" Liluetta protested.

"Now, now. He's kind enough to take us with him. Let's just treat today as a learning experience, my lady." Yune, all soft smiles and gentle energy, calmed Liluetta down just like that.

Just a moment ago, Yune had called me "Master Kiri," and now it was "Kiri-o," but I really didn't mind. She was easygoing and *not* terrifying, which I really appreciated. More importantly, the two of them seemed close, so Liluetta actually listened to her.

"Fine. But if I don't like it, I really will leave," said Liluetta.

"Yeah, I don't have a problem with that," I replied.

Liluetta relented, and I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. If she left partway through, I wouldn't mind at all. And if I didn't meet their expectations, that was their problem. I wasn't some skilled adventurer who could impress them anyway.

"All right, let's head out. Follow me," I said.

They had completed their adventurer registrations and bought their gathering baskets. I had learned their names and told them everything they needed to know. We were finally ready. Sure, we were starting way later than I'd planned, but we could set out at last.

An adventuring field trip.

That phrase left a strange feeling in my chest, like a fog rolling in. But I ignored it. I just wanted to start gathering.

Do what I can and share what I know.

That was what I'd decided. But the only thing I knew how to do was imitate the only party leader I'd ever followed. I was still new to this, and that was all I had to work with. Even then, I had a feeling I

wouldn't be able to pull it off nearly as well as *he* had.

And I was about to learn just how right I was.

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"Kiri, Kiri, Kiri. It sounds kind of unusual. Your name is a little rare, isn't it?" Liluetta said as we approached the northwestern town gate.

No one had ever told me that before, so I wasn't sure what to make of it. I didn't know anyone else with my name, but I'd never really thought about whether it was rare.

"Uh, are there even names that *aren't* rare?" I asked.

"What? Of course there are," she replied. "Take my name, for example. Liluetta's not all that uncommon. Yune isn't rare either. But I've never heard of a *Kiri* before."

So Liluetta and Yune are normal, common names, huh.

As we walked, I glanced up at the sky. There were a few clouds, but I didn't think it would rain. The weather was calm but not entirely clear.

What Liluetta had said was still on my mind. "Is Kiri really that strange of a name?"

"Not at all," she replied. "But it's not exactly *cool*, and it doesn't feel familiar, so it throws me off. Maybe you should change it? You could add a syllable or two."

"Huh?"

This girl was ridiculous. We had just met, and she was already suggesting I rename myself? Kiri wasn't a hard name to say, so I figured she would get used to it eventually. Well, Old Badger hadn't used his real name, so maybe coming up with an adventurer name would be fun.

But still. Rare, huh?

"I guess in towns, there are so many people that you're bound to run into others with the same name. But back in my village, everyone had different names," I explained.

"Oh? So you weren't born in a town?" Liluetta asked.

I shook my head. "Nope. I came from a village about a three-day

walk from here."

"Hmph. A country boy," she concluded.

We continued walking while chatting about nothing in particular. When we reached the town gate, I greeted the stationed guard.

"Got company today, huh?" he remarked.

I responded with a vague smile. I wasn't sure if I could call these two *companions* just yet.

Liluetta spoke up again as soon as we stepped outside the town gates. "Hey, Kiri. That gate guard seemed to recognize you. Do you know him?"

I had expected her to be more standoffish, given how she'd acted in the adventurer's guild, but she seemed to enjoy talking more than I thought.

"I just say hello whenever I pass through the gates. I guess I stand out, so they remember me."

"Well, you *are* small. I thought so when I first saw you at the guild, and now that I look again, you really are short."

Okay, yeah, she was taller than me. Not by much, though. And the smug way she said it was pretty annoying. Besides, if she was registered as an adventurer, that meant she was at least twelve. But she was on the shorter side herself for that age.

"You're not exactly tall either, Liluetta," I told her.

"I'm still growing," she insisted. "Unlike you. Hey, are you even eating properly?"

"Of course I am," I said.

"Are you *sure*?" Yune chimed in with a worried tone. "You're not just picking at your food like the young lady here, are you? You need to eat your vegetables *and* your meat if you want to grow big and strong!"

Well, she wasn't wrong. Skipping food because of personal preferences was a bad habit. You had to eat everything, or you would just end up hungry again later. That said, I *did* have things I didn't like. I had a tough time with spicy foods and extremely bitter things. And then there was that one spiky wild plant and fish innards. Adults said those were delicious, but I couldn't imagine *ever* finding those things tasty. I'd always given both to my brothers.

"Yune, keep quiet," said Liluetta.

Yune kept going. "But Kiri-o, you're even shorter than the young lady here. Are you *sure* you're actually twelve?"

"Of course I am. I wouldn't have been able to register with the guild otherwise, right?" I told her. I was actually nine. But if the guild found out, I'd be kicked out just like that. So I had to keep saying I was twelve, even though I knew it wasn't right. Lately, I'd started feeling like I was getting a little too comfortable with this lie.

"What about you two? How old are you?" I quickly turned the question around. Same topic, different targets. If I controlled the direction of the conversation, I wouldn't have to risk slipping up and exposing myself. Based on their heights, I guessed Liluetta had just turned twelve, and Yune was around fifteen.

"I turned twelve just the other day," Liluetta confirmed.

"I'm fourteen," said Yune. "So I'm a little bit older than you and the young lady here."

I had guessed right for Liluetta, but I had overestimated Yune by a year. Still, they were *young*—especially for the adventurer's guild. And it was rare to see girls this age in the guild at all. That made it even more odd.

Plus, both of them wore fine clothes, and they had enough money to buy gathering baskets right away. Yune had even prepared proper gear. She wore leather bracers on her arms and a leather breastplate beneath her baggy clothes. Apparently, that was standard for clerics trained in healing magic. Having money and good equipment was great, but I didn't understand why they had chosen to become adventurers. Yune called Liluetta "young lady," which made me wonder...

Is she from a noble family or something?

I considered asking. But for some reason, I didn't want to know. Their reasons for becoming adventurers were probably completely different from mine. Actually, that was obvious. And that left a strange, heavy feeling in my chest. I kept walking, unable to shake the vague sense of frustration.

"By the way, Kiri-o, where exactly are we heading? Do we still have a ways to go?"

Yune's questions were reasonable. I suddenly realized I had never told them where we were going. I made a mental note to communicate better as I turned to answer.

"Ah, we're almost there. See that over— Wait..."

Liluetta was *gone*.

Did she seriously get lost? Here? We hadn't even left the main road yet. Panic surged as I spun around and scanned the area—and then I spotted her. She was hunched over on the ground a little ways behind us.

"Liluetta! What's wrong?!"

"Ah, my lady?!"

Yune and I both rushed over. Liluetta was clutching her foot, her face twisted in pain. We were outside the town now, beyond the walls and beyond the gate. This was dangerous territory. Had she been shot? I'd heard that goblins sometimes used crude bows and arrows. Or was it a trap? I wasn't sure if monsters set them, but it wasn't impossible. If something smart had placed one here...

Or maybe it wasn't an arrow or a trap. Maybe it was a venomous snake or a poisonous insect. Some of those could be really bad.

"Ah..." Liluetta let out a pained breath, her voice trembling. "My foot... It *hurts*..."

Her *foot*.

I looked at it again. She had slipped her fingers between her heel and her shoe to create a small gap. Her shoe... She was wearing fancy wooden clogs carved with intricate designs, dyed beautifully, and decorated with colorful ribbons. Even *I* could tell they were stylish.

"Wow. They're really cute." That was all I could say. Because there was only one possible conclusion here: Those shoes were absolutely not meant for long-distance walking.

I dropped to my knees. Then onto my hands. And let the crushing weight of pure despair sink in.

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I had heard stories about fake adventurers: people who claimed

to be mages or healers but actually had no magic at all. Some were failed apprentices who had started magic training but never mastered it. Others were just frauds lying about their abilities so they could coast through battles while hiding behind everyone else. Fake adventurers would trick others into forming a party with them, only to be immediately exposed and kicked out. But somehow, this kind of deception never stopped happening.

At the very least, Yune seemed to be the real deal. Just as she had claimed, she could use healing magic. She chanted a spell, then a soft glow enveloped Liluetta's foot and closed the wound with an almost ethereal beauty.

Granted, all she was healing was a blister.

"I think you just need proper traveler's shoes," I said.

After fixing Liluetta's shoe-related injury, we immediately returned to town. There was no way we could continue like this. She had only made it a few steps outside the gates before her foot started hurting, so there was zero chance she would last the entire journey. We had no choice but to go back.

We headed straight for the armorer's. Since it sold adventurer supplies, I figured they would have decent boots. But by the time we got there, the sun was already way higher in the sky than I wanted it to be. And worse, even the supposedly well-stocked armorer's shop didn't carry any shoes in Liluetta's size. That was the moment I gave up on today's adventure. Even if we *did* find new shoes for her, it would be too late to get any meaningful herb gathering done.

"Adventuring, even outside of herb gathering, involves a lot of walking," I explained. "You'll want soft leather boots that fit well and don't pinch your feet. And make sure the soles are thick enough to protect against sharp rocks."

The soles were especially important. It wasn't just about protection—shoes without proper soles made you tired faster and your feet sore too. That would wear you down over long distances. The best shoemaker back in the village had always said that.

Liluetta sighed. "So we just need to buy normal shoes from a shoe store."

"Exactly," I agreed. "The armorer recommended a good store just

off the main street. Let's check there."

"I hope they have something nice," Yune said with a smile.

The three of us made our way through town. Since I was still new here, everything other than the main road felt unfamiliar. I kept my eyes peeled, making sure I didn't miss the shop we were looking for.

"Are there no special shoes made specifically for adventurers?" Liluetta asked.

Her question made me pause to think. *Special adventurer shoes?*

"Some vanguard fighters wear greaves, metal plating that covers the shins and toes. The shop we just visited had some of those. But since you're a rear-guard mage, I don't think you need anything that extreme." I glanced at my own feet. I was supposed to be a frontline fighter, but I didn't have greaves. Because, well, I had no money.

"I see..." Liluetta lowered her gaze, looking uncomfortable.

I tilted my head in confusion. *Why is she making that face?*

Yune leaned over and whispered, "If there were special shoes for adventurers, then it would make sense why she didn't wear normal walking shoes. That way, it wouldn't seem like her fault."

Liluetta shot her a glare. "I can hear you, Yune."

Yune had tried to whisper, but her voice carried way too well. She clamped a hand over her mouth as she realized her mistake. This girl was a bit absent-minded.

But now that I thought about it, I had just assumed Liluetta needed new shoes. Shouldn't she already own a decent pair for walking? If we weren't going back out there today, was there really a point in buying new ones right now? That was a mistake on my part. I should've asked before heading toward the store.

I turned to her. "If you already have proper walking shoes at home, there's no need to buy new ones right now, is there?"

"Huh? Ah, no, I'll just buy some as long as we're here," she said. "I don't really have anything sturdy enough."

Well, that works out, I guess.

"Oh, oh!" Yune pointed ahead. "That must be the recommended shoe shop!"

We had found what the armorer had told us about, and the three of us stepped inside.

The place smelled strongly of leather. It was dimly lit, small, and packed tightly with rows of shoes. There wasn't much space, but since they only sold shoes, they had a wide variety on display. This meant there was a good chance we'd find something that would fit Liluetta.

"Hmm, these all seem practical," she said.

She was right. Most of the shoes here looked like they were made for durability and ease of movement. No wonder the armorer had recommended this place. It was exactly the kind of store where you could find reliable, adventure-ready footwear. I even spotted some waterproof boots made from monster materials. Curious, I picked up a pair, then put them back as soon as I saw the price. *Nope. Way too expensive.*

At the back of the shop, an old man was hammering leather into shape with a wooden mallet. He must've been the owner. Was he making new shoes or repairing old ones? He glanced at us for a moment but said nothing before returning to his work.

So we were free to browse as we pleased. He reminded me of a grumpy old man from my village.

"Hmm, which ones should I choose?" Liluetta wondered.

"Let's just pick a few that seem like a good fit and try them on," I suggested.

Yune turned toward the old man. "Excuse me! May we try on some of these shoes?"

The old man briefly looked up at us. Then, with a simple nod, he returned to his work. *No words, just an acknowledgment. I guess that means we have permission.*

Yune, undeterred by the shopkeeper's silence, handed Liluetta a random pair. "See, my lady? When it comes to shoes, the most important thing is comfort!" But Liluetta still looked hesitant.

"There are a lot of choices, but since your feet are small, your options are limited," I added. "Might as well try on everything that looks like it might fit."

I glanced at the shelves again. Most of the selection was for adults, but there were still plenty of smaller shoes. With this many, at least *one* pair had to work for her. Back in my village, we broke in

our shoes until they fit. Here in town, you picked shoes that already fit well. That was new to me.

"No specific recommendations?" Liluetta asked, tilting her head.

I thought for a moment. "Anything in this shop should be fine. Just pick whatever you like best."

For some reason, that made her frown. "I thought you were guiding us because you *know* the best choices."

"Huh? You mean, for adventuring?"

"Yes."

I blinked. "No, not really. I already told you. Anything that meets the basic criteria I mentioned earlier should work."

I wasn't sure what Liluetta expected from me. I didn't know much about picking the "best" shoes. If she had tried to grab something that wasn't good for long walks, I would've stopped her. But everything in this shop seemed functional. As far as I was concerned, any of them should work just fine.

"I see. You're right, shoes are just shoes." Liluetta bit her lip as she accepted the pair Yune had handed her. Then she removed her wooden clogs. But before putting on the new shoes, she glared at me. "Just you wait. Today was a failure, but tomorrow, we are going on an adventure!" Her cherry-red hair rustled as she angrily shoved her foot into the soft leather shoe.

It didn't fit.

She immediately kicked it off and reached for another pair.

***

"Oh, shoes, huh? Yeah, shoes are pretty important," said Waine, nodding to himself.

It was the next session of our browplate-striking training. Once again, I was swinging a wooden stick around and pretending it was a spear. Meanwhile, Waine, who was entirely responsible for my suffering, dodged my attacks by a hair's breadth every time and made it look easy too. The tone of his voice was lazy, like we somehow weren't in the middle of a fight. "I've never worn any of those fancy shoes. Hell, I've never *seen* anyone wear stuff like that

on an adventure. Didn't even think to check."

The rules were exactly the same as yesterday. Waine had the same little twig, while I wielded a spear-length stick. And I still couldn't land a single hit. Meanwhile, my browplate had already been smacked three times. That twig? Still in one piece.

"We didn't have anything that fancy in my village, but we *did* have special shoes. People only wore them on really important occasions, though." I wanted to sigh. A big one. If I wasn't in the middle of training, I probably would have.

When I left my village, I traveled for three days before arriving in this town. I didn't bring much with me, just the clothes on my back and the most practical things I had. Of course, that included good walking shoes. I had never worn anything fancy in my life, so I'd never even had the chance to make the same mistake Liluetta did. Which meant I wasn't in a position to judge, but still...

How had she *not* realized that her shoes were no good for adventuring? No. It wasn't just about her. Sure, Liluetta had messed up. But the real issue wasn't just that. If Old Badger had been leading the party, he would've noticed before we even left town. The reason today's adventure had been a complete disaster over something so stupid was because I was the leader. In other words, it was *my* failure too.

I gritted my teeth, trying to shake off the frustration. I thrust my pole forward again and missed.

Waine was still as relaxed as ever as he avoided my attack. "So what happened next?"

"We went back to town," I explained. "Found a shoe shop and bought a proper pair of shoes. That was it. We started late, so there was no time left for adventuring by the time we finished all that. We just called it a day and disbanded."

"Ha ha ha!" Waine burst into laughter, which pissed me off.

I swung my stick in a wide, wild arc to try and smack him sideways, but he dodged with ease. That only pissed me off more. "Who do you think is responsible for me wasting an entire day?!"

"Ohhh, so basically, today was just a shopping date with two girls, huh? Damn, must be nice," said Waine. "Real ladies' man,

aren't ya?"

"Take this!" I yelled. I was too frustrated to care about form or discipline, so I just raised my weapon up high and slammed it down with all my strength.

Waine effortlessly sidestepped and smacked my browplate again.

Damn it!

"Hah! If you let some dumb taunt throw you off, you're gonna get yourself killed, kiddo."

"Shut up!"

I swung again. And again. And again.

Waine dodged *every single time*, grinning like the infuriating jerk he was. His smug face only made me angrier. Nothing was working. How the hell was I supposed to land a hit on this annoying guy?!

"Look on the bright side. At least you found out early." Waine stopped moving just long enough to speak normally. "You guys had just left town when it happened, right? That's good. You caught the problem when you still had time to fix it. Now, imagine if you'd been far from town. Imagine getting chased by monsters, only for one of your party members to take a tumble because she couldn't run. Wouldn't be a funny story anymore, right?"

"Well, no, but..." I didn't want to admit it, but he was right. I should be grateful we had learned this lesson before something truly bad happened. Failing like this was only funny because it *wasn't* a serious mistake.

"See? That's exactly why I'm laughing at you, kiddo!" Waine grinned. "So? Did you have fun on your little shopping date, surrounded by *two lovely ladies*?"

I gritted my teeth. Just swinging faster was *not* enough. Big, reckless swings weren't landing. If he was always going to dodge my first strike, then I needed to change my approach. I adjusted my stance, holding my weapon shorter. *Smaller, more precise thrusts. Keep probing. Keep looking for an opening. When I find it, I'll go for a critical strike. Somewhere tender like his groin.*

"So since you bought the shoes, that means you're going out with them again tomorrow, huh?" said Waine.

"Yeah, that's the plan." I tried to keep my voice neutral. But my

bitter expression must've been obvious, because Waine laughed again.

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Thwack! I struck the browplate hard. It rattled, and the twig in my hand snapped.

"Oh, would you look at that? Finally broke." I smirked and tossed the busted thing aside. "Training's over."

The kid collapsed onto the ground, utterly spent. We had started training earlier today than yesterday, but he had lasted longer this time. Yesterday, he'd flinched and shied away from my attacks. Today, he'd fought back and kept going until the very end. Even though he'd taken multiple hits, he didn't give up. That was progress.

Well, closing your eyes when something comes flying at you was just basic instinct. Fighting that instinct takes time, so it was too soon to expect real results. He still needed more training. But since he'd already lasted longer than yesterday, it was best to stop here for today. Pushing him further now wouldn't help.

"Rest up," I told him. "Once you can move again, eat something and go sleep in an actual bed. If you just pass out there and catch a cold, don't expect anyone to take care of you."

The kid groaned. "Ughhh..."

Good. That meant he was still conscious and didn't need any help. I left him lying there and walked back into the guild.

"Welcome back."

"Good work out there."

Sheya and Chikka were still sitting at the same table. Their plates had already been cleared away, leaving only wooden cups in front of them. Looked like they'd been drinking while waiting. The guild was still lively. Dinner hours were over, but some folks were still eating. Others were drinking and making a ruckus or discussing work for tomorrow. Same as always. It wasn't that late, and adventurers didn't usually go to bed early anyway. The noise would keep going for hours.

"So? What's the verdict with tiny?" Chikka asked, her face flushed from the alcohol. She was clearly tipsy, but I knew from experience that she wasn't actually drunk. She just turned red easily.

Most scouts either never drank or knew exactly how much they could handle. Chikka was the second type. Sheya, on the other hand, was a different kind of drinker. She sipped her drink as usual, her expression never changing. It was hard to tell with her, since she was always quiet, but I knew she could drink anyone under the table. No matter how much she had, her face never changed color.

I let out a deep sigh. The two of them came here every night because they had nothing better to do. They acted like they were so curious about the kid, but neither of them ever came to watch his training. Would it kill them to show up once in a while?

"The verdict? Who knows?" I scratched my head and took an empty chair. I wasn't good at calculations, but if I had to score the kid, it would go something like this:

Today, his swings were sloppier than yesterday. He was still pissed about getting dragged around by those two girls. That frustration made his attacks reckless, so minus points for that. At least he was being more decisive, so I'll give him a tiny *bonus. Later on, he finally stopped with the big swings and started mixing in small jabs. Means he was* thinking*. That's good. Still, instead of trying to force an opening, he just waited for me to mess up. That won't cut it. Between the two of us, he's the one who's always gonna make a mistake first.*

Overall? A complete failure. Trash tier. Final score: zero. But the kid was still just that—a kid. A complete beginner. Weakness was expected. What Chikka and Sheya were actually asking was, would he *eventually* become strong?

"Hell if I know." I shrugged. "Never taught anyone before."

I didn't bother thinking about it too hard. I wasn't a teacher, so I wasn't gonna pretend to have an answer.

There was no way for me to know if he had potential. This was literally my first time trying to teach someone how to fight. And I was teaching a kid, so I didn't even have anyone to compare him to. The only thing I could do was recycle the same training I'd gone

through myself. But even that was hazy in my memory. Some of those drills? I still didn't understand what they were for. Hell, looking back, some of them felt like I was just being messed with.

Well, at any rate, the browplate-striking drill would take time to kick in. The kid wouldn't stop closing his eyes for a while yet. That gave me some time to try and remember the other lessons.

None of this really mattered, though. Chikka and Sheya weren't interested in whether the kid had potential or not. Even I was smart enough to figure that out.

So instead, I told them what they *really* wanted to know. "He's a little more cheerful."

Sheya smirked, Chikka grinned wide, and I ordered myself a drink.

***

I had failed.

The room was silent. I collapsed face-first onto my bed and let my body sink into the mattress. I didn't want to see anything. Not my training wand. Not the thick tomes lining my shelves. Not even my favorite doll. I just wanted to shut everything out like a clam sealing itself away.

I had set out eagerly, believing this would be my first real adventure. However, all I had done was buy a shoulder basket and a pair of shoes before returning home to the Magnan estate. A complete and utter disaster.

I had registered as an adventurer. I had stepped outside the town walls. And yet, I hadn't even managed to complete the simplest of jobs: herb gathering, the one request even the lowest-ranked adventurers could take.

No payment.

No accomplishment.

Nothing but *shopping*.

And worst of all, it was entirely my own fault.

"Ugh!"

I had snuck back into the estate and quietly slipped into my room

while holding my breath as much as I could, just to make sure no family members or servants saw me. The fact that I had even needed to do this—to hide like a failure—filled me with so much frustration that I nearly cried.

What had all my training been for?

What had all my studying been for?

Why had I argued with my parents and grandfather so fiercely to get their permission?

It wasn't for this. I hadn't done all that just to end up face down in my bed, miserable.

"I could have done more. I *should* have done more."

Herb gathering should have been effortless. I should have completed the task easily. I should have proven that smug-faced idiot wrong for daring to lecture me. And then, tomorrow, I would have taken on a harder request—one where I could finally showcase my magical prowess.

Instead, I hadn't even made it to the starting line. I had been stopped by something as stupid as a blister. It didn't even have anything to do with adventuring. How *pathetic*.

"Shoes... Huh." I sat up on my bed, holding my new shoes. They smelled strongly of leather, a scent I wasn't very familiar with.

Shoes meant for walking long distances. Shoes focused on function, not appearance. Shoes made for working people.

I had never owned a pair of shoes like this until today. Like the sheltered noble daughters in fairy tales, I had simply never needed them. For ordinary people, these kinds of shoes were a given. Yune wore them without a second thought. That boy Kiri had them too. And, naturally, they were the kind of people who could walk far on their own two feet. People who could travel.

"No." I shook my head, hard. My hair fell into disarray, but I didn't care. I had shoes now. And with them, I could finally walk far. I would go to many places—no, not just that. I would travel to uncharted lands. There, I would find breathtaking sights beyond imagination.

So then, what was there to hesitate about?

"Tomorrow, I won't fail again." I sat up and felt determination

igniting inside me. It was fine to stumble in front of Yune. But that *tiny*, smug boy Kiri? I would never let him see me weak again. If I wanted to be an adventurer, then I had to act like one. Lying in bed sulking wouldn't accomplish anything.

"I need to break in my new shoes. And I need to gather herbs. That's where I'll start."

I sat on the edge of my bed, slipping on my new shoes and tightening the laces. I had spent time trying every suitable pair in the shop, and these were the ones I had chosen. They fit perfectly on my feet.

As I took my first few steps, I felt a remarkable difference. I had never worn shoes that were so easy to walk in before. I walked to my bookshelf, reached for a tome on herbalism, and absorbed the information as I flipped through the pages.

"I'll walk all the way to Yune's house and study to prepare for tomorrow. Of course. A Magnan merchant would never underestimate something as simple as herb gathering," I declared, before feeling my heart sink at how lowly and mundane that had just sounded. I had prepared for *so long*, because I was determined to become an adventurer. I had even become proficient in the noble art of *magia*, a discipline known for its extreme difficulty. And yet, *this* was the beginning of my journey?

Pathetic. Absolutely pathetic. But, at the very least, today was not over yet. There was still time.

One step at a time, no matter how small, I told myself. *I have to keep moving forward, because my journey as an adventurer has only just begun.*

Chapter 2: Detection Spell

The next day was clear and sunny. Summer was still a ways off, but I could already feel the heat. I got out of bed and stretched, prepared for the day, then said goodbye to the horse next door before heading to the adventurer's guild. It was just another morning. But since I had plans today, it wasn't going to be just another day.

I stepped inside the guild and scanned the room. Sheya was there, eating fish while she was half asleep.

She always has breakfast at the guild even though she doesn't live here. Maybe she lives nearby? I wondered.

I took a seat at her table and started eating my breakfast with her. She really looked like she might doze off at any moment, so other than a quick hello, we didn't talk at all.

Waine wasn't here today, which was unusual—and a relief. With him around, things always got rowdy. Since I wasn't in a hurry like yesterday, I took my time chewing and swallowing. Oatmeal was delicious and filling, which was why I liked it. But the problem was that it always tasted the same. I started getting a little tired of my oatmeal as I was finishing up, but at least it was all I needed to feel full. Most people ordered multiple dishes for breakfast.

"We're here!"

"Good morning, Kiri-o!"

I looked up and saw two girls approaching just as I was almost done eating. Yune greeted me with her usual soft, cheerful smile. Liluetta, likely still feeling awkward about yesterday, was pouting a little.

They both had their baskets, and Liluetta was wearing the comfortable, walking-friendly shoes she'd bought yesterday. That was good news. She also wore a long-sleeved robe, so she'd probably thought about what she would need for heading out of

town this time. At least she wouldn't end up collapsing after just a short trek through the grasslands.

"Good morning, you two. Are you ready to go?" I asked.

"Yes! I already had breakfast, so I'm good to go anytime!" said Yune.

"Of course. Let's get going already," Liluetta replied.

I could tell she was eager to leave the guild as soon as possible, which was pretty funny. She definitely wanted to avoid running into Waine. After all, we'd barely made it past the city gates before turning back yesterday.

"All right then, time for day two of our party's adventure. Let's head out." I slung my own basket over my back. *Hopefully, today's adventure won't be a repeat of yesterday's disaster.*

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"The herbs we're collecting for the request mostly grow in more dangerous areas farther from town," I explained. "You *can* find some in the open grasslands, but there's really not much so close to the walls. Otherwise, people would just gather the herbs themselves without hiring adventurers."

We left the main road and wove our way through the trees, up a sloping path on a narrow animal trail. These were the Sherzon Hills, and I was relying on my memory and the traces of cut, fallen branches to find our way as we climbed. We'd already made it farther than yesterday. I'd been a little worried about Liluetta since she was wearing new shoes, but it didn't look like she was having any trouble with blisters or pain.

"The key to gathering herbs is always staying aware of your surroundings. That doesn't just mean watching the ground. You have to look out for monsters, large animals, and snakes too. If you don't spot danger before it spots you, you're done for. If something attacks you from behind, you won't even have a chance to fight back before you're dead." I walked as I spoke, carefully counting on my fingers the few things I had been taught and the ones I had learned on my own.

Honestly, after what had happened yesterday, I was starting to doubt whether Liluetta and Yune were even cut out for this. If they could make a mistake as basic as showing up in the wrong shoes, then how much did they really know about adventuring? Probably nothing. That was why I figured I should explain even the most fundamental basics. Maybe this was what Old Badger had been thinking when he'd taught me.

I'd already planned out what I needed to tell the two of them today, and there was still plenty more to go over. As I considered which topic to cover next, I heard a voice call my name from surprisingly far behind me.

"W-Wait, Kiri! Hold on a second!"

I turned around and saw Liluetta leaning against a tree trunk. Yune was standing with her hands on her knees and gasping for breath. Both of them were drenched in sweat, their shoulders rising and falling as they panted.

Our walking pace has been pretty slow, though.

"Uh, let's take a short break," I suggested.

"Please... Let's."

"Mountain climbing is...more tiring than I thought..."

And it's not a mountain, but I kept that thought to myself too.

Sure, we were on a narrow animal trail, and dealing with the exposed tree roots was a bit of a hassle. But any branches that would be in our way had been cleared away, making the trail pretty easy to walk on. That said, it was hotter than the last time I came. The canopy of trees shielded us from most of the sunlight, but even I was starting to sweat a little.

"By the way, do you two have water canteens?" I only thought to ask after noticing a bead of sweat trickling down Liluetta's cheek.

Both of them shook their heads.

Right. I didn't even think about that.

Yesterday, when we went shopping, I was only focused on baskets and shoes. But adventuring meant lots of walking outside of town, and staying hydrated was crucial for something so exhausting. Since they were new to adventuring, it was my responsibility—as the one with a little more experience—to notice this.

Oh well. Mistakes happen. I wasn't expecting the day to go perfectly anyway, and this wasn't a critical problem. Besides, I had water.

"If you still have money left, we should go buy some later. For now, drink this." I held out my water canteen, a leather pouch filled with cooled water from breakfast. There probably wasn't enough to quench their thirst, but it would have to do.

"Are you sure?" Liluetta blinked in surprise as she accepted the canteen. She looked more subdued than usual, and the tone of her voice was quieter. I figured sharing was only natural, since it was my mistake for not bringing it up earlier. But apparently, she didn't see it that way.

"Yeah, it's fine," I told her. "I'll just cut a vine."

"A vine? What do you mean?" Yune tilted her head, clearly not following what I meant. Liluetta also looked puzzled. Fair enough. I probably could've phrased it better. But since I'd planned to teach them about that anyway, now was as good a time as any.

I glanced around until I spotted what I was looking for: a vine wrapped around a tree a short distance away. I walked over to it and pulled out my knife. "If you cut a vine at an angle like this, a little bit of water will come out. It's not much, but if you're ever out of drinking water, this can help. It's good to remember."

"Wow, you know so much, Kiri-o!" Yune exclaimed.

"It really is just a little. Will that be enough for you?" Liluetta asked with concern in her voice.

"I'm used to it. Don't worry about me," I told her. "Go ahead and drink what's in the pouch."

Well, to be honest, I wanted water too. But if they slowed down even more, that would be a bigger problem. We'd left town early, so even with the break I'd planned for us, we had some time to spare. Still, I had a good reason for wanting to move as quickly as possible. The spot I had in mind was still farther ahead, and they were struggling with the rough terrain way more than I'd expected. Their breathing was already ragged. If they didn't have water on top of that, the worst-case scenario was that one of them might collapse. That was why I gave them my water.

Okay, maybe a tiny part of me just wanted to look cool in front of the newbies.

Liluetta held my canteen in both hands and stared at it for a moment. Her lips trembled slightly as if she wanted to say something, but in the end, she didn't. Instead, she lowered her gaze slightly before turning back toward me. Then, still holding the canteen, she delicately pinched the edge of her skirt between her fingers and dipped into a graceful curtsy.

It was the first time I had ever been so struck by the sheer elegance of someone's movements. For a moment, I didn't even register what had just happened.

"Thank you. You're quite the gentleman, surprisingly." Her cherry-red hair clung to her forehead with sweat, and she placed a hand over her chest as she smiled.

My heart skipped a beat. I wasn't sure if it was because of her thanks or because of that display of refined manners I'd never seen before. I didn't even know what a "gentleman" was supposed to be. But I could tell she was praising me, at least.

Maybe it was because she was thirsty, or maybe she just hadn't noticed that I was frozen in place. Either way, Liluetta quickly turned her gaze away from me and opened the mouth of the leather canteen. But she didn't drink right away. Instead, she glanced around, exchanged looks with Yune, and the two of them tilted their heads in unison.

"Um, how do I drink from this?" Liluetta asked.

I blinked. "You just drink from it."

Their eyes went wide in surprise. But honestly, I was just as shocked as they were. Was this really happening? How could they not know? Did they only ever drink water from cups? Was that even possible?

"Well, it's an adventure, after all. I suppose this is just part of it," said Liluetta.

"That's right, my lady!" Yune added. "This is part of the adventure too!"

Wow. That's an incredibly low bar for what counts as an adventure.

Liluetta peered cautiously into the open canteen. After hesitating a few times, she finally brought it to her lips and tipped it slowly to let the water flow into her mouth. Her movements were stiff and awkward, like someone doing this for the first time. As she swallowed, her throat bobbed and made an oddly delicate sound.

"Ugh, it tastes awful," she said.

Yeah... In a leather canteen, the smell and flavor of the material gets into the water and makes it taste terrible.

***

The girls' stamina was even lower than I'd expected. That much was clear. We would need to take more breaks than I'd originally planned. This was the wilderness outside of town. There was no telling when monsters might attack, so I couldn't let them push themselves to exhaustion. At the very least, they needed to save enough energy to run away from danger. And since both of them were magic users, I had to make sure we moved at a pace where they wouldn't be too out of breath to cast spells in an emergency. So, as we pressed forward, I kept an eye on their stamina as well as my own. That said, I didn't want to waste any time while we rested.

"Look, there's some herbs here." I pointed out a patch of herbs growing conveniently at the side of the trail. They would be easy to harvest.

Yune clapped her hands together in delight. "Oh wow, it's really the one from the request! And there are so many growing together!"

It wasn't a particularly valuable plant, but like Yune said, there was a lot of it—enough to add up to a decent reward.

This was another trick I'd learned from Old Badger. Whenever that scout had started getting tired back when Old Badger had brought us here, he'd used the opportunity to stop and teach us something useful. Doing that was a good way to make sure we weren't wasting time even during a break.

As I grabbed my own knife to demonstrate, I figured I should check what Liluetta and Yune knew. "Do you two know how to harvest them?"

"Yes, we studied beforehand, so we'll be fine."

"No problem."

Huh?

The girls pulled out knives of their own. All of our knives seemed to have been made the same way, but theirs were a bit smaller and looked brand-new. Actually, those two knives were identical. Liluetta and Yune had probably bought them for herb gathering from the same shop. Their level of preparation was better than I'd expected, and it caught me a little off guard.

But it wasn't just the knives that surprised me. They both started harvesting the herbs using the exact method described in the request.

"Wait, did you two already memorize the entire request sheet?"

Yune had recognized the herb at a glance, and Liluetta, now crouched down in front of the plants, showed no hesitation in the way she handled her knife. I had originally planned to teach them the right way to harvest herbs. If they hadn't read the request carefully and memorized the details, there was a chance they might make mistakes. And if they did, Barque, the leader of the guild, would reject all of their herbs after inspection.

As far as I knew, they hadn't spent much time looking at the request sheet. I'd only shown it to them yesterday morning. We hadn't had much time then, so I'd only explained that we'd be gathering herbs and they'd be learning through hands-on experience.

So how did they already know the right harvesting method?

"I haven't memorized everything yet, but the young lady here has it all down," said Yune.

"All of those herbs are used in magia and alchemy," Liluetta explained. "I already knew about them."

"Ah," I responded. That made sense. She'd said magic, right? There was something about magic and medicinal herbs like the ones on the request that just felt like a natural connection. Liluetta was a mage, so of course she would know about all of that.

"My lady already knew all the names. But since we didn't know how to harvest them, we studied together last night."

"Yune, less talking, more gathering."

Well, knowing what to call an herb wasn't the same as knowing how to harvest it. Even so, I was a little surprised. Neither of them had become adventurers just to gather herbs, but they had taken the time to research the process for today. They were probably both diligent people. And even though Liluetta did already know about the herbs, she had still memorized the whole request sheet after just glancing at it. Maybe she was actually really smart.

"I always thought herbs were only used by the physician's guild to make potions," I said. "But you're saying it's not just that?"

That part caught my interest. I reached out and touched the narrow leaf on one of the herbs. I'd never really thought about how the herbs I gathered were used. I knew they had value, and the guild bought them, but I wasn't sure beyond that. Were they used in the various types of potions I'd seen? Or maybe in ointments or tablets? The request only listed the plants and their harvesting methods, not what they were actually used for. So I was impressed by Liluetta's knowledge.

But she shook her head. "To be precise, the potions made by the physician's guild are also a form of alchemy. Medicine making and alchemy are closely related."

So they were similar but different too.

"What's the difference?" I asked.

Liluetta stopped harvesting for a moment. She seemed to be thinking it over, but then she turned away from me. "That would be a rather specialized discussion."

She probably didn't know the details either.

***

We slowly made our way up the animal trail, gathering herbs and taking lots of breaks along the way. I adjusted my pace to match Liluetta and Yune, who were moving at a sluggish speed. The slope wasn't too steep. But walking was difficult on soft, damp ground with tree roots sticking out everywhere, and anyone who wasn't used to it would get tired fast. I was pretty sure the two of them

weren't used to paths like this.

That made sense. The streets in town were paved with stone, weren't they? My village had nothing like that, so I'd been shocked when I'd first arrived in town. For Liluetta and Yune, though, those smooth, stable, and well-maintained roads were normal. If they had only ever walked on even, solid ground like that, of course they would struggle with rough terrain.

So falling behind wasn't their fault at all. But I felt a slow-burning, almost unbearable frustration creeping up my back. When I glanced behind me, the gap between us had widened again. As I waited for them to catch up, I looked up at the sky. The sun, peeking through the gaps in the foliage, had already passed its peak.

With every passing moment, my frustration and regret grew. Even if this situation had started because of Waine, I was feeling more and more like I should've turned down this party from the start.

Our progress was slow. Since we were taking our time, I *did* have more chances to search for herbs. And I was finding plenty, but I was also going to make less money than usual because we were splitting the earnings three ways. I had given away my canteen on top of that, and now my throat was parched.

Teaming up with these two was nothing but a loss for me, wasn't it? The vague unease I had felt from the start was solidifying into certainty.

Earlier, when we'd been gathering herbs, I'd learned that these two were serious and diligent. After talking to them, I'd also realized they were actually nice girls, and Liluetta's gesture of gratitude had mesmerized me. But their lack of stamina was a real issue when it came to traveling together. Old Badger had once told me to think carefully when choosing party members, and he'd been absolutely right. If I was going to have companions, I needed ones who could at least keep up with me.

Our return time wasn't flexible. We had to make it back to town before sunset or the gates would close. How much time would we even have left once we reached the top of this hill?

"Hey, Kiri. This is a very simple question, but why are we climbing

a mountain?" Liluetta, who had finally caught up, voiced her doubts.

Yune nodded in agreement. "Wouldn't there be herbs in a forest that's easier to walk in? One with fewer slopes?"

Well, I figured they'd ask that eventually. For two people with so little stamina, making this their very first adventure was probably too much. I should have realized that back when I saw Liluetta's choice of shoes the day before.

That said, I had my own reasons. I couldn't just adjust everything to accommodate them.

"Um, first off, this isn't a mountain," I told them. "It's a hill."

"No, it's a mountain."

"It's a mountain, yes."

They shot my explanation down before I even got started.

But I wasn't giving up. "It's a hill. It's not that high, and besides, it's called Sherzon Hills, isn't it?" I remembered seeing it labeled that way on the map Old Badger had shown me that rainy day. So there was no doubt. These were the Sherzon Hills. Not a mountain.

"Sherzon Mountain is a mountain. Who told you it was a hill? Sure, since it's close to town and people have called this area 'the hills' for a long time, the elderly still refer to it that way. Old maps also label it as such. But in terms of elevation, it's a mountain. Everyone else calls it Sherzon Mountain now."

"Oh..." I groaned, covering my face.

Liluetta was probably right. Old Badger had been an old man, and that map was probably outdated. So this *was* a mountain, huh? No wonder the slope felt so steep. I had just accepted it as a hill because it was smaller than any of the mountains near my village.

I'd been about to say something like, *An adventurer should at least be able to climb a hill!* But now that argument was dead in the water.

"Well, fine, maybe it *is* a mountain. But, um, this place is the only option."

"Why?" Liluetta narrowed her eyes. Her shoes, brand-new just yesterday, were already covered in mud, and she scuffed them against the ground. She was clearly exhausted and drenched in sweat as she leaned against a tree for support. But her gaze was as

sharp as thorns.

Liluetta had called it a simple question, but I could tell—if I didn't have a good reason for choosing this as her first adventure instead of somewhere easier, she was going to be *mad*. She had been grateful when I gave her my water earlier, but that goodwill had probably already expired.

Well, I did have a reason. "There's a certain herb that can only be harvested for a short time," I began, but then I paused. That reason was entirely my own, and I hadn't considered their stamina when I chose this place. If I *had* been thinking about them, I would've just taken them to the riverbank instead. If nothing else had been on my mind, I definitely would've done that. But I had my own reasons. That was why I had come all the way out here, even with them in tow.

I let out a slow breath. Honestly, I hadn't planned to talk about this yet. From what I'd heard, the place I was looking for was hard to find. If I got their hopes up, only to fail in the end, that would be *really* embarrassing. But now that they were questioning me like this, I figured it was better to just explain.

"Near the summit of this, uh, *mountain*, there's this place called a mana pool." If my explanation didn't convince them, would they turn back here? That was fine. I had no problem with that. "It's full of valuable herbs. We found goblin tracks nearby last time, so we went somewhere else instead. But that goblin pack's been wiped out, so I want to try searching for it again."

When I'd gone on that goblin hunt with Waine, Sheya, and Chikka, we'd tracked the stragglers to make sure we'd gotten rid of them all. The trail had led to the top of Sherzon Mountain. In other words, there were no goblins left. That was when I remembered the first mana pool, the place where Old Badger had originally planned to guide us. The herbs growing there were supposed to be the same purple flowers that grew at the other mana pool, which meant they were only in season for fifteen days. They should still be harvestable, but the only problem was that I had no idea *where* the mana pool actually was.

"So you know it exists, but you still have to search for it?" Liluetta

asked.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. I don't know the exact location. The person who told me about it..." I paused. "He already left for the capital."

"I see." She pressed a finger to her lips and fell into a long silence.

I couldn't tell if she had accepted my explanation or not.

And then, she spoke again. "I *might* be able to find that harvesting spot."

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"This is as far as we came last time. We turned back here."

Near the summit, I checked the familiar ground. I couldn't see those footprints anymore, but I knew this was the place. I remembered it clearly. I'd never forget how *terrified* I'd felt. I hadn't reacted fast enough when Old Badger had told us to get down. I'd trembled at the sight of the goblin tracks. That warrior had gotten so angry at Old Badger that he'd reached for the hilt of his sword. I'd had no idea how things would turn out back then. Even now, I could picture all of it in vivid detail.

"S-So you came all the way...here and then turned back? H-He must've been...a very cautious leader." Liluetta slumped to the ground, breathing heavily.

Hearing Old Badger praised like that made me kind of happy. But still, I had to admit that I'd gotten ahead of myself. After hearing Liluetta say she might be able to find the spot, I'd picked up the pace and gone way too fast. That was on me.

"Are you *really* sure...that there's a spot around here...with valuable herbs?" Yune asked, panting.

I had the same question in mind as I let out a deep breath and wiped off some sweat with my sleeve. Even I was starting to feel exhausted after coming this far. Climbing a mountain was no easy feat. Maybe it felt even more tiring now that I knew this was actually a mountain, not a hill. Or maybe it was the extra effort of keeping pace with the other two.

"Do you want to rest for a bit?" I asked.

"No, I'll start right away," Liluetta replied.

I could tell Liluetta was worn out, but she wasted no time getting to work. Picking up a long stick from the ground, she carefully traced a large circle in the dirt. It was big enough for her to stand inside it with her arms outstretched. Within that, she drew a second, smaller circle. At the four cardinal directions—north, south, east, and west—she added intricate symbols.

Oh, I recognize this. I've seen it in books.

"Is that a magic circle?" I asked.

"Technically, it's a magia circle," she corrected.

I had no idea what the difference was, but judging by her serious expression, it must've been important. I decided not to push her any further. She continued adding more symbols and letters that I couldn't read, meticulously inscribing every detail. Once she was finished, she stepped outside the circle and stretched her arms out as far as they would go. Then, she planted the stick firmly at the center of the double-ringed design.

Liluetta closed her eyes. Slowly, she inhaled and exhaled, focusing and steadying her breath. She murmured words too quiet and indistinct for me to make out, but I could tell she was casting a spell—a chant in an ancient, forgotten tongue, said to hold great power.

Her small, pale hands withdrew from the stick. A moment later, it fell to the ground with a soft thud.

"That way." Liluetta pointed in the direction the stick had fallen.

"Um..." *Wait, that's it?* I thought. *Shouldn't there be some kind of flash of light, a sound, or something mysterious happening? All she did was let a stick fall over, right?*

"What's with that look?" Liluetta asked me.

"I didn't say anything."

"Your eyes are saying it!"

Wow, my eyes sure are expressive...

"Ugh, just watch!" Liluetta puffed out her cheeks in frustration, picked up the stick, and placed it at the center of the double circle once again. She chanted the spell, and this time it felt a tiny bit different. She removed her hand from the stick.

"Huh?" I couldn't contain my surprise. The stick had lost its support, but it didn't fall. It stayed standing upright on its own.

The stick wasn't stuck in the ground or anything. It didn't even seem all that well-balanced, so it really should've toppled over as soon as Liluetta had let go. But it stood there, perfectly and unnaturally still, without a single wobble.

"I've set the search area here. Right now, the stick is unable to point anywhere, so it's staying in place," she explained, but the words barely registered. I was too mesmerized by the strange phenomenon happening right in front of me. This wasn't the first time I had seen a spell, but I'd never had the chance to watch one this closely.

"Changing search target. Where is Kiri?" Liluetta spoke, then repeated her chant. The moment she did, the stick tilted. With another soft thud, it fell to the ground with its tip pointing right at me.

She had just searched for me with a spell. I had no idea how it worked—it *had* to be a mystery beyond explanation. But this proved that magic could locate things.

"This is a detection spell," said Liluetta. "It's the most basic form, so it only shows the direction. But that should be enough as long as what we're looking for is nearby, right?"

Magic.

I'd seen it before—flames appearing at the tip of a spear, wounds healing instantly—but I never imagined it could be used to find things too.

"The first time, I searched for a place with a high concentration of magical energy. If it's called a mana pool, that must mean magic is densely gathered there, right?" Liluetta waited for my answer.

"I think so." I didn't know the details, but I did know that "mana" was something like magical energy. So, a mana pool must be a place where magic accumulates. "Being able to cast magic spells like that is really amazing," I added.

Liluetta corrected me again. "It's magia," she said. "People use words like 'magic' and 'spellcasting' to describe what we do, but the *proper* term is magia."

She was really particular about that. I still didn't get the difference, but it was probably important.

"So with, um, magia, we can actually find the mana pool..." I trailed off.

"Never mind that, sonny. Back to yer map. I'm gonna show ya where to find the mana pools where you can go pickin'."

I still remembered all the places Old Badger had pointed out on that rainy day. But the map he'd used was old and vague, and he'd only said something like, "Somewhere 'round here." I'd never actually been to any of them.

"What are you doing?" Liluetta asked. "Let's go."

"Are you okay, Kiri-o? Did you get tired too?" Yune added.

Liluetta and Yune were so close that I flinched and took a step back in surprise. They peered at me with strange, puzzled looks, like I was some kind of odd specimen, and that snapped me out of it.

Shoot, I was lost in thought. That's not good. I can think about all that later—right now, we're in the middle of an adventure.

"S-Sorry, it's nothing. Let's go." Shaking off my distractions, I took the lead and started heading in the direction where the detection spell had pointed.

I couldn't do much right now. I lacked knowledge, skill, and experience. I wasn't even old enough. In other words, there was hardly anything I could do for Liluetta and Yune. So, for now, I decided to follow in *his* footsteps. One by one, I would recall the lessons my adventurer mentor, Old Badger, had taught me, then pass them on as best I could. I would guide these two girls through the places he once led me, until they found another party to join. That felt like the best way to honor Old Badger's memory.

After walking a good distance from the first spot where the staff had fallen, Liluetta used the search spell again. Then we walked even farther, she cast the spell once more, and we continued on.

Mountain paths were never straightforward. Obstacles and steep terrain forced us to take detours. Even if we knew the general direction of our destination, we had to be careful not to stray off course. Casting the spell three times had been the right choice. If

we'd only relied on the first attempt, we never would've made it this far.

"Are we really going in *there*?" Yune's weary complaint was understandable. The direction indicated by the search spell led us into a dense part of the forest where trees grew with branches intertwining and vines draping down like curtains. A dark, suffocating overgrowth loomed ahead, like it was warning us to stay away.

But still...

"Yeah, this is the place," I muttered, and I knew I was right.

Somehow, it felt the same as before. The area near the mana pool Old Badger had shown me had already been cleared of branches, so it'd been easier to walk through, but otherwise the greenery had been incredibly thick there too. The air even felt the same. This place was just like that one.

"Let's go. My detection spell pointed us here. There has to be something," Liluetta declared, standing firm after a slight hesitation. She was the one who had cast the spell, after all. The spell had led us here, so we were definitely close to a place where magic was concentrated.

"I'll try to pick the easiest path for us. Just follow me." Gripping my spear, I took the lead and started pushing through the dense undergrowth and thick foliage. Without a kukri like Old Badger's, I had to break small branches with my hands and search for gaps we could pass through. I used those broken twigs to clear away spiderwebs as we moved.

Liluetta looked like she was about to cry every time her fluttery skirt got caught, but with Yune and me encouraging her, she managed to keep going.

Then I started to feel something on my skin—something warm and comforting, almost like a slow, gentle surge of energy. And then, a scent I recognized tickled my nose.

"Ah, we found it." The words slipped out of my mouth. I was just so thrilled we actually made it here.

"Wow," Liluetta murmured in awe, her cherry-red hair rustling in the breeze.

"It's beautiful..." Yune whispered, brushing her wavy, chestnut-

colored hair aside. She was at a loss for words after that.

Just like the other mana pool, the breathtaking sight in front of us was like something that came straight out of a fairy tale. The trees completely gave way to a vast expanse of purple blooms that seemed to be under the protection of the surrounding terrain. None of the flowers had been trampled—in fact, there were no signs of anyone having disturbed this place.

It was so beautiful that it felt almost unreal. Maybe it really wasn't part of this world. Perhaps this scenery could only exist in a place like a mana pool, somewhere beyond the ordinary. Maybe this was actually a fragment of another world overlapping with our own.

"Lucky us. There's still some left to harvest." I knelt down to examine the flowers and let out a sigh of relief. And then, without even thinking, I smiled and said, "Thank you, Liluetta. We only made it here because of you."

"Huh?" Liluetta blurted.

Her surprised expression was too funny, and I couldn't stop myself from laughing.



If I'd been searching alone, I would've had to comb through this area a little bit at a time by leaving town in the morning, climbing to the summit, searching the terrain, then climbing back down in time to get back to town before nightfall. Maybe I would've found the mana pool eventually. But I had no way of knowing if I would've done it in time to harvest these flowers. The only reason we made it here so quickly was because of Liluetta.

"F-Finding it was only natural," Liluetta stammered. "Magia is all-powerful, after all."

I was just thanking her for using that spell, but she looked flustered like she was embarrassed. It was actually kind of cute, and I ended up chuckling again. But then Liluetta puffed up her cheeks and planted her hands on her hips.

Oh, she's definitely upset. That's not good.

"Ah, um. Kiri-o, how do we collect this herb?" Yune asked. Her timing was perfect—that question gave me the perfect excuse to get myself out of this.

"Oh, right. We need to hurry, or the sun will set before we're done," I said. "We only need the flower petals, so..."

There really wasn't much time left. It would take us a while to climb back down the mountain, and we needed to get back before sunset. We couldn't afford to waste a single moment.

Liluetta had seemed like she was about to say something. Instead, she let out a small *hmm* sound followed by a sigh. It looked like I had successfully dodged a problem. I exhaled in relief.

"The harvesting method is simple," I continued. "Just use a knife to cut the stem. But we need to leave behind about a quarter of the flowers so they can reseed for next year. Be careful not to take too much. Also, we need to keep the flowers in good condition until we bring them to the adventurer's guild, so don't get greedy and stuff the basket too full."

"I see, I see."

As I explained the process, something occurred to me. Hadn't they both studied harvesting methods beforehand? Maybe Yune was just pretending not to know so she could help me out. Liluetta was a mage who already knew a lot about herbs, though. I stole a glance

at her out of the corner of my eye while I was crouched down and teaching Yune how to harvest.

Liluetta stood motionless, gazing at the field of purple flowers. A gentle breeze blew, and she held down her fluttering cherry-red hair with one hand. Her delicate lips trembled as she murmured, "So this is adventuring."

For some reason, those words lingered in my ears.

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"Heh, so it's the old man's treasure hunt? Sounds kinda fun."

Instead of an answer, the small kid in front of me stepped forward with a shout. He'd been making tricky, crafty little feints with his eyes, pretending to aim for my face, but then he stopped short and swept his weapon at my torso instead.

This was the third day of training. Maybe he was starting to get used to it, because he wasn't holding back with his attacks anymore. His aim wasn't bad either. But his technique? Still sloppy. His movements weren't smooth enough, and he left himself wide open between attacks. I could react after seeing his strikes and still have plenty of time to counter.

More importantly, his intent was obvious. I wasn't scared at all. The moment his stance collapsed from an overextended attack, I stepped in and struck his browplate.

"Guh!" he grunted.

Even in the dim night, I could see the frustration on his face. Good. Kids like that have a lot of potential. At this age, all they do is grow. After all, I used to be the same way.

"Treasure hunting? It's just herb gathering," he said.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked. "That mana pool place is supposed to be special, right? Tracking down treasure based on clues an old man left behind sounds like a real adventurer's job to me."

Honestly, it did sound pretty damn fun. Hell, I wouldn't mind tagging along. Treasure hunting? Gotta be a blast. Not that I'd actually go, though. I'd be useless in any sort of exploration, and I'd

rather die than be dead weight for some Rank F adventurer when I'm about to hit Rank C.

"Well, yeah. I guess when you put it that way..." He trailed off.

Don't make that complicated face, I thought. *Adventurers don't overthink things. We just roll with it.*

"Anyway, Waine. You're cheating when you hit me."

"Wha?"

Crap. He's on to me.

"Right before you hit me, you pull the twig back into your hand. It'll never break, because you're just hitting me with your fingers."

He actually saw that?! I figured it would take him longer to get over his instincts. Keeping your eyes open while being attacked was a hard habit to break. Crap. I didn't have anything planned for the next stage of training. I hadn't even thought about it.

"W-Well then. Not bad," I told him. "You've got a sharp eye."

"I kept wondering why that tiny twig wouldn't break, no matter how many times you hit me. I never thought you were cheating, though."

So his curiosity outweighed his body's reflexes?! I figured he was smart, but damn, this was a pain. Warriors were supposed to be idiots who couldn't do anything except fight. This was way too much trouble. When I'd gone through this training myself, I'd never even questioned anything. I only found out after it'd been explained to me.

"Uh, well, you see, this is... Yeah! This training is only complete once you figure that out. That was just the first step! You've still got a long way to go before you can use this in real combat, so the next stage..."

"Is that really part of the training?"

Damn it, this kid is a real pain! Lies don't work on him.

"Q-Quit doubting the effectiveness of training! In the vanguard, you need to keep your eyes open even when you're getting hit! Otherwise, the enemy will slip past you and go straight for your allies behind you!"

"Mm..."

Oh? Looks like that got to him.

Now that he was in a party with those two magic users, he was their vanguard now. He must've realized how dangerous it would be if he let something get past him. Man, good thing I pushed those troublesome rookies on him.

"But they're going to join another party soon, right?" He said that casually, like it was just a given. "I heard that mages and clerics are pretty rare, so I'm sure there are plenty of parties that would want them."

Ah. Well. Yeah, that's probably how it'll go.

Having a party member who could use magic made a huge difference. The smaller one had a bit of an attitude problem, but there were definitely people who'd still want to team up with one or both of them. So there was no real reason for those two to stick with a guy who could only do herb-gathering jobs. And the kid understood that.

"You don't sound the least bit disappointed about it," I said.

"Well, if I'm on my own, I can always run away at full speed if things get dangerous," he explained.

So he knew that wasn't an option when you had allies. Being a frontline fighter meant that, even if you decided to run, you were still responsible for covering the party's retreat. That was just what you did when you were the one wearing heavier armor.

"Hmm..." *I get what he's saying. It's easier to be alone, huh. Is there something I should say to him? Some advice I should give? A lesson he should learn?* I thought about it for a bit and realized, nope, there was nothing.

It was a party formed on a whim, and it was gonna disband on a whim. Those two probably got some good experience before jumping into real adventuring. And the kid? He found the place he was looking for, so he was happy. *If both sides get something good out of it, that's all that matters.*

"Well, if you're gonna keep being an adventurer, you'll have to party up with other people sooner or later," I told him. "Better start getting used to it now."

"I get it. It's something I'll need to be ready for someday."

Oh, so he got that too. He was a smart kid. I'd always hated the

whole *train steadily now for your future's sake* thing.

"But instead of 'someday,' could you teach me something I might actually need right now?" he asked. "I mean, you've only shown me thrusts and sweeps so far."

"Oh, huh. You're right." Now that he mentioned it, I hadn't actually taught him any attack techniques. I'd just been making him swing randomly and whacking him on that browplate when he messed up. No wonder I was starting to feel like something was missing.

Crap, I got nothing.

"A-All right, I got it. Today, I'll, uh, I'll teach you...that. That thing."

"What thing?"

"Uh, that thing. Yeah, that thing."

I kept repeating "that thing" over and over, desperately stalling for time, until a single phrase finally popped into my head. I latched onto it like a drowning man to a lifeline.

"A secret technique."

I regretted saying that as soon as the words came out of my mouth. *Yeah, it's* way *too soon for that.*

***

I met a strange boy.

He was smaller than me, and although he was clad in armor, wielded a spear, and wore a forehead protector, he looked weak—nothing like the kind of adventurer I had imagined. When that *rude* adventurer with the shock of white hair claimed I was beneath this boy, I was livid. Yet, when I followed him, I realized I was nothing more than a burden.

I got blisters the moment we left town, which forced us to turn back. It was entirely my fault, so I was determined not to embarrass myself again the next day and studied medicinal herbs in advance. But still, I never once managed to find herbs before he did. Before long, I was so exhausted just from walking that I could hardly focus on searching at all.

When he gave me his canteen, I scoffed at the terrible taste of the water. That was partly out of petty frustration. It was unpleasant, but not undrinkable, and it did soothe my parched throat and fill me with renewed energy. I had to say something disagreeable, though, or else it would've felt like I had lost. Just like how I had to point out the nuanced differences between alchemy and medicine making, even though such knowledge was utterly irrelevant to him.

I was amazed as I watched him climb the mountain with ease. Even a child that small had such stamina. Was this what it meant to be an adventurer? But as we continued, I started to wonder. Did he deliberately choose this difficult path just to mock me? The thought irritated me so much that I demanded an explanation.

And when he gave me one, I felt ashamed. He had his own reasons, his own considerations, yet I—in my ignorance—had villainized him. Herb gathering was supposed to be the most basic of all adventurer tasks, but I had let my own arrogance cloud my judgment so much that I made a fool of myself.

After exchanging the gathered herbs for money at the adventurer's guild and parting ways with that boy, Yune and I walked home under the now completely darkened sky.

"Yune." I turned to my friend.

"Yes?"

"Do you think I was of any use?"

"Hmm, let's see..." Yune adjusted the oversized hat she wore as an apprentice cleric and placed a finger to her lips like she was deep in thought. "You were the one who found that mana pool, right? So, at the very least, you were more helpful than I was."

That was true. If I hadn't done that, I probably would have been feeling like nothing more than a miserable, useless burden.

"Thank you, Liluetta."

I thought back to when he'd said those words. That simple detection spell was beyond basic. I never expected anyone to thank me for something so elementary. Yet his gratitude was genuine. His smile, filled with pure delight, took me by surprise. I was so

completely stunned that I needed time to process the fact that he wasn't putting on an act or only thanking me out of politeness.

When he thanked me like that, I was truly glad I had studied magia. With just those few words, the long, grueling years of training suddenly felt worthwhile. He probably wasn't even thinking that deeply about it. That was why his joy was so pure and unfiltered.

Something stirred deep in my chest. *That smile of his is unfair,* I thought.

"Hey, Yune," I said, pulling myself back to the present. "That field of purple flowers was beautiful, wasn't it?"

"Oh, absolutely." My friend nodded with a warm, gentle smile.

My heart felt just as light and airy as her expression. "There must be so many more breathtaking sights like that all over the world."

"I'm sure there are," she replied.

I stopped walking and looked up at the night sky. There hadn't been a single cloud all day, and now the sky was filled with a sea of stars glittering in the darkness. I reached out toward them. I knew I couldn't grasp them, but I still wanted to try.

"I want to see them all."

If I were an elf with a thousand-year lifespan, maybe that dream could come true. But I knew that, as a human, it was impossible. Still, wanting to see them wasn't wrong. Wishing for something more... *There's no shame in that, is there?*

"In that case, you'll need to start walking a lot more," said Yune.

"Urgh..." A small groan slipped out. My friend had a way of hitting where it hurt, but she was right. If I wanted to travel the world, I couldn't be out of breath just from climbing a small mountain.

"Well, if you keep tagging along with Kiri-o for herb gathering for a while, you'll build up stamina soon enough."

For a while, huh?

It was true. I didn't have much stamina. So maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to keep working with him for just a little while longer. That thought came to me so naturally and easily that I had to wonder if it was because my heart was still floating in the air, as light as a feather.

Chapter 3: Curiosity about Magic

The purple flowers that grew in the mana pool bloomed for about fifteen days. By counting from the day I'd first climbed Sherzon Mountain with Old Badger and the three other adventurers, I realized there wasn't much time left. And so, today, we were climbing Sherzon Mountain once again.

At first, I'd thought Liluetta and Yune would refuse because of how exhausting this hike was for them. Thankfully, I didn't need to worry about that. The girls told me this was a great opportunity to build stamina. They insisted, actually, and I could tell they were determined.

Maybe, just maybe, that place is becoming something special for them too. That thought made me feel all warm inside.

There was one problem, though. Determination didn't make the climb any easier.

"Let's take a break here." I gazed up at the clear blue sky visible through the gaps between the leafy branches of a large and sturdy tree. We'd made good progress since our last break, and the thick roots here formed natural seats beneath the cool shade. In other words, it was an ideal resting spot for us.

Liluetta slumped against the tree trunk and crouched down to catch her breath. "We already climbed this mountain yesterday, but it's still quite the challenge."

"Ohhh, my lady, are you all right?" Yune fussed over her. Compared to Liluetta, Yune seemed to have slightly more stamina. But judging by the sweat trickling down her cheeks, she wasn't holding up much better.

I gripped my spear as I kept watch on our surroundings, then checked the position of the sun. Our pace was about the same as yesterday, but we didn't need to search for our destination today. We could go straight to the mana pool, gather the herbs, and head

back to town. That gave us more time to spare, so there was no real need to rush. The breeze was refreshing, and taking a slightly longer break wouldn't hurt.

"Oh, right. You two should be careful," I warned. "Sometimes slimes drop down from the trees."

"Wha...?!"

"Eek!"

Both of them jumped in surprise the moment they heard what I'd said.

Wow, they jumped really far. I didn't think they would react like that.

I tried reassuring them a little. "I already checked our surroundings, so we should be fine. But still, we're in the wilderness. So even when you're resting, you should always stay alert just in case."

"I-I'm not afraid of slimes!" Liluetta declared. "I'll take them down with my magic bullets!"

Magic bullets, huh? The priest back in my village had a book about heroes, and I remembered reading about that kind of magic. It was a spell that shot arrows of pure energy. But was that really the best idea?

"If a slime drops from above, it'll probably stick to your head or shoulders. Are you sure it's a good idea to shoot magic bullets in that situation?" I asked. "Wouldn't that be dangerous?"

Liluetta faltered. "Ugh!" was all she could say.

Yeah, I figured it was a bad idea. Waine had once complained about a slime slipping under his armor, and he'd had a miserable time dealing with it. If a monster latched onto you and you tried to blast it off, you'd probably end up hurting yourself. It was best to spot enemies from a distance and avoid them entirely.

"Kiri-o, have you ever had a slime fall on you?"

I shook my head. "Nope. But I have run into one before."

"Ooooh!"

Why does she sound impressed?

"I ran away, though," I told her. "Lucky for me, slimes are slow."

"You should've at least fought it," Liluetta muttered in

exasperation as she made her way back under the tree. After carefully checking above to make sure nothing was lurking, she spread a handkerchief over the exposed roots and sat down. Yune hesitated for a moment before cautiously sitting next to her.

Slimes were weak monsters, so I could understand why she'd say that. But things had been different back when I'd encountered that slime for the first time. Running was the smartest choice when you had no equipment.

I wondered how I'd do against a slime now that I had armor and a real weapon. They moved slowly, and I could probably fight them safely thanks to my spear's reach. Still, it was a little scary. Could I really take down a slime with just a spear?

"If a slime really did fall from above, I might not be able to use my magic bullets. But if I see one from a distance, I can definitely take it down," Liluetta said.

I nodded. "Okay, I'll leave it to you when the time comes."

Magic bullets could be fired from far away. That had to be safer than fighting with a spear. I didn't know how powerful the spell was, but Liluetta seemed confident in her abilities. So I figured I could trust her to handle any slimes we encountered.

Also, magic bullets sounded pretty cool. I kind of wanted to see it in action. Maybe I could ask her to demonstrate... But if it made a loud noise, it might attract beasts or monsters.

Probably best to hold off, I thought. So instead, I asked, "What other spells can you use, Liluetta?"

So far, I knew she could use detection and magic bullets. And that made me even more curious. What else did she know? In stories about heroes, there were spells that could do all sorts of things like teleporting someone to another place in an instant, summoning lightning from the sky, and even constructing massive stone ships.

"I can't use anything too advanced yet," Liluetta replied. "But I know magic bullets, light, ignition, detection, perception, fear, and magic resistance. Oh, and I'm currently studying weapon enhancement."

"That's a lot!" I was shocked. She knew seven spells—eight, if

you included the one she was still learning.

"Of course. Magia is *all-powerful*." Liluetta lifted her chin proudly.

Magia is all-powerful. That's the second time she's said that. If I learn magia, does that mean I'll be able to do anything?

"I can't use them yet, but I plan to master water walk and levitation in the future," Liluetta added.

"You mean walking on water? And flying through the air?!"

"Exactly. If I can go more places, it will give me a huge advantage as an adventurer."

That sounded amazing. With those skills, she could cross rivers and climb cliffs just like that. She could *literally* go anywhere. In that case, she could collect herbs from all sorts of places—maybe even places Old Badger had never been to.

"Magia is incredible," I said.

Liluetta looked pleased. "Of course it is. I've spent years training, after all."

"My lady's room is filled with thick, heavy books, you know." Yune puffed out her chest like she was the one who'd studied so hard.

That made me smile. I could tell the two of them were close, and it was honestly kind of cute. And Liluetta really was impressive. Not only had she learned all those spells, something that had to be extremely difficult, but she was still studying and trying to learn more.

A sharp cry resounded from somewhere high above our heads. I looked up and saw a hawk circling in the brilliant blue sky. Not a single cloud was in sight. Against that vast backdrop, the lone hawk spread its wings wide and soared freely through the air.

I glanced at Liluetta and Yune. They, too, were captivated by the hawk.

Liluetta is incredible, and her spells are definitely useful for adventuring. Once she builds up her stamina, I'm sure she'll take flight just like that hawk. Yune's a healer, which already makes her an asset to any party. On top of that, her gentle demeanor means she'll get along with other adventurers.

These two could use magic. Sooner or later, they would go far, far beyond where I could reach. As I watched the hawk carve graceful

circles in the sky, I truly felt like that was inevitable.

Magic is really amazing. If I work hard enough, can I learn to use it too?

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Old Badger had always told me to become a proper adventurer. He'd also said I could quit if I wanted to. I figured what he'd really meant was that I shouldn't spend my life just gathering herbs.

It was better to have more skills. If I could do a variety of things, I'd have a better chance of making a living. Even herb collecting might have bad years, like a poor harvest on a farm. If that ever happened, I'd need other ways to support myself.

And that detection spell was incredibly useful. Even though Old Badger had shown me where the mana pools were on a map, we'd still had a tough time finding one yesterday. If the other mana pools were hidden too, the hints I'd gotten from him wouldn't be enough. I would need a way to track them down myself.

Besides, if all I had to do was knock over a stick, maybe learning magic wouldn't be that hard. The circle Liluetta had drawn in the dirt didn't seem that complicated either. *If that's all there is to magic, maybe I really* can *do it.*

"That's why I want you to teach me magic."

After we'd finished gathering herbs and made it back to town safe and sound, I'd parted ways with the two utterly exhausted girls before heading to the adventurer's guild for dinner. I found Sheya and wasted no time in making my request.

She made a face like I'd just asked her to do something incredibly tedious. "I don't recommend learning it."

"Why not?" I asked. "Magic is super useful. Isn't it supposed to be all-powerful?"

Sheya shook her head. "Magic is not all-powerful."

Liluetta had told me that magic could do anything. But from Sheya's perspective, that didn't seem to be the case.

"Magic is the means of using magical energy to produce various

effects.”

The guild was as lively as ever, filled with adventurers laughing, talking, and clanking their cups together over dinner. It was a noisy, bustling scene. But even with all the commotion, Sheya’s soft voice slipped into my ears.

She’s not casting a spell. But if someone told me that making her voice sound so clear was a type of magic, I would probably believe them.

“In other words,” Sheya continued, “magical spells cannot achieve what magical energy is incapable of.”

“What can’t magical energy do?” I asked.

“Here, take this.” Sheya took a salt-grilled fish from her dinner plate and placed it on mine.

A pile of grilled fish small enough to be eaten whole—head, bones, and all—was heaped on Sheya’s plate, and she had a cup of what was probably alcohol beside it. Seafood and alcohol were two of her favorite things. I had black bread and vegetable-scrap soup. Since today’s earnings had been good, I’d splurged a little and added some cheese.

“Oh, thanks,” I said.

Sheya pointed to my plate. “This is something magic cannot do.”

Uh...

“Adding food to a plate.”

Okay, I guess magic can’t fill someone’s stomach. Message received. If there were things magic couldn’t do, then it wasn’t truly all-powerful. That made sense.

“Those who only understand magic in theory claim that magic is all-powerful. Most magic users are like that.”

Was Sheya saying that Liluetta believed in books too much? Sheya did seem to have more experience as a mage, but...

“But magic can do a lot of things, and it’s really useful, right?” I asked. Even if magic wasn’t all-powerful, Sheya couldn’t deny that.

She let out a small, thoughtful hum. “Magic is dangerous.”

I frowned. “I wouldn’t fire magic bullets at people or anything.”

“The danger is to the user,” Sheya said.

What does she mean by that?

As I tilted my head in thought, Sheya took a bite of her fish and washed it down with a sip of alcohol.

"If you use it carelessly and mess up, you could get hurt?" I ventured.

Sheya nodded in response. "Magic is difficult to control."

Well, that made sense too. Waine had said that beginners who try to swing a sword without proper control might end up chopping their own legs off. Magic probably had similar risks. Maybe it really was difficult after all. Both Sheya and Liluetta were amazing for being able to use it.

"So you think I shouldn't try it?" I asked.

Not being able to use that detection spell would be a shame. If it was dangerous to handle, though, I would need to come up with a new plan. Mana pools were hidden and hard to find, but Old Badger had found them on his own. That proved it was possible to track them down without magic. I felt like I should be able to find them by myself too.

"Mmm." Sheya folded her arms. A crease formed between her brows as she closed her eyes and fell deep into thought.

What is she thinking so hard about?

"I still don't recommend it." After a moment of hesitation, she opened her eyes and looked at me with reluctance written all over her face. "But I can teach you the basics."

***

When I walked into the adventurer's guild at night, I found a familiar mage with a pointy hat slumped over a table and clutching her head.

"Uh, what are you doing, Sheya?" I asked.

"Chikka."

"Yeah, it's me, Chikka. So what's wrong? Got something on your mind?"

"Regret."

Sheya was an extreme slacker who almost never said more than a few words, because just talking was a real hassle for her. Normally,

our conversation would've ended here.

But she kept going. Guess she actually wanted someone to listen.

"The kid asked me to teach him magic."

"And?"

"It's a pain." Sheya grimaced, twisting her otherwise refined features.

Even as a halfling, I could tell she was a beauty as far as humans were concerned. But her personality was kinda rotten.

"Magic is dangerous. I can't teach it haphazardly."

Well, at least she had that much common sense. "But you didn't turn him down?" I asked.

"I tend to keep my promises."

Oh, a promise. So that was why she had to go through with it, even though she thought it was annoying.

Sheya didn't say who she'd made that promise to. That meant she didn't feel the need to say it, so I was pretty sure she'd been talking about Old Badger. In gramps's final moments, he'd left the kid in our care.

Well, that didn't mean we had to do everything for him. That wasn't the adventurer's way. Even now, Waine was training tiny in combat behind the guild, which was a weirdly thoughtful move for that idiot. That level of guidance—teaching him how to survive on his own—was probably just right.

If the kid wanted to learn magic, teaching him wasn't a bad idea. It might even be more useful than fighting. In this town, mages still faced some lingering prejudice. That could make his life difficult. But if he ever went to the capital, magic would open a lot of doors for him.

On the other hand, getting too involved would be a mistake. Adventurers weren't the kind of people who could properly guide a child anyway.

"Speaking of tiny," I said, "I heard an interesting rumor about one of the new recruits in his party."

Maybe it was because of that promise, or maybe it was something else. But Sheya, who normally wouldn't even react to idle gossip, looked my way.

"That little one? She's Liluetta Magnan," I told her.

"The sea salt Magnan?" Sheya was quick on the uptake. As a local, she probably knew the name well.

"Yep. The granddaughter of the head of the sea salt guild, which controls the town's salt pans. You could say she's the princess of salt."

***

I activated the light spell, and a warm orange glow at the tip of my wand illuminated my room. I had grown quite accustomed to casting this spell. It was relatively simple magia because light was easy to visualize, and there was no need for complex spell formations because its function was so straightforward.

However, maintaining the spell and keeping the brightness steady were rather difficult feats. My light flickered unevenly, its intensity rising and falling like waves in the sea, and I knew it would vanish entirely the moment I let my focus slip. A seasoned mage would be able to stabilize the glow effortlessly and handle other spells at the same time, but...

"This is exhausting." I let out a long sigh and sat down on my bed.

Never in my life did I think my first task as an adventurer would be climbing a mountain. And I had certainly *not* expected it to be this tiring. And yet, here I was, doing it two days in a row. The fact that I would be going again tomorrow made me feel like giving up already. But those purple flowers would stop blooming soon, so making a third climb was nonnegotiable. Besides, I was doing this to build my stamina. I needed to stick with it.

Kiri had no problem with all the hiking, and he was smaller than me. Surely that meant any other adventurer could handle it as well. In other words, his level of endurance was the minimum required for adventuring. The only problem here was my own lack of stamina.

"Kiri is actually pretty amazing," I murmured, and I thought back to when we had parted ways earlier today. Even after a round trip up and down the mountain and walking all the way back to town, he

still seemed fine. Of course, he looked a little tired, but his steps remained steady at the end of the day. That was impressive enough to leave me at a loss for words, especially since Yune and I were barely able to stay on our feet.

But I could not praise Kiri without reserve. After all, he was the kind of person who would run away from a slime.

"In fact," I mused, "perhaps he isn't even worth praising in the first place."

Running away from a slime was simply unacceptable. It felt wrong to call someone like that amazing. Monster extermination was one of the most important duties of an adventurer. In fact, it was probably the main thing townspeople expected from us.

Evil creatures threatened travelers on the roads, sunk ships at sea, and destroyed valuable resources like farmland and buildings. Sometimes, they even formed hordes and attacked entire villages or towns.

I once saw someone attacked by a monster near the salt pans. The blood had drained from my face when I'd noticed how the man's legs and right arm had been bent in unnatural directions as he collapsed. A healer from the church had been summoned immediately, but I never found out if that worker survived.

Protecting people from those kinds of threats and bringing peace and security to everyday lives was part of an adventurer's duty. Of course, I could understand running away from a massive, terrifying monster. But a slime? If you were too afraid to fight something like that, how could you ever fulfill your duties and meet the townspeople's expectations?

"When I think about it that way, he's a mere apprentice adventurer. Just a trainee, at best."

True adventurers ventured into harsh, treacherous terrain for days, perhaps even weeks. They journeyed into unexplored lands where no one had ever set foot before. *We* were dealing with a simple one-day trip up and down a mountain. The endurance required for that was the bare minimum for adventuring. Kiri wasn't weak, but as an adventurer, he wasn't anything special.

"And yet, I haven't even reached the level of a mere apprentice."

The magical light flickered, disturbed by my unfocused thoughts. “I don’t like this,” I muttered, biting my lower lip.

Admitting it was infuriating, but *maybe* the words of that foolish-looking man at the adventurer’s guild weren’t entirely wrong. Maybe Kiri really was ahead of me. I wasn’t even at the bare minimum. Being able to use magia was useless if I didn’t have the stamina to reach my destination. Besides, I only knew basic, low-level spells.

“I have to do better,” I told myself.

Honestly, I just wanted to go to sleep. After climbing that mountain two days in a row, exhaustion weighed down my body. I longed to just collapse onto my bed and let it take me into a deep slumber.

But that wasn’t an option—not after realizing how weak I still was. I gripped my wand and began to chant. This was training to sustain one light spell while casting another.

The moment I created the second light, the first one vanished. I failed again.

Magical energy surged chaotically inside me, and pain crackled through my torso. I clutched at my chest and felt my body writhe from the backlash.

This is normal. Magia is not easy. The only way to improve is to do it again and again, over and over, until it works. As long as there’s still magic in me.

The path ahead was long, but I had no choice except to move forward. I would rest when my magic was completely drained. Time was limited, and I still had so much to do.

“Time is limited, and there’s still so much to do, huh...” I whispered.

I sighed. If only the path ahead were a little shorter, I could reach my goals a little faster. I had to hurry, because I couldn’t spend all my time on adventures. Soon, I would have to focus on my responsibilities as a member of the Magnan family. Compared to climbing mountains and magia training, *that* felt far more exhausting.

Chapter 4: Magnan

On the fourth day of our expedition, we finished early enough to make it back to town while the sun was still high in the sky. Of course, our walking pace was still slow, and we had taken plenty of breaks. But knowing exactly where to go made a huge difference. Not having to hesitate was just so much easier. On top of that, Liluetta and Yune had started getting used to the mountain trails. Compared to yesterday or the day before, we made much better time overall.

As we passed through the town gates, I adjusted my pack basket filled to the brim with purple flowers. The mustached soldier at the gate raised a hand in greeting, and I waved back.

What a relief. Another successful day. No problems, no injuries, just a smooth return. I'd been worried about forming a party, but things were going well. I was starting to feel proud of what we'd accomplished.

As long as I was in a party with these two, I would make sure they always returned safely. I felt that sense of determination in my heart once again.

"H-Hey, Kiri. You mean to tell me you're perfectly fine after climbing a mountain three days in a row?" Liluetta complained.

I was startled by how far away her voice sounded and spun around. Liluetta and Yune were both lagging far behind me, and I realized I'd sped up to my usual, faster pace without trying to. The ground here was flat and easy to walk on, and I was just so happy we were safely back in town that I'd gotten a little careless.

It's not dangerous here, but I shouldn't leave them behind. I need to match their pace again.

"Sorry. I'm tired too, but I'm used to a lot of walking," I explained.

My village was surrounded by mountains, and I had to walk a

long way every day just to fetch water. I was also used to bad roads. And when I played with other kids, we were always out in the fields and hills. I had thought that was normal. But in this town, it wasn't.

Of course, I was tired too. Sherzon Mountain wasn't that tall as far as mountains went, and I'd gotten used to the path after a few trips. But a mountain was still a mountain. I could feel the exhaustion from climbing every day piling up.

Liluetta and Yune were at their limit. That was only natural, especially since they'd worked so hard to keep up all this time. After passing through the town gates and feeling safe and relieved, they were probably ready to drop.

"Kiri-o, you're amazing," said Yune.

Liluetta sniffed. "He's just a country bumpkin."

Well, she's not wrong. I am a country bumpkin. Anyway, what should I do now? Should I slow down and walk at their pace? Or, since it's still early, should we sit down somewhere and take a break? Resting would be fine, since it's not dangerous here in town.

That seemed like a good plan, except I didn't really know of any good places to sit and rest around here. Once I got to this part of town after a gathering trip, I always headed straight for the adventurer's guild. Would it be okay to just pick a spot for taking a break, as long as we weren't in anyone's way?

"Hey, Kiri, since we're here, why don't we take a break over there?"

"Huh?"

Liluetta pointed to a stall at the edge of the main street.

***

The vendor took a yellow fruit I'd never seen before and cut it in half, revealing its juicy flesh. So much juice flowed out when they squeezed the fruit that it only took those two halves to fill a wooden cup to the brim.

I accepted the cup of juice and paid for it. It was just a drink, but it cost almost as much as my entire breakfast this morning. I did have some money to spare thanks to the purple flowers, but it still

seemed a little pricey.

"I've always wanted to try this," Liluetta said.

Since we would need to return the cups, I set my basket down on the ground and sat on a nearby bench to drink. Liluetta placed a handkerchief on the other end of the bench before taking a seat. Yune hesitated for a moment, then settled in between us.

The bench felt a little cramped with the three of us sitting side by side. Yune's wide sleeves brushed against me a few times, which tickled a little bit.

Liluetta took a sip and smiled. "Oh, this is quite good."

It seemed like the juice really won her over. Her water flask had been empty for a while, so she was probably extra thirsty.

"My lady, eating and drinking by the roadside like this..." Yune paused. "Some might say it's improper."

Liluetta shook her head. "Yune, that's such an outdated way of thinking. This stall is designed for people to drink freshly squeezed juice right here, and that's why they've provided benches. That means drinking it here *is* proper."

"You sure know how to spin things your way." Yune looked uneasy. From the way she held her cup in both hands and sat hunched forward a little bit, like she was trying to make herself smaller, she seemed to have some reservations about eating and drinking outside.

Liluetta, on the other hand, looked thrilled. From what she'd said earlier, this had to be her first time drinking juice from a street stall. Her face was practically glowing with excitement. I got the feeling she was doing something that was normally off-limits to her on purpose, just for the fun of it.

"Hey, why is drinking outside such a bad thing?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Excuse me?"

Both of them looked at me in surprise. *Huh? Why?*

"I figured adventurers wouldn't care about things like this, but you really don't even know? Well, I suppose that makes sense," said Liluetta. "A countryside village wouldn't have customs like these."

Yune nodded. "Being around Kiri-o leads to all sorts of

discoveries.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. Were they from a different world than me? I knew they weren’t exactly ordinary, but... Then again, most of the townspeople I knew were adventurers, so maybe Liluetta and Yune were actually the normal ones.

“This might not be a familiar custom for you,” Liluetta explained, “but eating street food like this is considered improper behavior for ladies. We were raised not to do it.”

“Huh? But I’ve seen plenty of female adventurers eating like this.”

“Adventurers might not care about such matters, but there are plenty of people who do. If you’re part of the upper class, and you eat or drink on the street, you would get some *serious* disapproving looks. Even among regular townsfolk, a lot of women would feel self-conscious about it.”

So that’s how it is. My village didn’t have any street vendors, so I never even thought about stuff like this. But now that Liluetta had mentioned it, I realized that I didn’t often see women buying food from street stalls here in town.

“And if you’ve spent time in a sanctuary like Yune has,” Liluetta continued, “you have to follow some really strict rules about manners.”



Yune shuddered like she'd just remembered something unpleasant. I knew about sanctuaries. The village priest used to live in one, and he'd said it was a very strict place. I didn't realize it was strict enough to make someone tremble like that, though.

"Oh, but the gods don't forbid women from eating or drinking in public," said Liluetta. "That's just outdated, rigid thinking from rusty old minds. I can't stand that kind of thing."

"Well, I suppose I've never seen any mention of it in the scriptures, but..." Yune trailed off.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I've never read about anything like that either."

Having to worry about where they could eat or drink seemed really rough for the women in town. It felt unfair. Why couldn't they just get rid of such a strange custom? As I pondered that, I took a sip from my cup.

Wow, this juice is amazing! What is it? I've never had anything like this before. It's sweet and tart at the same time, and the aftertaste is really refreshing.

I passed by this stall all the time, but I always walked past it without ever buying anything. Drinks just didn't fill you up, and boiled water was cheaper anyway.

But I had no idea something this delicious could even exist. This town is incredible.

"Oh my, Kiri-o, have you read the Scriptures of Amana before?" For some reason, Yune sounded like she was teasing me.

"Huh? Yeah, I've read all of it," I told her.

"Excuse me?" Now she looked genuinely shocked.

"It's the goddess's scriptures, right? The village priest let me borrow it. I even copied a simplified version of the text to practice reading and writing."

Yune took a deep breath. "'Mohatezze-Aus, son of the Earth Mother Amana, fell in love with an Innocent. His dearest wish was to always watch over her from where he dwelled in the skies above. Thus, by his command, the skies over his beloved remained clear for all time.'" She paused for a moment, then continued reciting the scriptures from memory.

"'The land withered without rain, and the Innocents suffered from

heat and drought. They pleaded with the Earth Mother for help, and stones rose to form a roof over the beloved Innocent and cast her into shadow. Losing sight of his love, Mohatezze-Aus was overcome with sorrow. His great tears fell from the heavens and watered the land once more.'"

That was from the volume of the scriptures that told of the Innocents, beings created by the Earth Mother, and the guidance they had received. I was pretty sure the story about the god Mohatezze-Aus came from the middle of the book.

As I listened to Yune, I remembered a different story from much later in the scriptures. I couldn't recite it word for word, but I knew the general flow.

"Yalfzag, daughter of the Earth Mother Amana," I began, "bestowed iron and fire, along with the sacred art of smithing, upon an Innocent. But the chosen Innocent disobeyed Yalfzag's wishes and spread the technique throughout the land. The Innocents forged tools in abundance and polluted the water and the earth. With great sadness, the goddess Amana withdrew her blessings and left the world barren."

The Innocents were given knowledge and skills. Sometimes, they imitated or stole them. So they learned to survive without the goddess's protection, but that led to the loss of their innocence.

Eventually, the goddess's creations branched off into separate races—humans, elves, dwarves, halflings, and beastfolk—each gaining the resilience to survive on their own. As they grew stronger, the gods gradually withdrew from the world.

"Wh-What?" Yune spluttered. "He really read them. My lady, he actually read them!"

"Calm down, Yune," said Liluetta in a soothing tone. "Kiri lived in a rural village. There's no way a place like that would have a *complete* set of the scriptures."

"Oh! I see..." Yune seemed to settle down.

Though Yune was taller and older, Liluetta somehow seemed like the more mature one right now.

"Uh, what's going on?" I asked, confused by their conversation.

Yune, no longer flustered, grinned and raised a finger to explain.

"The Scriptures of Amana are incredibly vast, spanning multiple thick books. The collection includes basic volumes that are widely distributed, more specialized ones only read by clergy, and highly advanced theological works that only bishops and other high-ranking figures are permitted to possess. You probably only read the basic volumes."

"Ohhh, that makes sense."

"Yes, yes! That's exactly it! Let's just go with that, shall we?" Yune seemed oddly desperate about this.

I wasn't really sure why, though. Would it really be a problem if I had read all of the scriptures? Maybe there were some secret texts that weren't meant for ordinary people. Well, I didn't have to worry about that, because I'd gotten permission from the village priest to borrow the ones I'd read.

"By the way, what kind of stories are in those other volumes?" I asked out of curiosity.

Yune averted her gaze. "That would be a very specialized discussion, so how about we save it for another time?"

Wait a minute. Didn't Liluetta say something like that before?

***

Kiri, the boy I'd met at the adventurer's guild, really was strange.

He had effortlessly recalled a passage from the scriptures as he sat on the other end of this bench, with Yune between us. It wasn't verbatim—he had simplified the text in a way that made it easier to understand. That proved he had actually read the scriptures and fully grasped their meaning. He might even know more than Yune. The gentle and diligent apprentice cleric studied every day, but I'd heard she tended to fall asleep whenever she read the scriptures. Even now, she struggled to recite the basics from memory.

Most people tended to see adventurers as little more than a band of rogues, and most adventurers deserved that reputation. Heroes worthy of poetry were few and far between. The majority of adventurers were hardly different from common thugs. That man I'd argued with at the adventurer's guild was a prime example.

But Kiri didn’t give off that impression.

To begin with, he looked weak. Even with a spear and armor, the image of him carrying a basket for gathering herbs didn’t exactly inspire fear. At the same time, he was kind enough to share his water with me and educated enough to read and comprehend the Scriptures of Amana. Most importantly, he had a sincere attitude toward his work.

He didn’t seem like an adventurer at all, to be honest. I couldn’t understand why he was adventuring in the first place. Someone like him could surely take on a normal job. Perhaps that would even be better for him.

There was one thing I could say for sure, at least: He seemed like someone I could trust. Following him had taught me a lot. I had made mistakes and learned what I was lacking. His very existence, so unlike the vague, rough-and-tumble image of adventurers I’d had in mind, helped dispel my own biases. Now I knew that not all adventurers were unruly rogues, because there were people like Kiri too.

This party had formed by chance, and I still disliked that rude warrior who had brought us together. But, in hindsight, maybe working with Kiri for my very first adventure was a true stroke of luck for me.

Well, trust and reliability were two different things. He might be trustworthy, but he wasn’t someone the Magnan Trading Company would want to rely on. His skills and age were clearly lacking, and there was no way around that.

Which was a little disappointing, I thought. *Only a little, though.*

“Hmm...” The fruit juice was sweet and tangy, but the moment I remembered my duty, I couldn’t help but make a sour face and sigh. That was *not* something I was looking forward to.

I wanted to go on adventures. I didn’t come here to work for the Magnans, but that was the pretense I had given as my reason for becoming an adventurer. It was also a condition I had to satisfy—a job I had to do.

“Yune, just drink your juice already. We can’t go home until you do,” I chided. “And you’re thirsty, aren’t you?”

"Ugh... Yes." The apprentice cleric clutched her cup with both hands. But instead of moving the cup to her mouth, she brought her face closer to the rim and took a hesitant sip.

Her expression softened in an instant. She was so easy to read and so genuinely expressive. "Wow, it's delicious!" she exclaimed.

"Of course. Drinking it outside doesn't make it taste any worse," I told her. If anything, it tasted even better than I'd expected. Whether that was because we were drinking it outside or because we were just tired and thirsty, I couldn't say.

"This juice is amazing. I had no idea something so good existed." Kiri seemed completely taken with his drink too. He was savoring every drop, as if the contents of his cup were something truly precious.

He was quite the country boy, so he probably hadn't had much experience with drinks meant to be enjoyed for their flavor and not just for quenching thirst. This fruit was grown in the villages surrounding town, so it wasn't particularly rare. But what really mattered was that he liked it.

I studied Kiri's face carefully, but I still didn't think he looked dependable or strong. Sure, he had surprising endurance and knowledge that completely defied my initial impression of him, but that was all. When it came to judging how reliable he was, appearances played a major role.

In that regard, well... Kiri's not just a little lacking. He's completely hopeless.

He was absolutely not the right choice. If I had to pick someone, I would choose an adventurer who seemed strong and competent. That was what anyone would do.

However, Kiri technically had more experience than Yune or me. And right now, he was the only adventurer the two of us knew—our only connection. To fulfill my duty as a member of the Magnan family, I ought to start by using him as a foothold.

But taking advantage of Kiri, when I haven't even been all that useful to him yet, feels a little unfair. Still...

"Hey, Kiri." I turned to look at him. Yune, who was happily drinking her juice with both hands wrapped around her cup, was still

between us.

"Hm? What is it, Liluetta?"

"Would you happen to know anything about the party that discovered a new section of the sewers?"

***

"Why..."

The dimly lit adventurer's guild had a spacious interior with numerous tables where patrons could drink and dine. At one of those tables, a group of adventurers sat facing each other with serious expressions.

For an utterly worthless reason, I added to myself.

"These three, Waine, Sheya, and Chikka, are the adventurers who discovered the new area in the sewers," Kiri said.

The trio consisted of a human male warrior, a human female mage, and a halfling female scout.

"*Why*..."

The three of them had apparently been in the middle of a card game. From the looks of it, they were gambling; each had a stack of silver coins in front of them. Beside each pile of silver sat a cup, and the distinct, heady scent of alcohol wafted through the air.

It wasn't even nighttime yet, but these rogues were already drinking *and* gambling.

"Yo, kiddo. You're back early today. Three cards."

"Welcome back. I fold."

"Looks like you did well, tiny. I can tell just by looking at your face. Call."

One after another, the three adventurers greeted Kiri while continuing their game.

I glanced at the table. It was entirely trivial, something I really could *not* have cared less about, but the mage seemed to be in the lead, followed by the scout. Only three silver coins remained in front of the warrior, meaning he had just gone all in.

With the bets set, the warrior and scout revealed their hands.

"Damn it! Lost again!" The tall warrior with dark brown hair and a

single streak of white at the front clutched his head in frustration.

Why does he look familiar... Ah.

It was the same rude man I had argued with when we'd first met at this very establishment.

"*Why* does it have to be *this* guy?!" I yelled.

***

"Oh ho, I see, I see! So the little ladies here wanna ask us some questions?"

"That's right. The discovery of the new section of the sewers has caused quite a stir in the merchant's guild. They're saying it's a groundbreaking find that will help the town flourish even more, and the adventurers responsible are heroes to be praised. I had no idea the first person we met here was the one behind such a feat. Please forgive our earlier rude remarks."

"Ha ha ha, no worries, no worries! So that's how it is, huh? Well, lemme tell ya, exploring those sewers was no easy task!" The warrior roared with laughter, oblivious to how blatantly forced and monotone Yune's flattery was.

Since the table they had been using earlier was too small for six people, the trio had moved to a larger one to accommodate us. We sat in a different order this time, with Yune, me, and Kiri on one side of the table. Across from us, from left to right, were the warrior, the mage, and the scout. If I remembered correctly from Kiri's introduction, their names were Waine, Sheya, and Chikka.

Yune and Waine, who were seated directly across from each other, were leading the conversation. As a member of the Magnan family, I should have taken charge. But speaking with that man was out of the question for me. I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid slipping into an argument with him, so I left it to Yune.



"My lady and I heard about your discovery, and it made us think, 'Wow, adventurers are incredible! So cool!' That's why we came to this establishment in the first place. So, we were wondering if you could share some stories about your adventure in the sewers."

"Ohh, sure, sure! What do you wanna hear about? I bet it's the cave gators, huh? Those bastards sneak up on you from the murky water, and you don't even realize they're there until they're already leaping at you." Despite having just lost a bet moments ago, Waine was already grinning and chatting away. He seemed to have forgotten all about it. I had suspected it before, but now I was certain: He was not a very bright man.

Meanwhile, the mage sitting in the center of the group was, well, unsettling. Ever since she had taken her seat, she hadn't uttered a single word. She sat upright with perfect posture and silently sipped her drink. I could tell it was a strong distilled spirit from the sharp scent wafting through the air, yet her expression remained completely unchanged. That only made her more unnerving.

And then there was the third adventurer. The small scout sitting across from Kiri rested her chin on her hand and watched Yune and me with an amused expression. Her lips curled into a knowing smirk, and her sharp gaze made me feel as if our every movement were under scrutiny. I had heard that halflings possessed keener senses than humans, but having all of that awareness directed at us was an uncomfortable experience.

Meanwhile, Kiri sat stiffly beside me. I could tell he was uneasy, and the look on his face clearly said, *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.*

Well, whether I liked these three or not, they were indeed the adventurers who had discovered the new section of the sewers. Kiri had done nothing wrong by introducing us to them, so he had no reason to feel guilty.

With a quiet *clunk*, someone set a wooden cup down on the table. "The sewer map is off-limits." It was Sheya, the mage. Though she spoke in a calm tone, her words carried enough weight to silence even the warrior's loud chatter.

I had to admit, I was impressed. "Why?" I asked.

It was the first thing I said since we had all sat down. Or, rather, the question had just slipped out. I would need to reflect on that later. Asking why was just like admitting, "Yes, that's exactly what we're after." I had allowed myself to be influenced by their casual demeanor and ended up letting my guard down.

"We already sold it to the lord," replied the halfling scout, Chikka. She lifted her chin from her hand with a weary sigh.

I turned my attention from Sheya to her neighbor. Chikka's answer made sense, and from a business perspective, it was something I had to respect.

"To be precise, we sold the map to the guild leader first," she clarified. "If Barque handled it properly, it should've made its way to the lord already. So right now, the only ones who know the full map of the new sewer area are the lord, Barque, and us, the ones who actually explored it. That's why we were able to sell it for such a high price. Leaking that information and devaluing the map wouldn't just hurt us. It'd ruin the guild's reputation too. I'd rather not get knocked flat by Barque's iron fist over something that stupid."

Hmm. The reasoning was a bit rough, but I had to admit that they seemed to understand the importance of confidentiality. Even among adventurers, there were those who conducted themselves with grace.

I decided to test the waters. "What if we offered to pay for it?"

"We'd still refuse, of course," Chikka replied flatly. "For an adventurer, trust is everything. Without it, you have no one to rely on, and no one will rely on you when it really counts. If you're that desperate, go hire some other adventurers to explore it for you. Though I doubt you'll be able to use the job board in this guild."

"I see," I told her. "That was a good conversation. Thank you."

I chuckled, unable to help myself. To my surprise, the common sense of merchants seemed to apply to the adventurer's guild as well. Adventurers upheld their confidentiality more than I had expected, and the guild wouldn't accept requests that undermined the interests of their clients. Even if I managed to find an adventurer outside the guild, it was far too late for hiring someone else to explore the sewers.

"Uh, what was so good about that conversation?" Kiri asked.

Well, I supposed that question was to be expected. After all, I hadn't obtained a map of the sewers. He was a bright boy, but a country bumpkin wouldn't be able to grasp the implications of what we had discussed.

"If you know the general location of the newly discovered sewer section, it could lead to a major business opportunity," I explained. "For example, if you buy up land in the area before anyone else found out about it, the price would skyrocket in just a few days."

Kiri looked surprised. "Buy land? The ground has a price?"

Oh. That's where he's starting from? Kiri really was ignorant of the ways of the world.

"Well, it's too late for that. But if you know which area is about to become more active, there are still ways to get ahead of the competition. Except it looks like that's not possible this time. Too bad." I shrugged.

"You don't seem *that* disappointed," Chikka remarked, watching me closely. She was sharp.

I *would* have been disappointed if the sewer map had been easy to obtain. It would have meant that these adventurers lacked basic trustworthiness and were unfit to do business with. But Sheya and Chikka, at least, seemed like people worth talking to. The only one who was completely lost, with his eyes darting around in confusion, was the warrior.

"Well, I've got a good idea of why you're here now. Looks like the sea salt guild is looking to expand its business," Chikka ventured.

"Huh?" Yune blurted.

I was startled too. Not as much as Yune was—it wasn't as though we had been keeping it a secret—but I might have let it show on my face a little.

"How did you know that we came from the sea salt guild?" Yune tilted her head slightly as she asked.

As a halfling, Chikka was even smaller than Kiri. Still, she gave a smug smile and rested her chin on her hand again. "I asked Kiri. You're Liluetta Magnan, aren't you? There's no one in this town who doesn't know the name Magnan."

"Wait, I didn't say— Ow!" Kiri started to speak but was abruptly cut off. Judging by the way he flinched, someone must have kicked him under the table.

I pressed my thumb against my lips in thought. Kiri hadn't told them our names, which meant they had either picked up rumors or taken the trouble to investigate us.

How diligent. It proves that, in the eyes of the adventurers in this guild, we stand out as something unusual.

Still, I was a little disappointed by the clumsy way she had tried to hide the truth. When you got someone as honest as Kiri involved, a lie like that was bound to be exposed immediately. Did adventurers really not understand something so simple?

"I see," I murmured under my breath.

Then I caught sight of Chikka's smug grin and understood. That lie was never meant to hold up in the first place. She hadn't been trying to test us. She'd been watching *Kiri's* reaction. If I had used a false name, his response would have been different.

Well, it wasn't as though I had anything to hide or feel guilty about. If they wanted to play these little games, they could go right ahead.

"Yes, my name is Liluetta Magnan. I am the granddaughter of the sea salt guild's leader," I stated with a sigh. If they wanted to test me, that was fine. Indulging them, however, was tedious. "But for now, I consider myself nothing more than a rookie adventurer. I'd be delighted if you veterans here would be willing to get along with me."

"There are some unpleasant rumors about the Magnans, you know," Chikka began.

Oh, here we go.

"They say the leader of the sea salt guild plants his children and grandchildren into various guilds and trading companies, forcing them into executive positions. That way, he can strong-arm those groups into signing favorable contracts. Or, if the opportunity arises, he can take over entirely. Not that I put much stock in gossip," she finished with a smirk.

"Oh, indeed," I said coolly. "I'm sure you pay more attention to a

passing sea breeze."

What a nuisance baseless rumors could be. That was obviously the kind of slander spread by some jealous little merchant, resentful of the Magnan family's success.

Still, I couldn't just brush it off. Not here. After all, Kiri was sitting right beside me. He was a country boy, so he didn't seem to fully grasp what was being said. But he was also my party member. Even though our arrangement was only temporary, I still didn't want him thinking my family was up to anything shady.

"When a Magnan child turns twelve and is old enough to register with a guild, they are sent to train with other guilds," I explained. "The idea is, rather than coddling us in the sea salt guild, it's better for us to do grunt work elsewhere and develop real skills."

From what I'd heard, this practice was fairly common overseas. It taught children the harsh realities of the world, built connections with different merchant houses, and provided opportunities to learn new business strategies. This approach had seemed reasonable and beneficial to me, when I had first learned about it. Of course, this meant the Magnan children had to undergo strict training. We couldn't afford to embarrass ourselves when we worked outside the family guild.

"Well, my grandfather's heir is an incredibly competent eldest son, and his own son is just as insufferably brilliant. Since the line of succession has already been decided, returning to the family trade means never rising to the top. So if a Magnan secures a good position at their assigned guild, they often just stay there."

I left out the fact that this system mainly applied to the men of the family; working outside the sea salt guild was much rarer for women. It wasn't particularly relevant, and mentioning it would only invite more questions about myself. I had no interest in dealing with *that* at the moment.

"For example, I have an older cousin who was sent to the transport guild, and yes, he's now a high-ranking officer there. He's competent, of course, but I won't deny that the sea salt guild's influence helped him secure that role. As a result, the two guilds have become much closer business partners. But from my

perspective as a Magnan, this actually looks like the opposite of what you're saying. The way I see it, the transport guild has taken my cousin hostage to ensure the sea salt guild keeps working with them for years to come."

Truth be told, I didn't have much interest in this kind of discussion. My cousin could use his position however he liked. All that mattered was that both guilds benefited from the arrangement.

Baseless rumors were just that: rumors. The Magnan family was running its business with legitimate practices.

"I see. I'm no expert in the world of merchants, but I get what you're saying. So? That means the next step is the adventurer's guild?" Chikka asked.

"That's right." I nodded without hesitation. We weren't doing anything wrong, so there was no reason to hide. "The sea salt guild frequently hires adventurers for exterminating troublesome monsters near the salt pans, for guarding caravans on the way to the capital, and for handling various other minor issues. But adventurers vary in skill, don't they? When the time comes, I want to know who the skilled fighters are—who the Magnan family can rely on and trust."

"Oh? So if someone catches your eye, they might receive direct requests from the Magnan family? That's something worth aiming for."

"Indeed. Naturally, I have high expectations for you three. If you're friends with Kiri, you must at least be trustworthy. Even if your personalities are awful."

The warrior had made a terrible first impression, Chikka had been antagonistic from the start, and Sheya's silence made her unsettling. I did *not* hold them in high esteem at the moment, so that last part was meant as a slight jab. But instead of getting offended, all three of them just grinned.

So they're aware of their bad personalities. In that case, there's no helping them.

"And thanks to the new sewer area you discovered," I continued, "this town is going to start transforming into a proper city. In a few years, Hiriyenka might even be comparable to Elmflaren, the neighboring metropolis."

Chikka raised an eyebrow at my words, while the warrior, who had long since been left behind in the conversation, spat out his drink. The only one who remained composed was Sheya. She seemed to be the only one among them who had realized the true magnitude of the situation.

Then again, maybe the real surprise was that even one person understood. After all, a mere sewer expansion wouldn't turn a town into a city. No one could be expected to leap to such a conclusion based on that information alone.

But this was just the beginning. The areas with underground sewer access were prime real estate in Hiriyenka, and they had been at full capacity for some time. This discovery would change everything. More of that property would become available, and large-scale construction projects would soon follow. With people and goods flooding in, everything the current lord had been carefully laying the groundwork for over the years would begin to take shape at last.

And the ones who had triggered this entire sequence of events were none other than the three adventurers sitting across from me.

"Your discovery will undoubtedly lead to Hiriyenka's development. That achievement will bring you prestige. It will also make it easier for me to introduce you to the Magnan family."

Yes, this was getting interesting. This was so unexpected, so unlike the stories I had heard before, that I nearly laughed out loud. Adventurers weren't just ruffians. They were a chaotic mix of specialists from all walks of life, like a witch's cauldron brimming with all sorts of ingredients.

"I came to the adventurer's guild as a merchant," I said.

It might have started as mere pretense, but I was beginning to take that role seriously. What Yune had said earlier to flatter the warrior—how the discovery of the new sewer area had drawn us to the adventurer's guild—wasn't a lie. That was indeed my catalyst for becoming an adventurer, despite the opposition I had faced from those around me.

There was business potential in the adventurer's guild. That justification had led me here, so I supposed I owed these three my

gratitude. Whether they were aware of that was irrelevant. Their party had accomplished something significant, and the changes they had set in motion would have a profound impact on the people of this town. Including, of course, the Magnan family.

"Adventurers sometimes uncover major business opportunities. And the ones who hear about them first are adventurers themselves, aren't they?"

Selecting trustworthy adventurers and obtaining information that could lead to lucrative deals—that was my role as a Magnan.

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A quiet voice rose up. "So basically..."

What's his name again? In the short time since I'd first learned the warrior's name, it had already faded from my memory.

With a solemn expression, he covered his mouth with his hand as if he had just realized something important. Something profound. "From now on," he said, "people are gonna start calling us the Three Sewer Adventurers or something like that, huh?"

Well... As far as titles go, that really does not sound cool.

"You might be right. Ugh, that's awful." Chikka clutched her head in both hands.

"The worst," Sheya muttered bitterly under her breath.

The Three Sewer Adventurers. When you really thought about it, it sounded like a name that would make people instinctively sniff the air around them. That image suited the warrior well enough, but it was a bit unfortunate for the women.

"Nicknames and titles are usually something like So-and-So the Slayer or the Pathfinders of Some Ancient Ruins, right? Why do we have to get stuck with something weird when we didn't even do anything bad?" the warrior griped.

"Old Badger called himself the Yellow-Bellied, though," Kiri countered.

"The old man's different. He *chose* to call himself that."

It was the first time I had heard that name. "Yellow-Bellied" sounded outright terrible. And if that guy had willingly embraced

such a title, he was clearly a weirdo and not someone worth inquiring about. I decided to put it out of my mind.

Honestly, this whole conversation was a waste of time. I spoke up again to move things along. "Anyway, that's all there is to my situation. I don't intend to do anything underhanded. In fact, as both a Magnan and a new adventurer, I'd like to build a good relationship with the people here. Of course, that includes all of you. I hope that's clear."

I did not obtain a detailed map of the new sewer area, and that was unfortunate. But if the reason was truly because these adventurers actually understood discretion, then perhaps they were more reliable business partners than I had initially assumed. For today, that would be enough.

If we continued to linger, the conversation would just keep revolving around me. Frankly, I wanted to avoid that. At the end of the day, Magnan-related matters were family business. Even though there was nothing particularly damaging about people knowing, being interrogated down to the last detail was not pleasant.

"I got a pretty good idea of where you stand. Sorry for grilling you like that. Oh, right. As an apology, why don't I give our adorable little newbie adventurer a bit of advice?" Chikka flashed an amused smirk, as if indulging in one last bit of entertainment. "As you know, there are all sorts of adventurers out there. So, make sure you choose your party members wisely, *rich girl*."

Ah. That. A valuable piece of advice, indeed. Mages and healers were rare, and those who became adventurers were even rarer. So I had assumed forming or joining a party would be easy. My plan had been to find any decent party, go on normal adventures together for a while, and gradually get to know how this adventurer's guild worked. But I hadn't realized I'd been treading on dangerous ground since my very first step.

"Thank you. I'll do that." I accepted the advice with gratitude and stood up. A glance out the window showed that the sun was beginning to set. It was still relatively early, but heading home now and making it back to the estate before dark would be best. "Kiri, thanks for introducing me to these people today. See you tomorrow."

"Oh, and thank you all as well!" Yune said, bowing her head as she stood up. "Your advice was really helpful!"

I followed her lead and bowed too. Respect was important. It didn't cost anything, so it was worth offering. These three seemed rather eccentric, but aside from Kiri, they were the only adventurers we knew. That made them valuable connections.

"Oh, so you two still live at home?" the warrior asked. "That Mag... Uh, whatever it is, the salt-making place, that's by the sea, right? Bit of a trek. Better get back before dark."

It was gentlemanly advice, which took me by surprise. But the fact that he didn't even know *Magnan* was absolutely baffling.

"Be careful," Sheya said. Since she had barely said anything throughout our meeting, I had thought she was creepy. But maybe she was just the quiet type.

"See you both tomorrow!" Kiri waved at us with a smile.

I wondered what he was thinking after hearing all of that. How did he feel about my background, now that he knew about it? The question lingered in my mind for a moment, but I reminded myself that I could ask him tomorrow. This wasn't the time or place for that conversation.

I gave him a small wave in return and walked away with Yune. Since he had said "see you tomorrow," I could wait until then.

"Oh. Kiri, here," Sheya said.

As we were leaving, her voice made me glance back over my shoulder. I saw Kiri reach across the table to take a thick book from her. The cost of all that parchment alone would make it quite expensive.

I caught a glimpse of the cover and the large title written on it: *A Beginner's Guide to Magic*.

"Wha...?!" I spun on my heel without thinking.

Yune gasped in surprise and said something, but her words didn't register in my mind.

I rushed back to the table and pointed at the book in Kiri's hands. "What is *that* supposed to be?!"

That quick glimpse had given me a bad feeling, but I wasn't sure until I confirmed I hadn't misread the cover of the book. I knew,

without a doubt, that this was a textbook for learning magic. An emotion I couldn't quite understand welled up in my chest and twisted into something close to panic.

"What do you mean?" Kiri asked, looking up at me from his seat. He was still holding the thick book in both hands. "That detection spell seemed really useful, so I thought I'd learn it."

He said it so casually, without any hidden intentions. He wasn't being defiant, nor did he seem to think he'd done anything wrong. All of that only made it harder for me to accept.

I slammed my hands on the table. "Th-That's what *I'm* here for!"

But Kiri only tilted his head. "You and Yune are only in a temporary party with me, right? You'll both be gone soon."

I tried to say something, but the words caught in my throat. For the first time today, I found myself at a loss. He was right. We had only teamed up by chance because of that rude warrior and formed a temporary party with a set time limit. Both sides had agreed to it from the beginning. Of course, we would eventually leave. If Kiri needed detection, it made perfect sense for him to learn it himself.

But still... It's just too...

I shook off those thoughts. "M-Magia requires deep knowledge and years of training! It's not something you can just pick up overnight. And even with endless training, there are people who will *never* be able to use it!"

"Oh, really?" Kiri frowned.

So he doesn't even know magia might be impossible for him, no matter how hard he tries?

Ah, there was that troubled expression. His eyebrows drooped, and he lowered his gaze to the thick book in his hands. I had just told him that the noble and profound art of magia might be beyond his reach. His only reaction was mild disappointment, as if he'd been told a convenient tool might not be available.

How perplexing. Does he even understand what magia is?

"Without talent and aptitude, one cannot use magic," Sheya said. Her voice was quiet, yet strangely compelling. "But only those who study magic can use it."

Of course. That was obvious. And yet, I couldn't let it go. *Magia*

was power. It was a high and noble discipline. Even as a Magnan, I had struggled just to earn the right to study it.

And now, some ordinary person, someone who had *nothing*, thought he could just learn it because he *wanted* to?

"Magia is dangerous!" I insisted.

"I will supervise," Sheya replied.

"It costs money! That book isn't cheap!"

"My old copy. Books exist for those who need them."

"And you think *he* has the right to learn such a noble art?!"

"I have no interest in a mage's nonsense."

Despite being a mage herself, she had just dismissed all mages with that single, scathing remark. And as I looked at her again—truly *looked*—I finally noticed something that should have been obvious at a glance.

She was breathtakingly beautiful.

How had I not noticed until now? Her face was stunning—so much so that I was momentarily shocked by the realization. But that beauty was now laced with stern anger as she turned to face me for the first time today.

Ah, no. I was wrong. I hadn't failed to see her. This woman had simply held no interest in me, not even enough to spare a glance, before this moment. She had never once looked at me until now.

"You annoy me," she said.

A shiver ran down my spine. The pressure was immense. I was overwhelmed by the absolute force of it, and pure instinct made me take two steps back. It wasn't just her gaze or her voice. If that were all, I would not have been shaken so easily.

What sent fear coursing through me was something only a mage could recognize. She was sitting perfectly still, yet she was gathering a huge amount of magical energy and directing it straight at me.

The sheer density and refinement of her magic, the speed at which it surged and flowed through her... Even though she wasn't casting a spell, I could feel the difference in power between us in an instant. My body froze, and I could not speak. I knew, at the core of my being, that she was far, far beyond me.

"Sheya, stop that," Chikka scolded.

Halflings had little magic power of their own, but apparently their heightened senses made them attuned to shifts in mana.

After just those few words, the pressure vanished as if it had never been there. The beautiful mage lowered her gaze as if nothing had happened at all.

As if it had been a cruel joke, I thought bitterly. *The staggering pressure of what she just unleashed... Is that something she can summon on a whim?*

"Um, is learning magic that big of a deal?" Kiri asked. There was some hesitation in his voice, but I knew he didn't really understand what had just happened.

And... He didn't ask me. He asked Sheya*.*

Her elegant features turned into a slight frown as she considered her response. "It is and it isn't." She paused for a few beats, then spoke again. "Mastering it is difficult. Beyond that, there's nothing you need to worry about."

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I retreated to my room the moment I arrived at the Magnan estate.

"What am I *doing*?"

Herb gathering had been a success, and I'd gotten the chance to speak with the adventurers from the sewers. I had plenty to report. And yet, I had no desire to speak to anyone.

"Argh, seriously?!" I was well aware that I was of two minds, contradicting myself.

Becoming an adventurer was my dream. I believed that, as an adventurer, I could go anywhere. There were so many beautiful sights I had yet to see, and the thought of it always made my heart race. And I thought that if I could use magia, I could become an adventurer. That was why I had decided to learn it.

"Magia is a noble art."

My instructor had taught me that. Only the chosen were permitted to study magia, and only the special were able to wield its powers. That meant *I* was chosen. I was special. The Magnan name

and wealth had secured me a teacher, *and* I had the talent and aptitude.

But wasn't that just something I was told?

This supposedly noble art had been nothing more than a tool for me, a means to become an adventurer. I had studied, trained, and gained proficiency in magia for that sole purpose. The process had been rigorous and exhausting, requiring great effort, but whether it was noble had never mattered to me.

"A mage's nonsense."

She was right. Power was power. Knowledge was knowledge. Skill was skill. If an ordinary person were to wield magic, would that negate these truths? In the hands of someone who wasn't special, someone who wasn't chosen, would we no longer call it magia?

I just wanted to be an adventurer.

For a member of the Magnan family, getting permission to become an adventurer was nothing short of a miracle. That had only been possible for me because of those three adventurers who had explored the sewers and found the new area.

Judging by their reactions, perhaps such a discovery was insignificant to adventurers. But to the townspeople, it was a treasure worth more than silver and gold. Of course, it was the same for the Magnan family. I had used that as leverage to convince those who opposed me—to force my way into becoming an adventurer.

I had planned for this. I had *worked* for this. And I had luck on my side.

"I went through so much. And yet..." A bubbling, directionless anger began to rise within me. Even I could tell it was irrational. But once it surfaced, there was no stopping it.

Magia doesn't matter. It's just a skill, a tool, nothing more.

The words that had slipped from my mouth in the guild were nothing but empty rhetoric. No wonder Sheya had gotten angry. What I'd said was just an excuse. My true, deepest feelings were something else entirely.

"I never thought it would feel this sad." That small, fragile whisper was so faint that I almost doubted it had come from my own lips.

I had demonstrated a detection spell to find a mana-rich area known as a mana pool. That must have seemed incredibly useful to Kiri, which was fine. Good, even. Magia was all-powerful, after all. I had never expected something as simple as detection to bring someone so much joy, but Kiri was such a purehearted person. To him, it must have seemed like something truly amazing.

But when I saw him accepting that beginner's spellbook, when I realized he was going to learn magia, I understood.

All he wants is magia. He doesn't need me.

Chapter 5: Like a Beast

Magic is not recommended.
Magic is dangerous.
Magic requires years of training.
Magic demands both talent and aptitude.
Magic is a noble art.

After hearing all of that, wanting to learn magic started to feel wrong.

"Did she get mad because it *is* wrong?" I murmured while staring at the ceiling. I'd just woken up on my straw bed—thoughts like these had even crept into my dreams.

It was still early morning, and the sun hadn't fully risen yet. My body ached from the past few days of hiking and training, and I wanted nothing more than to stay still. But thanks to that dream, sleep had completely left me.

"Magic... Magia, huh?"

I would be lying if I said I wasn't fascinated by the powerful spells in the stories I'd read about legendary heroes. But the spell I wanted to use more than anything was detection, because I wanted to find all the mana pools Old Badger had told me about. Except...

I turned my head without getting up. Sheya's magic book for beginners sat on a thick pile of straw. I had carefully placed it there to make sure it wouldn't get dirty from the stable floor. The book was a hefty stack of parchment, so heavy that I felt like just picking it up would wear me out.

"It's thick," I grumbled.

The detection spell had seemed simple, but I would have to read that entire book and undergo a lot of training just to use it. Would that be easier than just searching for mana pools on foot? Leaving town for long periods of time meant running into monsters, and that was risky. Learning magic still seemed like the safer option.

Then I thought about Liluetta and Sheya arguing yesterday. If learning magic was going to cause that kind of fight, maybe it was better to just give up. Sheya hadn't seemed all that enthusiastic about it when I'd asked her to teach me, anyway.

I let out a low groan and sat up. My mind was swirling with thoughts, and it didn't seem like I'd be able to fall back asleep. I could go to the guild, but the only food they would have this early was either raw vegetables or stale bread. Raw vegetables were fine, but I wasn't in the mood for them right now.

I did the only thing I felt like doing and leaned back against the wall. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the magic book. I thought about flipping through it since I had nothing better to do, but I just couldn't muster the energy to lift something that heavy right now.

Why had Liluetta been so against it? Sheya had told me not to worry, but I felt like I shouldn't try reading the book without figuring that out first. There had to be a reason—a reason strong enough to make Liluetta so angry.

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"Basically, the young lady wanted you to ask her to stay," Yune explained matter-of-factly.

Wait, what? I pressed a hand to my forehead, trying to steady myself against the dizziness creeping in.

"Uh, but you two *are* planning to join a different party eventually, right?" I asked, still trying to process what she'd just said.

"Yes," Yune confirmed with a nod. "But that's beside the point. She still wanted you to ask her not to go."

We were in a corner of the armorer's shop next to the adventurer's guild. Yune had said there was something she wanted to buy, and she'd asked me to come along and give my opinion.

Then she hits me with this nonsense the moment we arrive. Liluetta's still waiting back at the guild...

"Well, we haven't exactly been that helpful, have we?" Yune whispered. "If anything, we've probably been holding you back.

Wouldn't it feel much better to leave a party knowing someone *wants* you to stay, rather than thinking they're secretly relieved to see you go?"

"That logic is kind of messed up." I leaned away from Yune a little. The sheer selfishness of what she had just said was throwing me off. If they were going to leave anyway, what difference did asking Liluetta to stay make? Honestly, I should've just started reading the magic book instead of worrying so much.

But I could kind of see her point too. If the roles were reversed, maybe I would've felt the same way.

I decided to tell the truth. "For the record, I don't want you two to leave anytime soon. If something dangerous happens, I won't be able to protect you. That really scares me. But I have a lot of fun when the three of us are together."

At first, I had thought of dealing with Liluetta and Yune as a hassle. On our very first day, when we had to turn back because of Liluetta's shoes, I had no idea if this was even going to work out. But both girls took things more seriously than I expected.

When I told Liluetta she needed better shoes, she bought them. When both of them realized they needed canteens, they made sure to get them. They did their best to keep up with me on every hike up and down the mountain, even though it meant being drenched in sweat every day.

Besides, we found the mana pool thanks to Liluetta. And the fruit juice we shared was a brand-new discovery for me. It was one of the best things I'd ever tasted. Most importantly, Liluetta and Yune were the first friends around my age I made in this town.

"Oh dear. That was..." Yune pressed a hand to her chest and looked away. "Unexpectedly heart fluttering," she murmured.

Does her chest hurt? I wondered. *She's probably exhausted. If she isn't feeling well, maybe I shouldn't push her too hard today.*

"W-Well, for what it's worth," she continued, "if both you and the young lady are okay with it, I wouldn't mind adventuring together for a while longer."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"Really."

That was unexpected. Joining a stronger party of experienced adventurers was definitely way better for Liluetta and Yune, compared to staying with me. That was exactly why I had no right to stop them if they decided to leave. If I held them back, I would only be getting in their way.

"The truth is," Yune began, "Master Magnan, the young lady's grandfather, assigned me the duty of protecting her. So, ideally, I'd like to stick to low-risk, manageable adventures."

Ah, that made sense. If that was her position, then staying in my party was a good idea after all. The only thing we were doing was gathering herbs, which wasn't very dangerous.

Now that I thought about it, Yune didn't speak up as much as Liluetta did. But back when Liluetta and Waine were arguing, Yune had actually agreed with Waine's suggestion to go with me. Looking back at it now, maybe that whole situation had been convenient for her.

"As far as I'm concerned," she continued, "I'd really like for you to convince the young lady to stay. She won't listen if I'm the one who says it..."

Yune ended on a slightly pitiful note. But if she couldn't convince Liluetta, I wasn't sure I could either. Still, maybe it was worth trying.

Yesterday, Liluetta had said her goal was to connect with reliable and skilled adventurers she could trust. That didn't necessarily mean she had to go on dangerous adventures herself. In fact, now that I had introduced her to Waine, Sheya, and Chikka, hadn't she already achieved her goal? If I convinced her to stay, and both Liluetta and Yune ended up staying in my party for a while, then... Yeah. That would be fine. It wouldn't cause any problems for them at all.

I still felt a bit anxious, but I decided to give it a shot. "All right. I'll do what I can. I'll talk to her when we get back."

As soon as I said that, Yune's face lit up. It seemed like she actually did want to stay in my party. I really wasn't all that confident about convincing Liluetta, though.

We left the armorer's shop without buying anything and headed back to the adventurer's guild. I walked with my arms crossed and wondered what in the world I should do.

How should I even go about convincing her? Can I make a case about party composition? Well, you don't really need three people to gather herbs. Having two rare magic users in the group just for that probably seemed like a waste to other adventurers.

What about financially? Right now, we were making good money thanks to the herbs from the mana-rich spots. But gathering herbs didn't bring in that much coin most of the time. If Liluetta and Yune wanted to make the most of their abilities, they'd be better off joining a stronger party. Liluetta might not care too much about money since she came from a wealthy family, but earning more was always better.

Then there was the matter of improving our skills. If I was going to study magic, it would be great to have Liluetta around so I could ask her questions. But she was against me learning magic in the first place, and I didn't think there was much else I could teach her in return.

The more I thought about it, the clearer reality became: I had no real argument here. To make things worse, there was what happened yesterday. Liluetta had barely even looked at me this morning, before Yune and I went to the armorer's. She was probably *still* furious.

The moment I opened the door to the adventurer's guild, I heard someone shouting in anger.

"Never speak to me again, you insolent fool!"

***

"I was invited to join a party," Liluetta explained, in response to Yune hesitantly asking what had happened. Her voice was sharp, and her already irritated expression twisted further. Then she crossed her arms and puffed up her cheeks in frustration.

Even after all that, her posture was straight, and she sat with perfect form in her chair. She was furious, but she still carried herself with grace.

So this is what having a good upbringing looks like... I couldn't help but feel a bit impressed.

When I'd first heard Liluetta's outburst from the entrance, I'd thought, *Is it Waine again?* But as I looked around, I realized she had been yelling at a pair of adventurers.

"Invited by those two?" I asked.

I had never talked to them, but I had seen them before. They were definitely more experienced than me but still young enough to be newcomers themselves. Both were equipped with swords and armor, meaning they were vanguard fighters.

The two of them looked startled, like they were about to say something before Liluetta's furious expression or the jeers from the other adventurers in the guild intimidated them into staying silent. With awkward, defeated expressions, they turned and left.

I saw them around here all the time. Running into them was going to be *really* uncomfortable from now on.

"Those men, huh? But isn't that an honor?" Yune, now sitting beside me, tilted her head in confusion. She usually sat next to Liluetta, but this time she'd clearly been driven away by the overpowering force of Liluetta's anger.

Being invited to join a party meant that someone recognized your abilities and wanted you on their team. Whether you accepted was a separate issue, but the invitation itself was a good thing. At the very least, it wasn't something people usually got mad about.

"They were only after the Magnan name," Liluetta said with a scowl. Her voice was terrifying too. "First they just said they wanted us in their party, so I listened to what they had to say. But something about it seemed off, so I tested them a little. The moment I pressed them, it became painfully obvious that they were expecting my family name to bring them better gear and high-paying jobs." She huffed, her face dark with irritation. "How infuriating."

"Ahhh, I see." Yune nodded.

Liluetta clicked her tongue. "I suppose they overheard our conversation yesterday. That scout's warning was useful after all."

I didn't really want to know every single detail, but at least it sounded like Chikka's advice had come in handy. I sighed as I glanced between Liluetta, who was still seething, and Yune, who

looked troubled. Apparently, the Magnan name was extremely attractive to adventurers. Being from a wealthy family seemed to come with its own set of headaches.

"They were both warriors, right?" I asked, trying to steer the conversation somewhere neutral. "So they probably did want someone who could use magic."

Liluetta's gaze, sharp and piercing, snapped toward me. "What? Are you saying I should leave and go join *their* party?"

"I didn't say that." I placed a hand over my forehead to partly cover my eyes and escape Liluetta's line of sight. This was bad. I had to be careful about what I said next.

"Fine," she said. "It's not fair to take it out on you, anyway."

Not fair, she says...

Liluetta turned away with another huff. She was obviously not happy with the situation, and I could tell she was sulking because of it.

"Anyway, did you finish your shopping? What did you buy?" she asked.

Yune shook her head. "Well, I looked around, but I still couldn't decide."

"I see. In that case, let's go. If we waste time, we'll just get back late again." Without waiting for a response, Liluetta stood up, turned on her heel, and strode out of the guild.

Yune and I exchanged glances. I shook my head.

Now's not the time.

***

As we walked through town, passed through the gates, and left the main road to head toward the base of the Sherzon Hills—or rather, Sherzon Mountain—the three of us barely talked. Even though we walked side by side the whole way, no one made an effort to fill the silence.

To be honest, it was awkward. Liluetta was clearly irritated, Yune was visibly nervous, and even the gate guards gave us questioning looks. Everything felt like it was ten times harder than it needed to

be.

But in that long, wordless stretch, a question started to form in my mind.

"Let's switch to formation here," I suggested, because the trail would narrow once we entered the mountain paths. "Same as yesterday. I'll take the front, Liluetta stays in the middle, and Yune takes the rear."

"Got it," Liluetta responded briskly.

"Understood," said Yune.

The two of them moved into position as instructed. This kind of exchange was easy enough. But since we couldn't walk side by side anymore, conversation died out completely. That silence really bothered me.

I decided to try asking the question that had been on my mind. "Liluetta, did you become an adventurer just for your family's sake?"

I'd been thinking about it while we walked. Someone from a wealthy family like Liluetta wasn't struggling to make a living. She didn't *need* to go adventuring every day. If she didn't feel up to it, she could take a break whenever she wanted.

But here she was, setting out again without hesitation, even after getting so angry earlier and dealing with those guys who wanted to use her for her name—even though she had said the repeated mountain treks were exhausting just yesterday. And today, her mood had to be worse than ever.

After a pause, she asked, "Why?"

"Because you're serious about this," I replied.

If I had to sum up the strange feeling I'd been getting, that was it. She studied herbs before our outings. She listened to advice and actually followed it. Even when she was frustrated, she still prepared and set out for another day of adventuring. And just now, when I gave instructions, she responded right away and did exactly as I said. Liluetta was a very serious person.

That was why I thought becoming an adventurer was so strange for someone like her.

"What kind of answer is that? That doesn't explain anything," Liluetta said, unimpressed.

"Uh, sorry."

"Besides, even if I had another reason, it wouldn't concern you." And just like that, she shut down the conversation. She was still in a bad mood, no doubt about it.

We continued making our way up the rough mountain path, keeping an eye on our surroundings. There was no need to search for herbs on the way since we planned to gather them at the mana pool, but I still wasn't as skilled at being vigilant as Old Badger. Plus, trying to hold a conversation while staying alert made for some awkward pauses.

"Adventurers are just a no-good bunch of scoundrels," I said, recalling something I'd heard before. Just then, I could've sworn I heard a raspy chuckle in the back of my mind.

I started counting on my fingers as I listed off what had stuck with me. "Let's see. There's the starry-eyed idiot chasing dreams of becoming a hero. The idiot who'll do anything to get out of an honest day's work. The idiot who's too useless to fit in anywhere else. The idiot treasure hunter gambling on striking it rich. And the idiot who just doesn't think at all. I think that's all of them?"

"That's a whole lot of idiots," Liluetta said dryly.

I shrugged. "Maybe I didn't get it exactly right, but most people who become adventurers are like that. Normal people don't want to fight scary monsters. They choose safe jobs and live secure lives instead."

I'd fought a goblin once, and it had swung a rusty sword at me. The sword had only hit my shoulder armor, so I hadn't been seriously injured, but it *had* hurt like hell. It had scared me too. Even now, days later and fully healed, I could still vividly remember the pain in my shoulder and the overwhelming terror that had made me tremble.

"When a regular person hires an adventurer, what they're really saying is, 'Go risk your life instead of me,'" I said.

Well, in my case, that goblin fight had been a guild quest.

But every day, just as Old Badger had taught me, I checked the requests posted on the guild's wall. Some of them made my spine and heart feel like ice, like the ones that expected someone to go

out and kill monsters bigger and stronger than bears just for materials. There was something seriously wrong with that—both to request such a thing and to accept it.

"'If you succeed, I'll pay you. But if you die, I don't care.' That's what a request really means. And accepting one means agreeing to that deal."

Wait. This isn't what I was going to talk about.

I'd started with my curiosity about Liluetta—why she'd become an adventurer—but now I was veering way off course. My thoughts were a mess, and I was frustrated by how poorly I was explaining things.

But Liluetta and Yune stayed silent as they listened to me, so I kept going.

"Adventurers gamble their lives just to earn money to survive. They risk dying today so they can eat tomorrow. Adventurers are the ones who choose to live that way, either by ignoring how messed up that is or by knowing it's messed up and doing it anyway. That's why, as people, adventurers are no good."

I grabbed onto a slender tree trunk and pulled myself up over a ledge. Then I put my spear down and reached for Liluetta and Yune to help them climb up.

"If the Magnan family is rich and has any sense, then didn't they try to stop you from becoming an adventurer, Liluetta?"

I was curious. Normally, if someone said they wanted to become an adventurer, people would try to stop them. That would be even more true if they came from a wealthy family. So what had Liluetta meant when she'd said she became an adventurer for her family?

The more I thought about it, the more something felt off. And that feeling kept growing.

Yune had told me that Liluetta's grandfather, the head of the Magnan family, had asked her to protect Liluetta. That's why she'd said she wanted to stay in my party. Liluetta's family clearly wanted her to be safe. They didn't care about her ranking up as an adventurer or anything like that.

So what was the Magnan family's real goal? In other words, what was the goal of the sea salt guild and the Magnan Trading Company?

From what Liluetta had said yesterday, it seemed to be about gathering information, finding trustworthy adventurers, and identifying new business opportunities. Those were the reasons she had become an adventurer.

But if that was the case, why was she planning to leave my party and join other adventurers later? That would mean taking on even more dangerous jobs. It didn't add up. If I wasn't misunderstanding something, then Liluetta and the Magnan family were completely at odds with each other.

All of that led me to one conclusion: Liluetta hadn't become an adventurer just for her family. That was just an excuse. The real reason was that she had wanted to become one herself. She had pushed for it and forced it through, no matter what.

And if that was true, another question came to mind: Why did she want to be an adventurer in the first place?

With a sharp *smack*, Liluetta slapped my hand away.

"Ow." My hand stung a little, but it didn't actually hurt that much. What really shocked me was how sudden the slap had been.

"I'm disappointed in you, Kiri." Liluetta's low, heavy voice sent a shiver down my spine.

When I looked up, I met her gaze. She was furious. I had no idea what part of what I'd said had made her so angry, but her glare made me shrink back.

"The people of this town are all doing their best to live." Her tone reminded me of the village priest. "Fishermen catch fish, farmers grow wheat and vegetables, and they provide us with food. Lumberjacks cut trees, craftsmen fire bricks, and carpenters use them to build homes. Shepherds shear wool, and weavers turn it into fabric for clothing. And when problems arise, adventurers step in to solve them. That's how a town functions."

Her expression was still sour, but her voice was serious. Her eyes were sharp and unwavering as she looked straight at me. "When people can't do something themselves, they pay those who can. That exchange doesn't just serve individual needs. It allows everyone to support each other and survive together. The people of this town depend on one another. No one ever thinks, 'It doesn't

matter if an adventurer dies.' That's not why they post requests. They offer up the money they worked so hard to earn, not because they want to send someone to their death, but because they desperately need help. They turn to adventurers—specialists in their field—because they have no other choice."

Behind Liluetta, Yune nodded along, mm-hmming in agreement. That made sense. After all, this same idea was written in the Scriptures of Amana. And fairly early on, if I remembered correctly.

"People cannot live alone. That is why they must help and respect one another."

Liluetta's eyes flashed with anger as she continued. "You think clients are just telling adventurers, 'Go risk your life in my place'? Do you really believe they're all that cowardly? If anyone here is being a coward, it's you. You're just trying to justify your own fear. If you're part of this town's cycle of trade and labor as an adventurer, then you should respect everyone else who contributes through their own work."

She had spoken so quickly and forcefully that she needed to pause. But even that wasn't enough. She exhaled, then inhaled again to steady herself. "It's fine if you're not strong enough yet. But using fear as an excuse to belittle others? That's unacceptable. You need to take yourself more seriously as a professional. You're doing work that ordinary people can't, so act like it. Carry yourself with the kind of pride that earns respect from others in this town. If you're an adventurer, don't just sit there being afraid. At least have the resolve to take down a few weak monsters! No client wants to pay someone who has no confidence in themselves."

Wow. This was a serious scolding. It was so straightforward and reasonable that I couldn't even argue back. Instead, all I felt was the growing weight of embarrassment.

"You're earning money from this job, so take it seriously."

It was a lecture so perfectly and painfully on the mark that I had no way to argue back.

"You should always carry out your work with sincerity and dedication," Yune added.

Ouch. This was really, really rough.

"Well, I suppose that's just how an ordinary town boy would think." Liluetta let a long breath out, like she was trying to dispel the lingering frustration in her voice. It didn't seem to work. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "Ah, but Kiri, you're just a child from a rural village, aren't you?"

Liluetta turned away and grabbed onto the same thin tree trunk I had used earlier to haul myself up the ledge. Her grip was firm as she gave it a few testing shakes.

She sighed. "How enviable—becoming an adventurer with a child's heart, without burdens or obligations. So free. Well, do your best from now on."

With that, she planted a foot onto the ledge, tightened her grip, and pushed off the ground with a burst of effort.

"Ahhh!"

"Whoa, careful!"

"My lady?!"

Liluetta's foot slipped, and Yune and I lunged forward to catch her just before she fell.

***

Liluetta was a serious person. That was my conclusion about her.

She hadn't said a word since she'd nearly fallen. Even now, as we neared the summit, her expression remained sour. We were taking a break, and Yune asked me what we should do in a whisper. But, of course, I had no answer for her.

"How enviable—becoming an adventurer with a child's heart, without burdens or obligations. So free."

Liluetta had said that with an unmistakable edge, like her words were meant to cut deep. I didn't think *envy* was a lie, though. So, to become an adventurer, she had to cast aside her own child's heart. She had to bear burdens. She was not free.

"She really did want to become an adventurer, after all," I said under my breath, keeping my voice low enough so that she wouldn't hear from just behind me.

The vague sense of unease I'd been feeling was no longer just a

hunch. It had solidified into certainty. The Magnan family of the sea salt guild—I didn't fully understand what that name meant or represented, but I knew Liluetta wasn't just some ordinary town girl.

And she definitely wasn't a country kid like me. She had been born into something special and raised in a special way. Was that why she longed for the freedom of an adventurer?

"'Enviable,' huh?"

I had left my hometown to find work, only to be deceived and nearly sold into slavery. I had barely managed to escape and only stumbled upon the adventurer's guild by chance. Now, a rich girl was telling me she envied *me*? Of course, she didn't know my circumstances. She had no way of knowing. I understood that.

But still, the uneasy feeling coiled in my chest refused to settle. The silence between us stretched on too. Neither of us said anything. Neither of us *wanted* to, probably.

We walked the same path we had taken yesterday and the day before, and the quiet gave my thoughts room to churn. I could hear Liluetta's breathing grow heavier as she struggled with the mountain trail. I knew she was pushing herself, but I didn't slow my pace.

I kept walking ahead. If she told me to wait, I would. But she didn't. Instead, she gritted her teeth and followed with determination written across her face. She never complained and never gave up.

She really is serious about this, isn't she...

You know what? This isn't right. We can't keep going like this.

I stopped and turned around to wait for Liluetta and Yune to catch up. We were outside the safety of town, and the monsters here didn't care about our problems. Liluetta's breathing was ragged as she approached, her face flushed from exertion. Yune trailed behind. She was drenched in sweat and swaying unsteadily. They were both at their limit.

We were close to our destination, but we needed to rest again. We *could* push forward. We might even make it to the mana pool before collapsing. But what if we ran into a monster on the way? The two of them wouldn't be able to escape, which would be the worst thing that could happen. Even a short break for them to catch

their breath was better than nothing. Sure, things were probably going to be awkward again if we sat in silence. But that was unavoidable.

I started scanning the path ahead, searching for a good spot to rest. Somewhere we could sit down without too much trouble.

That was when I saw—

I threw myself to the ground.

"Get down! Keep low!"

I couldn't risk shouting, so my voice barely carried to the two trailing behind me. But my tone was sharp enough to make them freeze. The uneasy weight in my chest vanished in an instant.

"Wh-What is it? I don't see anything," Yune whispered, curling up as small as possible.

Liluetta still looked irritated, but she followed my lead and crouched. I pointed ahead to a spot not too far away. *These* were nowhere near as difficult to spot as the ones Old Badger had found before. There was no need to strain my eyes this time. If we took just seven more steps forward, we'd step right onto them.

"Goblin tracks," I said.

Memories crashed into me. *Old Badger, those three adventurers, that terrifying climb up this very mountain. A dizzying wave of something that feels too familiar.*

"Are you sure?" Liluetta whispered. She moved closer in an awkward stoop while clutching the hem of her frilled skirt at her ankles to keep it off the dirt. We were finally having a conversation, but all I could hear was the doubt in her voice.

"I'm sure," I said firmly. I traced the tracks with my finger. "They came from the side, then merged with our footprints."

The tracks pushed through the low shrubs and emerged from the underbrush. Then they changed direction and lined up with our own footprints.

"Are you *sure* these aren't ours?" Liluetta asked.

"They're about the same size, but there are definitely more than just our prints here. And we're not barefoot," I replied.

The tracks veered away from us after a certain point. I scanned the area—no goblins in sight. Only then did I ease up, shifting from

lying flat to kneeling. It looked like we were safe for now. At least, we hadn't been spotted yet... But I couldn't relax. I kept my spear ready and tightened my grip on it.

"There are probably no more than five," I estimated. "Definitely more than one."

Even as I said it, uncertainty crept in. In rough mountain terrain, creatures didn't walk side by side. They moved in single file, picking their way through gaps in the trees and avoiding steep slopes. That meant their tracks overlapped and trampled over each other, which made it nearly impossible to count them. I could only narrow it down to somewhere between two and five.

Old Badger was incredible for being able to read trails so well...

"Ah, I see them now. Kiri-o, that's amazing. You spotted them right away," Yune said, sounding impressed.

Her tone was relaxed as ever, but I could tell she was tense. Her hands clenched tightly around her long-handled mace.

Don't grip it so hard, I wanted to tell her.

Waine had said that, hadn't he? *"You gotta loosen up. You're gonna die if you're all wound up." Being tense means you won't be able to react fast enough.*

"Hmph, goblins. A convenient opponent for our first battle." Liluetta's voice carried a note of...amusement?

I turned to her in disbelief. What was she thinking? Had Liluetta really just called goblins a "convenient opponent"?

A chill ran down my spine. Her understanding of danger was dangerously naive. There was still plenty I didn't know about this girl, but she'd just called this "our first battle," which meant she had no real combat experience.

People often said goblins were weak, and yes, I'd fought and defeated one myself, but I would never underestimate them. Goblins fought with the intent to kill. Losing was the same as dying. Old Badger had been killed by those very goblins.

"They're just ahead, right? Yune, Kiri, prepare yourselves," Liluetta said, her voice full of confidence.

"Wh-What? Are we really going through with this?" Yune whimpered.

I couldn't understand what Liluetta was thinking. I didn't know why Yune was preparing either. Why did they want to keep going? Why were they acting like the decision had already been made?

I finally managed to force my words out. "No. We need to turn back."

Both of them were clearly shocked as they stared at me.

Why are they surprised? I'm the one who should be surprised here.

"What exactly do you mean, Kiri?" Liluetta asked. Her words were polite, but her tone was cold—dangerously cold—and brimming with undisguised anger.

"Goblins are monsters. If we leave them alone, they'll harm others," she continued sharply. "They might attack hunters or woodcutters who come through here or ambush merchants and travelers on the main road. In the past, monsters have even scaled the town walls. If we know they're here, then it's our duty to eliminate them right now."

She was serious and earnest—so earnest that she'd lectured me about professionalism and respecting the townsfolk. Given her mindset, her reasoning made perfect sense.

But that was exactly the problem. Her attitude was far too upright and far too good. Now I finally understood what Chikka had meant. Liluetta wasn't suited to being an adventurer. She wasn't *broken* enough for it. If she kept going like this, she would die.

"We're turning around. We're leaving the mountain right now," I said firmly.

Liluetta was righteous, logical, and extremely angry. A small voice in the back of my mind told me trying to persuade her would fail, but I refused to back down.

"After we've come all this way?" she retorted.

"How far we've come doesn't matter," I said.

We were almost at the summit and so very close to the mana pool. Even I didn't want to give up after coming this far. But judging from the goblin prints, we were facing the worst possible scenario.

"Look." I pointed at the trail. "Right there, where their footprints merge with ours. Can you see how there are a lot more goblin tracks

gathered in that spot? They must've stopped there to talk things over. They probably realized someone regularly uses this path."

Hearing how uncertain my voice sounded, full of "probablys" and "must'ves," was annoying. I should've pretended I knew everything for sure.

Old Badger or Chikka would've been able to interpret a lot more from the footprints, and they would've sounded perfectly sure about it. Compared to them, my lack of experience and confidence was beyond frustrating.

"The goblins are following our tracks," I explained. "They're probably planning to ambush us somewhere up ahead."

Yune's eyes widened into perfect circles, and Liluetta's jade-green eyes narrowed skeptically as they both stared down at the footprints. I hoped this would be enough to convince them.

We were in a bad situation. The goblins knew we were here, and every part of me was screaming, *Turn back now!* There had been five of us in our party when Old Badger had taken us up this mountain, and even then we had decided to retreat rather than risk a fight. Then, when I had hunted goblins with Waine's party, the goblins hadn't noticed us at all. That had given us plenty of time to prepare. This time, our situation was completely different. There were only three of us, and the goblins were likely waiting and ready to attack.

"They might have just followed our path because it's easier to walk on," said Liluetta.

I gritted my teeth. "Maybe. But assuming that would be careless."

"If we already know they're planning an ambush, we can just stay alert," she insisted. "If we're prepared, we can handle it."

"It's hard to see clearly on a mountain trail," I argued. My throat felt tight. "Goblins are small. If they hide behind trees or rocks, spotting them in advance is almost impossible. We won't be able to react fast enough."

"So what if we get hurt?" Liluetta shot back. "We have Yune. She's a healer. She can deal with injuries easily."

"I don't know much about healers," I said, "but she can't heal us if we're all dead."

"Goblins are among the weakest of monsters," Liluetta countered. "We'd have to mess up pretty badly to lose to them."

"But we're even weaker than those weak goblins."

Liluetta let out an exasperated sigh, giving me a look that was no longer angry. Instead, it was filled with disappointment and pity. "All right, I understand perfectly now. You're just a coward."

I squeezed my fists until my palms hurt and clenched my jaw so hard I heard a grinding noise.

Does she think she's invincible? Does she think a goblin's claws and weapons are made of cotton?

"We're adventurers," she continued coldly. "If all we do is avoid danger, we'll never accomplish anything."

Does she think calling herself an adventurer would somehow protect her from harm? Facing the goblins would be like walking to her death. But my thoughts didn't matter, because I had failed to convince her. Any chance of persuading her was gone.

So I played my last card, the one I never wanted to use.

"I'm the leader here," I said. "You both agreed at the start to follow my decisions."

As the party's leader—as someone who had very slightly more experience as an adventurer—I tried to make the newcomers obey. It was the lowest tactic I could use, and I hated myself for resorting to it.

Liluetta knitted her brows. Even Yune looked uncomfortable. I had a feeling this would destroy our relationship, and we would probably never adventure together again. That was disappointing, and it hurt, but I couldn't help it. After all, I knew that if we went ahead, I didn't have the strength to keep them safe.

If ruining our friendship meant the three of us would make it out of here alive, that was far better than letting them die.

"I see." All expression vanished from Liluetta's face.

Both of them were so earnest, I never doubted my tactic would work. I knew it would be effective as a last resort.

"You're right," said Liluetta. "To you, we're nothing more than temporary party members. And the same goes for us." She turned her back to me. It was like she was telling me loud and clear that

there was nothing left to say.



But that wasn’t the case. Not yet, anyway.

“Our party is disbanded,” Liluetta announced. “Let’s go, Yune.” She began walking farther up the path.

Why is she going that way?

“W-Wait!” I shouted. “I said you could leave if you didn’t want to follow my lead, but I never said you could keep going!”

“Our party is disbanded,” Liluetta repeated coldly. “You have no right to tell me what to do anymore.” She ignored my protests and continued up the mountain.

Liluetta was silent, then, and she didn’t look back. Even so, I felt like she was saying, *Don’t follow me.* As I watched her walk away, I knew I was no longer welcome.

“W-Wait for me, my lady!” Yune called nervously, hurrying after her. She glanced back at me once with a troubled expression on her face before joining Liluetta.

All I could do was stand there, dumbfounded, and watch their backs grow smaller as they disappeared from view.

In that moment, only one thing was clear: I had failed to do what Old Badger had done.

***

I wanted to be an adventurer.

But I had heard adventurers were rude, unruly troublemakers who spent their days drinking and refused to get normal jobs. I never wanted to end up like that. Quite frankly, the very idea disgusted me... That was what I had thought at first, anyway. After a while, I started to realize how incredibly free their lives seemed.

I was born the daughter of a prestigious merchant house that also oversaw the sea salt guild: the Magnan Trading Company. My life was comfortable and never lacked for anything, but I had no freedom to choose what I wanted to do. From the day I was born, I was bound to this town and destined to live out the rest of my life here.

Perhaps I might be allowed to visit the capital, or maybe even the royal city, but that was it. Traveling the world was an impossible

luxury. That was why I admired adventurers. I longed for their freedom and believed that becoming one would grant me the liberty I craved.

Yet here I was, not the least bit free.

Nothing had gone right. Everything about this adventure was physically exhausting, and I constantly dragged everyone down. The worst part was, once you stripped away the Magnan name and my magia, I had no value as just Liluetta. I had even lectured *him* in an arrogant attempt to make myself seem important.

Discovering goblins nearby should have been my chance to prove my worth, but *he* had decided to run away. And then it had all ended with such an awful goodbye, right when I'd thought I could finally show him what I was capable of.

Yune and I walked along the mountain trail after that, brushing branches and foliage aside as we went. To reach the harvesting spot, we climbed until we were near the summit before looping around to the opposite side of the mountain. The path remained difficult and uneven with roots, rocks, and jutting branches in our way. Each step was arduous, but the steepness eventually eased until it gave way to a gentle downhill slope and a broad, flat clearing. Areas like this were known as a mountain's shoulder, if I remembered correctly.

Yune stopped and peered down at the path. "The footprints are still here," she murmured uneasily.

I followed her gaze. Among the tracks we'd left yesterday and the day before, smaller footprints stood out. They were roughly the size of a child's, with ragged claw marks clearly visible at their tips. Goblins, undoubtedly.

Even though *he* had spotted them first, proving he was at least somewhat capable as an adventurer, I still found it hard to take the threat seriously. Goblins were small, weak, and dull-witted creatures. They were among the weakest of all monsters.

I suppose that's why he's a mere herbalist, not a fighter, I thought.

"It looks like goblins *are* up ahead, after all." I straightened my posture. "Let's stay alert."

We adjusted our formation. Yune took the vanguard, as her armor was slightly sturdier, and I stayed behind her. Ideally, our healer would remain protected at the back. But under these circumstances, it made sense for her to go first. If we were attacked, I could at least cover her with magia.

"Still, if those goblins really are trying to ambush us like he said, they're not very bright." I shook my head. "They didn't even consider the possibility that we'd notice their tracks first."

Yune nodded. "Ah, yes... I suppose you're right. Because our guard is up."

Yes. Yes, exactly. We knew there were enemies ahead, so we could proceed with caution. That meant there was no way we would be caught off guard. He really was too much of a coward. Danger was an unavoidable part of adventuring, yet he was so desperate to avoid it. Maybe he just wasn't cut out for this job.

"But isn't Kiri-o better at moving cautiously than us?" Yune mumbled.

"Don't talk about him. He's not even here," I snapped. Hearing his name made an irritated tone I couldn't suppress leak into my voice.

Yune flinched. "Uh, y-yes, my lady."

I sighed. I knew our situation wasn't good, and what Yune had said was true. He looked small and unreliable at first glance, but he was constantly aware of his surroundings and always ready to grip his spear at a moment's notice. He was experienced enough in the mountains to do that naturally. In contrast, Yune and I were completely unfamiliar with places like this. We hadn't even climbed a mountain before this one. I had to admit it: That warrior from the adventurer's guild had been right. Compared to Kir—*him*, we were inexperienced and weak.

"But that's just for now." My reaction to that unpleasant conclusion slipped out before I could stop myself.

I lifted my gaze to look at Yune. She glanced around nervously, gripping her weapon as she took hesitant steps forward. It didn't seem like she had heard me.

I let out a quiet breath of relief as I scanned our surroundings. As expected of a mountain, the trees and undergrowth created

numerous blind spots and made it difficult to see. Now that we were so close to our destination where the mana pool lay, the already thick vegetation was even more overgrown. In a place like this, small monsters like goblins could hide as much as they pleased. I wouldn't be surprised if they were lurking in this very area.

"Yikes. This is way scarier than I thought it would be." Yune whimpered.

"Pull yourself together. It's just goblins," I scolded her.

I did understand how she felt. We were heading straight into enemy territory, moving through an area full of blind spots and places to hide. At any moment, something could leap out at us. The tension and anxiety slowed our steps. If we weren't careful, fear could make us freeze in place.

That would be unacceptable. If we let ourselves falter over something like this, we would never move forward. I wanted to go higher. I *had* to go higher. I had become an adventurer under the guise of doing it for the Magnan family, but in truth, it was for my own freedom. To stay free, I had to prove I was strong enough.

I had to show them I didn't need to be pulled back under the sea salt guild's protection. I had to make them believe—no, make it an undeniable fact—that leaving me to my own devices was in their best interest as well as mine. If I couldn't do that, the miracle that let me spread my wings as an adventurer would be plucked away in an instant.

"Hmph. He and I were never meant to be connected in the first place," I said.

Now that I really thought about it, there was no possible future where we would continue working together. If he was the kind of person who would run from something as insignificant as goblins, then he wasn't even worth my consideration. If that coward wanted to move slowly and cautiously, then fine. Let him. I was in a hurry, so I would push forward and overtake him. I *had* to.

"Honestly, I never thought he'd be the kind of guy who doesn't even listen to his party members and just barks out orders like that," I grumbled.

Ah, I'm thinking about him again. The memory of our argument

resurfaced, stoking my irritation. Sure, we didn't have as much stamina as he did, but that hardly mattered when I had magia that could more than make up for it. I was a mage, after all, and Yune was a healer.

Yes, he was more experienced as an adventurer. He was above us in that regard. But still, how dare he say that we were weaker than goblins? Goblins, of all things—the weakest of monsters! Belittling us like that, without even seeing a fraction of our true abilities, was beyond insulting.

"Well, I can kind of understand how Kiri-o feels, though," Yune said, without turning to face me.

"Wha?" I blurted.

Yune tightened her grip on her long-handled mace with both hands. She was tense and trembling as she carefully kept watch on our surroundings, but she had said those words so casually that I couldn't help but show my surprise.

Doesn't she feel angry about his attitude at all? I fumed. *Okay, Yune* is *soft-spoken,* and *she's an apprentice cleric, but surely even she has to be upset about this.*

"Remember what Kiri-o said? About not being able to protect us if something dangerous happened. He said that scared him. Yes, he looks weak, and I'm sure he really was scared. But maybe he was even *more* scared because you and I were with him."

Probably true... But still.

"That in itself is an insult," I retorted. "We're adventurers, *and* we're party members. We're supposed to trust each other, rely on each other, and face hardships together. Him thinking he has to protect us is just offensive."

I was seriously ticked off. Just how much did he plan to irritate me before he was satisfied? He was smaller than me—much too scrawny for that spear and armor—and he had only ever seen me use a detection spell. Someone like *him* had the nerve to act like *that*?

"That's exactly why Kiri-o never saw us as real party members," Yune said. She still didn't turn around. "Because isn't it true? We treated our first adventure as a trial run, we tagged along without

contributing much, we got in the way more than anything, and then we shamelessly asked him to introduce us to other adventurers. On top of that, we acted like we were planning to leave soon. *We* were the ones who treated Kiri-o like a mere stepping stone for the next opportunity."

Her words struck me hard, and I couldn't respond.

"If you want to earn trust, show results. If you want to gain credibility, show sincerity. That's what Grandfather Magnan always says, isn't it?" Yune's voice was as light and airy as always, and she spoke at her usual leisurely pace, but her anger was unmistakable.

Just then, the scenery opened up and revealed a clearing filled with blooming purple flowers.

"Oh, how wonderful. Look, my lady, we've finally reached the gathering site." Yune sounded more lively all of a sudden. Perhaps she was excited or even relieved to have reached our destination after struggling through the overgrown mountain path... Yet she still refused to turn back and look at me.

"Hmm, I can't really make out any footprints," Yune murmured, frowning at the ground. "All these herbs make it hard to see." She was crouched down, trying to read the ground the way Kiri had before. But with so many plants growing wild, their leaves got in the way and made it nearly impossible to even find footprints, let alone analyze them.

I scanned our surroundings, my eyes sweeping across the area. There were no signs of monsters in sight. If goblins had come through, I would have expected them to trample the flowers without a second thought. Strangely enough, the field remained untouched. The only visible traces were those left by whoever had recently gathered herbs here.

A breeze drifted past the two of us. As the purple flowers swayed, their sweet fragrance tickled my nose. These herbs were used in alchemical mixtures, but they were also prized for making perfumes. Someone else might have been coming here to harvest petals for that reason.

A pleasant wind, a beautiful sight, and a scent that wrapped around me like a gentle embrace—this was where we had completed

our herb-gathering request together. The *three* of us.

"Let's go back." The words just slipped out. The breeze carried them to Yune, who finally turned to look at me.

"Oh? What about the goblins?" she asked, tilting her head.

"We can't track them any further," I said flatly.

Yune blinked. "No herb gathering either?"

I crossed my arms. "We haven't confirmed it's safe. Could you really focus on gathering while keeping watch the entire time?"

Without even pretending to consider it, Yune shook her head. Of course. We were raised in the city and inexperienced as adventurers. There was no way we could manage that.

"Kiri-o might be able to, though," Yune pointed out. "But yes, let's head back."

He probably could. After all, he had been completing gathering requests solo. Caution was natural for him. When I gathered herbs, I carefully followed the methods I'd studied in books. But he could do that as well as I could *and* keep an eye on our surroundings for danger, even while we were walking and resting. Now that we were separated from him on this mountain, I finally understood. He *had* been protecting us this whole time, on all of our adventures.

"If we hurry now, we might be able to catch up to him," I said.

Yune stifled a small laugh. "That's impossible. Kiri-o is faster than us."

I bit my lower lip, holding back my frustration. It was painfully obvious I wasn't thinking rationally. I knew I was anxious because of the sense of urgency burning in my chest. I had to see him again.

I had no idea what I would say when I did... I would have to figure that out while catching up to him. But even if I couldn't put my thoughts together, not seeing him again was *not* an option. The one thing I knew for certain was that this could not be the end.

That said, Yune was right. Kiri had been slowing himself down to match our pace since the very beginning. No matter how much we rushed now, we wouldn't be able to catch even a glimpse of his back.

"He'll be at the adventurer's guild," I reasoned.

Yune tilted her head. "Hmm. But what if he's already gone

home?”

Home? Where does he even live? I knew he was from the countryside, so there was a good chance he wasn’t living in a house but staying at an inn somewhere in town. He always ate at the adventurer’s guild, so maybe he was renting a room there.

But if that were the case, then where were his parents? At the very least, I had never seen them. Actually, why was he out here adventuring all on his own in the first place, when he was so cautious and afraid?

I didn’t know. And now that I had started thinking about it, the questions wouldn’t stop coming. Why had I never wondered about any of this before? How had I never thought to ask? I’d had plenty of chances while we were walking, or resting, or gathering herbs—even when we were drinking fruit juice at that stall. I could have asked at any time.

I clenched my fists. “He stands out. Someone has to know where he lives.” My knees threatened to buckle under a fresh wave of despair, but collapsing now would be far too shameful.

How foolish I had been, treating the one person who had been protecting us this entire time like a stepping stone. I even had the audacity to rant about what it meant to be comrades. Of course he had never seen us as his real companions.

I had made a terrible mistake. A rush of self-loathing swelled inside me, and I felt like I might be crushed under its weight. But I couldn’t allow that to happen, because I had to see him again.

Yune let out a small chuckle, then spoke in a teasing tone. “Wow, going that far, huh?”

I frowned. She *would* find this funny. That girl could be awful sometimes. Well, I had to admit that tracking down someone’s home and visiting them unannounced wasn’t exactly normal behavior.

“Yes, I am.” My voice was firm. “I need to see him again.”

Even if Yune laughed, my resolve wouldn’t waver. I turned on my heel and started retracing our steps. We had to hurry back.

I still didn’t think I was wrong about the goblins, though. Running from such weak creatures wasn’t what an adventurer should do. But, thinking back on it now, I understood why he didn’t see us as

capable fighters. To ordinary people, magia was this mysterious, unknowable thing. All I had shown him was a simple detection spell, and all Yune had done was heal a blister. Sure, I *had* mentioned what else I could do with magia, but expecting him to treat me as a real asset based on that alone was absurd.

If I had even tried to understand his perspective, it would've been obvious. He had made the right call as our leader. Now that I had calmed down, thanks to Yune's words, I could finally see that I was the one who had failed. I hadn't put in the effort to earn his trust or confidence. Why would he rely on me if I hadn't done any of that?

That realization hit me harder than anything else. It hurt more than the embarrassment of turning back on our first attempt because of my shoes or the humiliation of having to drink his water because I didn't bring a canteen. It felt so much worse than the utter disgrace of giving him a pompous lecture, only to trip and nearly fall off a ledge right after.

All of those mistakes were trivial compared to this. Being inexperienced as an adventurer? That was understandable. But being born a merchant's daughter and failing at the most basic principle of commerce? There was no excuse for that. To him, I was nothing more than a selfish, demanding customer.

I had to go back and talk to him. This time, I would do it right. I still didn't know exactly what I needed to say. Maybe it was already too late. Even so, I couldn't just leave things as they were.

"My lady!"

Yune's voice was sharper than I had ever heard it before. Her shout overlapped with another sound—a guttural, inhuman shriek belonging to something between beast and man.

From the shadows of the trees, a goblin lunged into the clearing and pounced at me. It raised its club up high and swung.

I had let my guard down.

I had been too distracted, too caught up thinking about Kiri to pay attention to the danger right in front of me. If I had just stopped to think, I would have realized that the goblins tracking us must

have seen our footprints lead here and turn back two days in a row. In other words, they knew this was our destination. Since they hadn't ambushed us along the way, they had to be lying in wait here and biding their time.

I had been so sure we would win as long as we didn't have to deal with a surprise attack. In my arrogance, I had assumed a surprise attack was impossible because we would never let our guard down.

But that was exactly what I did, and I was caught in an ambush.

I raised my wand to block the incoming blow. With my wand in hand, I had thought I would be ready to cast a spell at any time. But magia was out of the question—my wand was simply my only shield.

A loud *clack* rang out as the goblin's club slammed against my wand and left a huge dent. My grip went numb, and a sharp jolt of pain shot up my arm. Cold terror flooded my veins.

What...? What's happening?

Goblins were supposed to be weak. That was what I had always heard. No one had ever told me they could hit this hard! If that attack had struck me, my bones would be *crushed*, not broken.

"Get back, my lady! Eek!"

Yune tried to push between me and the goblin. But before she could reach me, two more goblins armed with shortswords burst from the undergrowth and lunged at her.

"Yune!" I screamed. "D-Damn goblins!" I raised my wand again, gathered my magia, and opened my mouth to start a chant.

The first goblin's club swung up from below and sent my wand flying.

"Ah!" I yelped.

Our eyes met. I tore my gaze away and saw the rest of the goblin's face: a hooked, wart-covered nose, sunken cheekbones, and jagged, yellowed fangs. It was a grotesque, green-skinned visage with lips twisted up into a sneer. The goblin's eyes gleamed with cruel amusement in mockery of the weak. It was mocking *me*.

I knew, in that instant, that I was going to die.

My legs wouldn't move. My throbbing fingers couldn't grasp anything. My mind went completely blank, except for one last

thought.

It's going to kill me, and I'm going to die... This is the end.

"Help!" I shrieked.

The club came swinging down.

My body wouldn't move. I couldn't even close my eyes. All I could do was watch—

A spearhead burst through the goblin's throat.



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I took a slow breath in, then let a slow breath out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Repeat. With each exhale, I stripped away emotions I didn't need. With each inhale, I cleared my mind and corrected my focus.

Liluetta and Yune had left. They had disbanded the party and walked straight into what might be a pack of goblins lying in wait. They had left me behind, and their actions had told me not to follow. All I had done after that was stand here, frozen in place.

But I couldn't go home alone, no matter what. My legs shook, but they would not retreat. My dry throat begged to let out an angry roar. My tense body stubbornly faced forward, refusing to turn from the path I needed to take.

"I wasn't able to do what Old Badger did..."

I exhaled again, and the trembling in my legs faded. Old Badger had been a *real* leader. He had stopped those three adventurers back then. There had been five of us in that party, and we had all agreed to turn back because of him. But I hadn't been able to convince Liluetta and Yune. I had let the two of them go alone.

With a deep breath in, I unstrapped my pack basket and tossed it off to the side. I wouldn't need it today. If I made it back safely, I could pick it up then.

"It's different this time," I told myself. I gripped my spear so tightly it hurt and clenched my teeth so hard I could hear them grind. I recalled the memories of my anger—that unbearable, searing rage that burned away everything else. I was going to face death, and the only thing that could drive me forward now was this emotion.

With each exhale, I discarded every other feeling. With each inhale, I fed the flames of my fury.

"It's different this time. It's not like what happened with Old Badger, when I knew nothing and let it end!"

With my heart dyed in rage, I forced my foot forward. It took an eternity to move a single step. But once I did, the next came easily.

After that, I fixed my eyes on my destination—on the ones who had left me behind. I had made a mistake and let them go, and I regretted it. But I was going to fix that now.

I was still far too naive to call myself an adventurer. I couldn't be like Old Badger. What I should've done instead was act like those other no-good adventurers I knew—to do what Waine, Sheya, and Chikka would've done. I knew exactly how *they* would've handled things. The three of them would've grabbed those two reckless girls by the scruffs of their necks and dragged them down the mountain. Especially...

"That stubborn *idiot*!"

I threw more fuel into the fire. My legs surged forward, and I broke into a sprint.

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I ran. I ran. I ran.

I crouched low and tore through the undergrowth like a beast, ignoring the branches that lashed against my face. A cold, calculating part of me was assessing the situation. Even if the goblins were lying in wait, their focus would be on the two girls ahead. Even if I made some noise, they wouldn't notice me. Plus, I had taken far too long to start moving and couldn't afford to take my time.

My mind flashed again and again with the worst possible images, and I shoved every single one of them out of the way. I sprinted up a slope before hurling myself downhill, almost losing my footing and tumbling over, then wove through the thick vegetation choking the animal trail until I reached my destination.

The sight before me obliterated the last shred of restraint in my heart: a clearing, filled with blooming purple flowers, with Liluetta, Yune, and three goblins.

It was a one-sided battle. Yune was flailing her weapon around, but she was just desperately trying to keep two of the goblins from closing in. Liluetta... She had started to chant when a goblin's club struck her wand and sent it flying.

I took it all in within seconds. And in that moment, I heard it—the sound of something snapping inside me.

"What the hell—"

I sped up like a beast and raised my spear up high, ignoring everything I'd been taught about proper form. My mind was blank, my vision tunneled, and time seemed to slow to a crawl.

The goblin raised its club, with Liluetta frozen in terror below.

I lunged, and my spear pierced the goblin's neck from behind.

"—are you doing?!"

I twisted the spear still embedded in its throat. Something hard snapped with a sickening *crack*. I could feel it through the shaft of my weapon. I dug my heel into the dirt and wrenched the spear sideways. The goblin's head twisted unnaturally like a broken toy, and blood gushed from its mouth, nose, ears, and eyes. A wet, ripping sound filled the air as I tore my spear free, shredding flesh and skin in the process. Dark goblin blood splattered across Liluetta's pale face and clothes.

She was still alive. That was all that mattered.

But that wasn't the end, and I didn't stop moving. Yune's goblins had turned toward me, while she was just staring at me. Maybe she was stunned by my arrival, but I felt a strong headache coming on.

This is your chance to strike! I wanted to scream. *The enemy's distracted! Why the hell aren't you attacking?!*

I adjusted my grip on my spear, sliding my hands back and holding it near the butt end. This would create the widest arc, the longest reach, the strongest horizontal swing, and—if I missed—the biggest, most defenseless opening that would probably get me killed.

Like I give a damn.

"RAHHHHH!" With a fierce battle cry, I swung my spear.

The nearest goblin raised its shortsword in a panic and blocked my attack just in time. The rusted blade dug into the wooden shaft of my spear, but that didn't matter. I clenched my teeth so hard I thought they'd shatter. I planted my feet and felt my leg muscles straining. Then I let the fury raging inside me take over as I ripped my spear free from the embedded blade. The goblin couldn't hold its

ground—its own weapon struck its face and sent both sword and monster crashing to the ground right beside Liluetta, who was staring at me in stunned silence.

"GYAAAGH!" An ear-piercing screech, high-pitched, raspy, and ugly, sounded from somewhere behind me.

I whipped around. The third goblin was charging straight at me with its shortsword in a forward thrust. It wasn't attacking to avenge its fallen comrades. The creature was driven by simple instinct and logic: I was its greatest threat.

Its twisted face contorted with aggression as it came in close and lunged. I jumped back, narrowly avoiding getting stabbed, then dodged a downward slash by stepping back at an angle. With my spear, I barely managed to block a third attack aimed at my stomach.

I gritted my teeth and braced myself. My training had paid off. I could hold my own on defense... But this was bad. The goblin had forced its way inside my range. At this distance, my spear was more of a hindrance than a weapon. I needed to create space, but the goblin was faster at closing the gap than I was at retreating.

The fourth attack came. I blocked it, but the impact was heavier than before. The shock rattled through my arms, numbing them all the way up to my biceps. A groan of pain escaped my lips.

I caught sight of the goblin's wicked grin, and I wanted to spit out a curse. Just moments ago, its face had been twisted in fury, but now it was already beginning to relax. That alone filled me with frustration. I could tell just from that disgusting, twisted smile that it had realized its advantage and was relishing the sight of me struggling.

These things really don't care about avenging their fallen. It's already forgotten its comrades.

I had killed the first one with a surprise attack from behind. The second one had been off-balance when I struck and got knocked out easily. But this third goblin had forced me into an unfavorable range as soon as our fight had started.

Another strike—I blocked it with the shaft of my spear, but just barely. It was a heavy blow, fully backed by the weight of the

goblin's body and its confidence from having the upper hand.

"Ugh...!" I grunted. I couldn't hold my stance. My body staggered, and another groan of pain slipped out.

And then, with a dry, cracking sound, my spear split in two right at the middle of the shaft where the goblin's blade had cut into it earlier.

This time, the goblin laughed outright. It cackled, its voice full of ridicule, and bared its yellowed, jagged teeth gleaming with spit strung in between. With a victorious sneer, it raised its shortsword high.

I had lost my balance. There was no way I could dodge in time.

Even so, I didn't close my eyes.

***

"In other words, you drop your weapon on purpose."

What is this guy talking about? That had been my first reaction.

It was the first night I managed to keep my eyes open during the browplate-striking training, and I had just asked Waine to teach me something I could actually use in a fight.

He said he would show me a secret technique, and this was how he explained it.

"Don't make that face. Listen up, kiddo. When I say 'secret technique,' I don't mean some amazing move that can take down any monster in a single hit. I'm talking about a last-ditch trick, something you only use when you've got nothing left to rely on. A desperate gamble. A garbage move that's useless in any fight you can win."

"A garbage move?" The more he explained, the more skeptical I felt. Couldn't this guy at least consider how bad all of this sounded from my point of view?

"But it's also a move that lets you beat someone stronger than you." Waine twirled a little twig between his fingers. Something about the moonlight shining down from above made him seem different. "Kiddo, you're still a total weakling. If you ever get into a fight, chances are the enemy is gonna be stronger than you.

Wouldn't it be smart to have at least one trick up your sleeve for when you're outmatched? Sounds about right, doesn't it? I'd say so." He crossed his arms and nodded like he was agreeing with himself.

What is this? Why does it feel like he just blurted something out, then came up with a bunch of stuff on the spot to justify it after?

Maybe this *was* just the usual Waine after all.

"Well, just humor me and think about it. If you drop your weapon, what do you think your opponent would do? Or, if your opponent drops their weapon, what would you do?" he asked.

"If I drop my spear, or if my opponent drops their weapon?" I frowned, thinking it over. Well, if he was going to teach me something, I might as well hear him out. I could decide whether to use it afterward. *I probably won't,* I thought, but I answered him anyway. "I guess I'd kick their weapon away so they can't pick it up?"

"Not bad. That's one right answer," said Waine.

Well, it does feel good not to be wrong.

"Other options include keeping them in check so they can't grab their weapon, picking it up and using it yourself, or just straight up taking the opportunity to punch them in the face."

So there are actually a bunch of right answers. That feels a little less good, somehow.

"In other words, no one's gonna see an opponent drop their weapon and think, 'Oh no, I should be careful and defend myself.'"

A thin layer of clouds drifted over the moon. Even with my eyes fully adjusted to the dark, there was barely enough light to make anything out. But, for some reason, I could tell Waine was grinning —a twisted, ruthless grin.

"In that moment, they're wide open. Am I wrong?" he asked.

A creeping dread ran down my spine. This was insane. It was a technique with a single purpose: to create a brief opening by letting go of your own weapon as a way to manipulate your opponent.

No, this wasn't even a technique. It was just dropping your weapon on purpose. I could do it right now if I wanted to. This was no technique, because it didn't require any skill.

"But... But if I don't have a weapon, I won't be able to take my

enemy down," I said.

"Just use your backup weapon."

"I don't have one, though."

Waine let out an extra-long sigh and shrugged his shoulders. Everything about the way he was acting told me that he could see right through me, and he *knew* I was afraid.

"If you don't have a spare weapon, then punch them. Or kick them. Hell, grab them and slam them into the ground. Don't get caught up in the *how*. Whether you put them in a choke hold and snap their neck, stab them full of holes with a knife, or smash their skull in with a rock lying around..."

The clouds drifted away, and moonlight threw Waine's features into stark relief. He smirked. And then, with a smug look on his face, he stated the most obvious thing in the world.

"If you kill them, they die."

***

Waine had downplayed it as a last resort. It was a desperate gamble and a worthless move you would never need against an opponent you could beat. The "secret technique" really wasn't amazing at all. At the same time, I understood what he had meant when he said it was for defeating an opponent stronger than yourself. It was a move you could only use after you had accepted death. I had thought—no, *sworn*—I would never use it. I would never *want* to use it.

Until my spear broke. The goblin sneered, and it held its shortsword up high.

At that moment, my enemy was wide open.

Those words flashed through my mind, and I knew—I felt it, in my gut—that this was my only chance.

I hadn't dropped my weapon on purpose. My spear had simply broken in two. The situation was almost identical to what Waine had described, except I hadn't planned for it. My stance was off. There was no way I could dodge.

So I didn't.

I'll kill you. Those words, along with the fury raging in my chest, drove me forward. I threw myself into that desperate, last-ditch move right then and there and lunged straight into the path of the goblin's attack.

I planted my feet, tensed my neck, ground my teeth, and kept my eyes wide open.

I had been trained to keep my eyes open even when attacked. Waine had hit me on my forehead over and over again while I wore the crude piece of headgear he had given me, a strip of cloth with an iron plate sewn in—a piece of equipment so flimsy it barely counted as armor. The simple browplate only covered my forehead, left my face completely exposed, and offered no protection from above, the sides, or behind.

I lined my forehead up with the path of the goblin's blade.

The impact of sword against plate exploded through me. I didn't hear the sound it made, but excruciating pain shot down my spine. My vision flickered as tears stung my eyes, while my forehead went numb and my head spun.

I let out a voiceless scream and lunged like a beast.

I shoved the goblin's shortsword back with my head. I grabbed the goblin's face, my hands covering its startled eyes, and pushed with all my might until I went crashing down with the goblin. It yelped when its head cracked against the earth, and I pinned it beneath me.

With both hands, I raised what was left of my shattered spear—

"Ahhhhhhh!"

—and drove the jagged, splintered end straight into the goblin's disgusting face.

Its nose caved in, and its flesh split open. The blow shattered its cheekbone and crumpled its forehead. As its jaw snapped apart, broken teeth lodged deep into the back of its throat. I pounded its face relentlessly. Again. And again. And again. My arms burned with fatigue, while my hands were growing numb from the force of each brutal strike. Pain flared in my skull, and my spinning head was screaming in protest. My gut twisted in revulsion at each sickening *crunch* and the accompanying jolt I felt through the shattered shaft

of my spear.

I didn't stop. I couldn't stop until it was dead. The method didn't matter. Even without a spear tip, the result was the same. That was the most important thing, because I had learned—I *knew*—

"If you kill them, they die."

A wet *squelch* sounded as my spear shaft suddenly refused to move. It took me a moment to even realize what had happened. Apparently, the broken piece of wood had jammed deep inside the goblin's shattered eye socket. I gave up on retrieving it and looked down. The goblin's face was unrecognizable, its features reduced to a blood-soaked mess. It didn't so much as twitch.

I let out a shaky exhale. My lungs burned, and it felt like my whole body wanted to gasp for air. I was beyond winded from sprinting here at full speed before jumping into battle. I took a ragged breath and forced myself to stand. The moment I did, I heard a quiet, hitched breath followed by a small, trembling whimper.

I turned my gaze. Yune was staring at me, pale with fear.

Ah. I see. Of course.

I knew I looked terrifying to her. If our roles had been reversed, I would've been afraid too. I had pinned a goblin down, straddling it as I caved its face in, until it was nothing but a mutilated ruin and I was drenched in its blood. That must have been horrific to watch.

As I stood, my vision swayed and my legs wobbled. My mind blurred at the edges. Waine had said it didn't matter how you killed, as long as you got the job done. That had to be a lie, because I was pretty sure the way you look when you kill changes how people see you.

Not that I care, I thought.

I scanned my surroundings and spotted the other half of my spear, the part with the spearhead still attached, lying nearby. I picked it up with one hand and pressed the other to my forehead, where the pain had finally caught up to me. I could feel a deep gash carved into the upper part of my browplate. Blood was seeping from the torn fabric and dripping down my face in thick rivulets.

So I hadn't completely blocked that last strike. That wasn't

surprising. I had always thought this browplate was a crappy piece of armor, and now I knew I was right. To be fair, it had done its job. Just barely, anyway.

Wiping the blood from my right eye, I turned my back to Yune and walked away. My movements were frustratingly slow, and soon someone came up to me and stood in my way.

"What... What do you want?" I mumbled.

Liluetta's face was drained of all color. She was racked with fear, and her body trembled. Even so—even with goblin blood splattered across her, even after everything she had just seen—her gaze held firm as she glared at me.

"Did you come here just to say 'I told you so'?"

What is she talking about?

"Do you want to boast that you're stronger than us?"

Why is she making that face?

"Or..." Her voice wavered. "Or do you expect me to thank you for saving me?"

Every question she spat out only seemed to wound herself, like she was stabbing herself over and over again with every word.

If it hurts so much, then why are you even saying any of this?

"I... I didn't need you to come save me."

Enough already.

I didn't even know what she was saying anymore. The words barely registered in my mind, but I could still *feel* how loud she was. *So* loud. Without thinking, I lifted the broken spear and pointed the tip straight at her.

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"Hey, Waine. If that technique is supposed to help you beat someone stronger, does that mean I could use it to beat you?" After he taught me that shady-sounding secret technique, I still didn't feel convinced, so I asked him.

The result? A loud, booming laugh. "Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Yeah, right! Not a chance."

I frowned. If this technique could take Waine down, then maybe,

just maybe, it really was strong. But judging by his reaction, my first impression had been right. It wasn't all that great.

"But hey, good question, kiddo. That was sharp. I'll give you full marks for that one."

"A good question?" That threw me off. I hadn't expected praise after getting laughed at. *What was good about that?*

Waine smirked and twirled the twig in his hand. "That technique won't work on me 'cause I already know it. If you know a dirty trick like that exists, you'd have to be a real dumbass to fall for it, right?"

"I mean, yeah. That makes sense."

"Exactly. Knowing about it means you can be on guard against it." He gave the twig a little flick, like a teacher gesturing during a lesson. "I'll tell you this, kiddo. It's not just about *when* an enemy drops their weapon. No matter how good your position is, no matter how big an advantage you think you have, never let your guard down."

This so-called secret technique was about putting yourself at a disadvantage to lure the enemy into making a mistake. But really, it meant something even simpler. No matter how good or bad things seemed to be, nothing was final until the fight was over. This technique embodied that truth.

"The tide of battle can turn at any time. Until you've finished off every last enemy, until you've made sure they're dead, never assume the fight is over." Waine's expression was a little more serious than usual. Something about him felt different again. "Listen up, kiddo. Most things die when you kill 'em. But the flip side of that is, if you *don't* kill 'em, they won't die."

He paused, then grinned. "That's the *real* reason this dumbass move gets to be called a secret technique."

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The spear in my hand was short, having been broken halfway down its shaft. I stepped forward with a sharp thrust—the spearhead passed just beside Liluetta's pale, terrified, and stunned face and struck at something behind her.



"If you don't kill them, they don't die," I murmured.

I should've seen this coming, because I hadn't killed it yet. If it wasn't dead, then of course it could still move. That made sense.

It was the second goblin. I'd only smacked it with the shaft of my spear and sent it crashing to the ground earlier. It had been about to lunge at Liluetta before my spear pierced its throat.

Ahh, having a sharp weapon really is nice. Takes a lot less effort than beating something to death.

I stepped past Liluetta to get closer to the goblin. I didn't have much strength left, so I gripped the spear shaft with both hands and used the weight of my body to drive it in deeper. The point tore through flesh and scraped bone before it punched clean through the other side. This goblin was probably already injured and weak from my earlier attack. It wasn't even holding a weapon this time and didn't put up much of a fight before it just coughed blood and died.

I let out a breath. Finally, some relief. All three goblins were accounted for, and I didn't see any other enemies around. I couldn't say for sure that no other goblins were hiding somewhere, but for now, I had finished off every last one of the attackers. Liluetta and Yune were both alive, and neither of them seemed seriously hurt.

The battle was over.

"H-How? How did you know it was going to get back up?" Liluetta looked like she was going to collapse at any second.

I pulled the broken spear from the goblin and turned toward her. "If it's still alive, it's going to get back up." That was the only answer I could give, because it was the most obvious thing in the world.

If you kill them, they die. If you don't, they won't. What Waine had taught me was just a bunch of basic truths, the kind even an idiot could understand. But because he had only taught me the really obvious stuff, I didn't know what to do at times like this.

"Why... Why did you come after us?" Liluetta asked.

"I thought I'd bring you back," I answered honestly.

If I had caught up to Liluetta and Yune before they were attacked by the goblins, I would've dragged them off the mountain by force if I had to. But I'd spent too much time standing frozen back there. By the time I had caught up, they were already at the mana pool and

under attack.

"What?!" Liluetta's face crumpled as she raised her voice. "If you're that strong, then you should've just come with us from the start, you coward!"

Guess she didn't like my answer. Ah, seriously. What a selfish thing to say.

She was the one who had ignored my decision and disbanded the party to go on ahead. She was the one who had underestimated the goblins and called them weak monsters. Why did she ever become an adventurer? She wasn't suited for it at all.

A sharp *smack* echoed in the clearing. My palm stung, and Liluetta's face was turned to the side. One of her cheeks was slightly pink, and her expression was frozen in shock.

During the fight with the goblins, I'd forgotten the fact that I'd come all this way fueled by anger toward these two girls.

After a few heartbeats of silence, a thin, faint "ah" slipped out from Liluetta's lips. Large tears began to fall from her eyes.

"Ah... Ugh, ah... Ahhhh!"

Like a dam bursting, tears streamed down her face. Her choked sobs turned into wailing cries, and she fell to her knees.

I'd known she had been putting on a brave front, and what I'd done would be enough to shatter it. But I hadn't thought about what to do once it happened.

"Don't yell. What if there are still enemies nearby?" That was all I could say to a girl sobbing her heart out, even though I was the one who had made her cry.

I averted my eyes. This felt incredibly awkward. My head throbbed, and I was too dazed and dizzy to string my thoughts together. I had no idea what I was supposed to say. More importantly, we needed to get away. If there was something I needed to say to Liluetta, I could do it once we were somewhere safe.

Or so I thought.

"Huh?"

The world tilted. I tried to brace myself, but my knees buckled.

"K-Kiri-o!" Yune's voice sounded distant, somehow.

Everything went black.

Chapter 6: A Night for the Newcomers

Even though it was still early evening, and only some of the seats were filled, the smell of alcohol was already strong inside the dim guild. Scattered voices—people laughing or chatting idly—buzzed through the space. There were tables crowded with plates of food. Someone sat alone at the counter with a drink in hand. A party having a serious discussion stood in front of the wall where requests were pinned. Even after everything that had happened to us, the adventurer's guild was the same as ever.

Of course it is, I thought. *This is a place for people who live with danger as part of their daily routine.*

"Three goblins, huh? Hmph. You were lucky." The voice came from behind the reception counter. Barque, the leader of the guild, sounded somewhere between annoyed and unimpressed.

That reaction made sense. Someone like me had been the party leader, and the other two members were brand-new rookies. No one would ever expect us to handle monsters properly. Honestly, one or two of us could've died. I didn't think anyone would've been surprised if all three of us had been wiped out. The fact that we all made it back in one piece really was just luck.

I nodded. "Yeah. I think so too."

Barque shot a sharp look at my forehead. "That dent on your browplate. Was that from today?"

The wound on my head was already healed, but the notch on my browplate was still there.

"Yeah. I got slashed by a shortsword."

"You took a clean hit. I'm surprised that flimsy scrap of metal actually blocked it."

"Yeah... It didn't fully block the attack, though. I still got hurt, but

Yune healed me. Healing magic is amazing."

"Be careful. If it's a fatal hit, not even healin' magic can save you."

So bringing someone back from the dead is off the table, huh? I guess having a healer in your party doesn't mean you can go taking hits left and right. Not that I want to fight recklessly... Getting hurt still hurts.

Barque turned to the side and shifted in his seat while reaching for a feather pen with a worn tip. That meant our conversation was over. He always gave solid advice, even though he looked scary and spoke bluntly, so I thanked him and stepped away.

In my hand were a few small silver and copper coins, our reward for the day. I counted them out, then put exactly one-third into the pocket of my pants. I held on to the rest as I made my way to a table, tucked against the wall in a back corner of the room, where Liluetta and Yune were waiting for me.

After I'd passed out, Yune had apparently healed me with her magic. By the time I'd woken up, my head had stopped hurting and not a single scar had been left on my body. I probably hadn't been out for very long, because Liluetta had still been sniffling a bit and Yune had still looked pale. Everything had still felt awkward too, so we'd made our way down the mountain without saying much.

At the table, Liluetta and Yune were sitting side by side. The two seats across from them were both empty—one of those was probably for me. Both girls wore gloomy expressions as they sat in silence with their heads bowed. They didn't notice me until I was standing beside the table.

"I reported to Barque," I said. Both of them looked up in surprise.

Instead of sitting down, I kept talking. "This is something I only just found out. It seems like goblin hunting is considered a permanent request. It's like an ongoing job from the lord, so adventurers who take out goblins at any time, even while they're doing something else, will get paid for it. The reward's not much, though."

I set their share from the money Barque had given me on the table. This was the only reason I'd asked them to wait for me. Now

that it was done, I had no more business here—no reason to sit down.

"See you." I turned on my heel.

"Wait..." came Liluetta's quiet voice behind me.

But I didn't stop. I walked between tables, past all the noisy adventurers, and headed for the guild's exit.

The whole way down the mountain, I'd been thinking about what I should say to Liluetta and Yune. In the end, I decided there was nothing I needed to say. They had already left my party. It had ended with a falling-out, which wasn't great, but they had been planning to look for different companions from the start anyway.

And if what had happened on the mountain made the two of them quit being adventurers, maybe that wouldn't be so bad. They weren't struggling to make a living or anything, though I kind of had a feeling they weren't going to give up.

What would I even say if I sat down at that table? I asked myself.

Would I scold them for acting recklessly? But I'm a rookie too.

Would I try to convince them to stay in the party? But they were the ones who left.

Would I tell them to quit because they're not cut out for this? But being an adventurer means being free to make your own choices, so giving advice like that would be pointless.

There's really nothing I can say. That's why it's better to leave without saying anything, I decided.

I had made sure they got out of there safely. I had given them their fair share of the reward for defeating the goblins. There was nothing left to do. Even if I felt a little uneasy, this was the end. There was nothing more I could do.

As I stepped out of the guild, Waine was there like he'd been lying in wait for me.

"Yo, kiddo. What's with the face?" he asked. "You're lookin' all gloomy."

"It's obvious." Sheya peeked into the guild as she placed a hand on my shoulder. "Those two made a mistake."

"Oh, yup. Your spear got busted," said Chikka, noticing the damage. "If you're gonna get it repaired, don't go to that blacksmith

on the main street. That place is for pots and pans and stuff. I'll hook you up with a good smith, one who's cheap and skilled." She casually pulled the broken spear out of the basket on my back.

Being surrounded by the three of them made me clutch my forehead. The injury was fully healed, but for some reason I felt a sudden headache coming on. And then, a wave of exhaustion washed over me.

"Ah, um, thanks, Chikka," I said with a weak smile. "I appreciate it." Knowing a good smith *was* important, since I couldn't go on any adventures with a broken weapon.

Then I turned to face Waine and Sheya. "Uh, so..." I hesitated. "You two..."

There was a different kind of weight in my chest now. It was a weird, restless feeling, like an *is this really okay?* kind of emotion. We were definitely not kindred spirits. At the same time, I didn't have anyone else to rely on.

"What's up, kiddo?" Waine asked.

Sheya raised an eyebrow. "What's on your mind?"

I can't say that I don't care about what's going to happen to Liluetta and Yune, because that would be a lie. Is it really okay to leave things like this? Or maybe I should be asking, is it really okay to leave those two girls in their hands? Waine and Sheya will definitely handle it... Somehow. Except I have an awful feeling they'll make things worse.

I squeezed my eyes shut, turned my face away, and forced myself to speak. "Please. I have a request."

"Oh, c'mon, did you see the look on his face just now? That was the *worst* way to ask someone for a favor I've ever seen," Waine muttered.

"He looked deeply unwilling," Sheya added.

I pretended not to hear them. They were definitely not talking or making snide comments. I was not anxious and not thinking this was a bad gamble while I started walking away as fast as I could. Well, it was more like running away. *I'm already nervous, and there's no way I'm going to stick around and watch everything play out. I don't even want to know what happens after.*

"Jeez. That's your job as the leader too, y'know," Waine called out.

"That kind of thing? Easy." Sheya headed into the guild.

Did Waine sound exasperated just now? And didn't Sheya sound kind of ominous? Nope. Didn't hear any of that. I kept walking.

Chikka waved her hand. "Hey, tiny, not that way. You're going the wrong direction."

I *did* hear that, so I turned around in a hurry.

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As Kiri disappeared beyond the door, I slowly sank back into my seat. It felt like a hole had been punched through my chest, and a hollow emptiness was taking over. I had stood up when he had walked away, but I still couldn't make myself take a single step. I hadn't even called out to him.

That hollow space was soon filled with despair.

He had left money behind and simply said, "See you," before walking away without so much as a trace of anger.

Why was he so calm? How could he leave, just like that? Surely he must've had at least one or two things he wanted to say to us. At the same time, some part of me was relieved he hadn't. Not wanting to hear what he might have to say was why I didn't chase after him, yet I was horrified at my own inaction.

Kiri was always kind to us, even though we treated him horribly. Even though I said such awful things. Even though I never even thanked him for saving us. And after all I did—after all I failed to do—I still haven't apologized.

"Why?" I asked out loud.

It wasn't like I never had the chance. I could've said something right after he saved us, or while we were walking back to town. There had been plenty of opportunities, but I was too afraid to face him.

"Why did it have to end up like this?"

If he had just gotten angry, then at least I could've had the chance to be forgiven.

I covered my eyes with both hands. I fought against my urge to cry with everything I had. I didn't deserve to shed a single tear right now. Someone who was selfish, thoughtless, and too cowardly to apologize had no right to cry and pretend to be worthy of compassion.

I had thought I was right. Goblins were dangerous monsters that attacked people and stole crops and livestock. Enough of them could destroy entire villages or towns. Clearly, there was nothing good about leaving them alone. That was why I had thought seeing a goblin meant you should defeat it. Because of that, Yune and I had nearly died. And the one who had come to save us could have died in our place.

I had worked hard and learned magia despite its difficulty, so I had thought I could handle a fight. But I didn't have nearly enough strength, knowledge, skill, or experience. Even after returning safely, I still couldn't stop trembling.

When the goblin had brought its blade down on Kiri, I'd felt all the blood drain from my face. Despair had nearly crushed me when he had collapsed to the ground. While Yune had been healing him, when he had still been unconscious, I remembered not feeling alive at all—just numb.

"Someone could've died. We could've all died out there because of me." I had to say it, even though I didn't want to admit I wasn't strong enough to carry that kind of burden. I couldn't even thank him. I was so desperate to escape from the guilt, to push the blame onto someone else, that I had ended up lashing out at the one person who had done nothing wrong.

How can he just walk away after all that?

"Maybe leaving behind the goblin hunting money is his way of saying we're even," Yune murmured beside me.

She sounded completely drained too. He had saved us, but Yune had healed him with her magic. Maybe he saw that as a lingering debt, and he was settling the score by leaving behind our share of the reward. If that was the case, then it really was over. I had broken the party apart to begin with, and now all ties had truly been severed. There was nothing connecting us anymore.

"That was scary, huh? Being an adventurer," Yune said. Her voice was quiet as she shivered beside me.

I couldn't nod, because I couldn't agree with her right away—not because I hadn't been afraid during the adventure but because I wasn't sure what she was referring to: Was Yune afraid of the goblins, or was she afraid of *him*?

I had seen how Kiri had swung his spear at the goblin. I had heard the sickening sounds and watched blood fly through the air. I had been right there when he had beaten a goblin's face into an unrecognizable mess, until there was no doubt it was dead, and I had felt the terror when the goblin that should have been defeated had risen and attacked me from behind.

I had witnessed what it truly meant to kill. I had seen the eyes of someone who carried the resolve to fight until the enemy was dead, no matter how horrific the means. And I had frozen at the sight.

When I had first stepped into that mana-rich field, surrounded by the beautiful landscape, a rush of exhilaration had filled my body. I remembered thinking, *"So this is adventuring."* I had truly believed *that* was what it meant to be an adventurer.

But I had been wrong, and now I understood. Yune seemed to understand it too, deep in her bones. The real essence of adventuring lay in the depths of *his* eyes.

"It *was* scary," I finally said.

Kiri knew. He knew—he knows—killing is the only choice when your life is on the line. And if you can't accept that, you die.

I wanted him to be angry. I wanted him to blame me. He could've told me, "From now on, you do what I say," or even, "Don't ever show your face again." Anything would've been better than him walking away like that.

I just... I want him to tell me how I can make it right.

"Yo, what's with the mood here? You at a funeral or something?" said a loud, familiar voice.

"Youthful drama," added a smoother voice beside it. "Pairs nicely with a drink."

Those were voices I recognized—voices I had no desire to hear. I looked up anyway and saw two faces I knew. They placed wooden

mugs filled to the brim with alcohol on the table, pulled out the chairs opposite us without so much as a by-your-leave, and sat down.

"Well, you two look pretty funn—I mean, depressed," said the man with a crooked grin. "If you want, we veteran adventurers can lend an ear."

The woman next to him wore a small, elegant smile. "Right now, we're the ones who know him best."

It was that rude warrior whose name I couldn't remember and the beautiful mage, Sheya, two of the adventurers Kiri had introduced us to from the sewer expedition. They were sitting across from Yune and me like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Wh-What are you doing here?" I asked, still stunned.

"What do you mean, what?" the warrior asked, leaning back and stretching an arm over the back of his chair. "The kid's spear was busted, and his browplate had that gash in it. Clearly something went down, yeah? And you two look like you've been through the wringer. Of course we're gonna check in."

"We're in the mood to look after some newcomers," Sheya added lightly, taking a sip from her mug without looking at us.

So it was just on a whim, then. Here we were, seriously and painfully shaken, and they just showed up with drinks in hand like nothing was wrong.

"Anyway," the warrior said, resting his elbows on the table, "let's hear it. What happened? Talking it out doesn't cost you anything, right?"

If it had been any other day, I might've yelled at them. These two were easily the most obnoxious people in the whole adventurer's guild as far as I was concerned. But the truth was, they *did* seem to know Kiri really well. That mage had even gone so far as to lend him one of her expensive magia books. They were clearly closer to him than we were, plus we had no one else to turn to.

I had no idea what I was supposed to do. "The truth is..." I began hesitantly.

I refused to believe that it was supposed to end like this. I couldn't just leave things as they were. So I clung to the two people

in front of me—the only people who might understand how I felt—and told our story.

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"Pfft! Wah ha ha ha ha!"

I buried my face in my hands and tried to block out the sound of that man's laughter. I *never* should've opened up to them. What was I thinking? It must've been a moment of weakness. Would anyone *really* blame me if I fired off a magic blast at them right now?

"Excellent. A delightful side dish for drinking."

Sheya was already on her third drink, but her face hadn't flushed in the slightest. Just how twisted did your personality have to be to knock back drinks so happily while using someone else's failure as entertainment?

"I admit it," I said through gritted teeth. "We let our guard down. That's why they caught us by surprise. That's why we ended up in a life-and-death situation against goblins."

"No, that's not it," the warrior said, waving a hand dismissively. "That's not the funny part, and you're wrong about that anyway. You two would've been in danger even without the ambush."

I frowned, offended by his tone. But what he said after that left me with no choice but to bite my lower lip in frustration.

"Man, I needed that laugh. Seriously, it's a miracle you two made it back alive. Getting killed by goblins isn't that unusual, you know. Someone from this guild died fighting goblins just recently. You screwed up the moment you headed straight into a likely ambush. You underestimated everything."

"If you get cut by a sword, you die," Sheya added flatly.

The warrior nodded. "Unless you're decked out in full plate armor. Even then, I wouldn't walk right into something like that head-on."

The two adventurers' message was clear: Never underestimate your enemy. Who or what that enemy was didn't matter, as long as they were capable of hurting or killing you. That was a lesson I couldn't argue against.

Even these two, with all their strength and experience, would've

approached that situation with caution. And yet I had charged right in, thinking goblins were weak monsters barely worth considering. In other words, I had been wrong from the start.

"That's why Kiri didn't come with us at first," I muttered. "He understood that no matter how strong you are, charging into a disadvantageous situation is a mistake. I get that now."

Under different circumstances, I was sure he could've taken down the goblins easily. But because he had been trying to save the two of us, he had taken a hit that might've killed him.

"That's wrong too," Sheya said calmly, taking a sip from her drink as she refuted my words. "He's not that strong."

Okay, I mean, he doesn't look strong. But the truth is, I saw him take down three goblins with my own eyes.

Sure, there were probably a lot of adventurers who could handle three goblins. Maybe he wasn't considered strong compared to others in the guild. These two could probably wipe out goblins without breaking a sweat.

"Maybe he's about even with one goblin?" I offered.

"Nah, nah." The warrior shook his head. "To be fair, the kid's got the edge. He's got reach with that spear, wears armor, and hey, I've been training him lately. Still, at best he's the kind of guy who'd win maybe three outta five times."

"Huh?" Yune let out a surprised little noise.

I felt the same way.

"B-But Kiri-o *did* save us," Yune protested, clearly confused. "He took down three goblins all on his own. Doesn't that kind of result count for something?"

"Oh, sure. But he only did that..." The warrior paused to take a deep gulp of his drink. Without putting his mug down, he stuck a finger out to point at me and Yune in turn. "Because you two were there."

Because we were there?

"Don't get me wrong," he added. "I'm not saying something cheesy like 'he awakened his hidden potential to save the damsels in distress.' It's not some stage-play nonsense like that." In the rowdy adventurer's guild, filled with the usual clamor, the warrior—with that

stupid-looking grin of his—spread his arms wide in an exaggerated, theatrical gesture.

"The first one he took down was the goblin going after you, the mage girl, right? Stabbed it from behind. The second one smacked itself in the face with its own weapon when it turned its back on you, cleric girl. It was out cold for a while. He killed the third one even after his spear broke. And then, when the second one got back up, he finished it off with the broken spear." He recounted our whole story from beginning to end, counting each goblin off with his thick fingers, then tapped his temple and grinned. "Seriously, use your head. The kid only fought one of them head-on."

The man still looked like an idiot. That grin was absolutely moronic. But what he had just said was true.

Sheya sipped her drink. "The two of you were positioned as the vanguard. You drew the enemies' attention and acted as a shield to protect your ally. In other words, you served a vital role as a tank in that fight," she said calmly. Her tone was surprisingly serious. And then, she added, "That's too generous. Decoy is more accurate."

You didn't have to correct yourself.

"Or, better yet, bait."

Our value's dropping with every word. Doesn't bait exist to get killed?

The warrior picked up where he had left off. "The kid's weak, but he's smart. He's fully aware of how weak he is, and he knows taking on three goblins at once will get him killed. I didn't even have to beat that fact into his skull. He already gets all of that. Actually, from your story just now, it sounds like that clever little brat even understands exactly how and why he managed to win—because you two split the goblins up and distracted them."

Despite not being able to follow a normal conversation yesterday, he became unusually talkative when it came to explaining battle mechanics. It must be a matter of experience. He's likely been through a lot of fights. And now, this seasoned warrior was looking at me and Yune and laughing like he genuinely found us amusing. *Not in a mean way. If anything, it looks like he's...* I had to think for a moment to decipher the man's behavior. *It looks like he's pleased?*

"You might be thinking you were just getting saved the whole time during that goblin fight. But, in reality, that was a *party battle.*"

"That's..." I struggled to get the words out. "That can't be right."

"Y-Yeah," Yune agreed, her lips twisting with disbelief. "I can't accept that either."

Of course she couldn't. Neither could I. That was nothing but self-serving rationalization. *A party battle? I got caught off guard, didn't cast a single spell, and just stood there watching Kiri fight and rescue us. How did any of that help the party?*

"Of course it doesn't sit right with you," the warrior said with a shrug. "If you walked away from that thinking, 'Yep, we totally did our part,' that would be a problem." He laughed loudly, almost mockingly, and took a big swig of his drink. He was clearly in a good mood. Having drained his mug, he raised a hand and called out for a refill in a booming voice. He was only on his first drink, but maybe he couldn't hold his liquor as well as Sheya because his cheeks were starting to turn a little red. "Hey, if you're actually feeling down about it, that's not a bad sign."

It was hard not to think he was just having fun teasing us. There was no guarantee these two were telling us anything we could take at face value.

"There are all kinds of situations in combat," Sheya said, poking the man's arm with her own mug. Then, with a glance, she silently ordered another drink. She'd already finished three using our story as entertainment, and now she was going for a fourth.

Sheya lifted a single slender finger and pointed at Yune and me. "Mages or healers are meant to be in the rear guard. Close combat is one of the worst-case scenarios you can be in."

Technically, Yune *was* wearing light armor, and she'd received a little pole mace training from the church. But getting technical with Sheya wouldn't change anything. We really had been in a terrible situation.

"Still, dangerous situations happen. If you're going to keep adventuring, you'll have to push through those kinds of things again and again." She took another quiet sip, then set her mug on the table. Raising her pale, slender hand, she slowly traced the rim with

her finger in a gesture that reminded me of a fortune teller. “Why didn’t he shout out at the very beginning?”

It took me several seconds to understand what she was asking. And when I did, my breath caught in my throat.

“Shouting could have drawn the goblins’ attention. That might’ve reduced the pressure on you two. At least, one of the goblins would’ve turned to deal with him, giving you the chance to regroup.” Speaking more freely than usual, the beautiful mage laid out a hypothetical that had never happened.

This felt like the crux of our whole conversation. Or was she just a bit loose-lipped after drinking? I really wasn’t sure.

“But he didn’t make that choice,” Sheya continued. “He used the fact that you two were being attacked to prioritize taking down one of them first. You became part of his strategy.”

Back then, I’d only realized Kiri had come to save us *after* the spearhead had pierced through the goblin’s throat. Just as Sheya said, he hadn’t shouted. Not once. The goblin hadn’t even noticed him until the moment he drove his spear in from behind. All of its attention had been on me.

“He made a judgment call. He couldn’t defeat all three goblins unless he handled the fight that way. He understood he couldn’t win alone better than anyone. That’s what the money on the table means,” Sheya explained.

I looked over at the coins sitting at the edge of the table. They were mostly copper pieces—the reward was far too small for the risk he’d taken. And yet, there it was.

“That money? He wouldn’t have gotten it if you hadn’t been there. So he figured he ought to split it with you and left it behind on purpose. Pretty damn honest of him, huh?” The warrior’s casual, indifferent tone carried the unspoken message: *It doesn’t matter what you think about it.*

Whether we felt like we were saved, or that we had just gotten in the way, or that we had done something unforgivable... No matter how strongly we believed any of that, Kiri had no intention of listening. From his perspective, the only fact that mattered was this: He didn’t have the strength to beat three goblins on his own. That

was the truth he had acted on.

"If you've got three people, the enemy's gotta divide its attention. Just being there made you part of the fight, whether you like it or not." The warrior shrugged.

"A special case," Sheya added coolly, her fingers tapping her mug. "The division of the reward is up to those involved. If he left that money behind, then it's yours to take."

My jaw clenched, and I felt my back teeth grinding together. Tears stung at the corners of my eyes. I couldn't accept it. I *refused* to accept it. "I-I made the wrong call," I said quietly. "I went off on my own, got us into that mess, and in the end, we had to be saved."

"Everyone screws up," the warrior said with a smirk.

"Falling into danger is part of the job," Sheya echoed, lifting her mug again.

Their words chopped mine down and sliced them away as if they didn't matter. And maybe they didn't.

"Adventuring doesn't always go smooth." The warrior took another swig. "Actually, if it *did*, it wouldn't be called adventuring, would it?"

Adventuring meant facing danger and pressing forward in spite of it.

Just then, a woman from the kitchen arrived with another round of drinks and placed them on the table. Both adventurers looked relaxed and unbothered, but they reached for their mugs right away.

The warrior took a long drink, then let out a satisfied sigh before glancing back at us again. "That's exactly why you form a party, yeah?" he said, gesturing with his mug. "You team up with people who can cover what you can't handle."

"A party exists," Sheya added softly, with a small smile, "to support one another where we're lacking."

My throat tightened, and I couldn't get any words out. My thoughts were a tangled mess. At that point, I didn't even know what I was trying to argue against anymore. If you had a mage and a healer, then ideally, you'd want a warrior too. Having a scout would be even better, as would having more than one person who could hold the front line. That was how parties were supposed to be

formed, right?

But forming a party only for the sake of getting through danger is wrong. It has to be wrong. Because if we're supposed to follow that logic—if ideal formations were all that mattered—then Kiri... I...

"Exactly," Sheya said. The beautiful mage nodded easily, as if my thought process were completely expected—obvious, even—and easy to swallow, just like another sip of her drink. "A party that makes up for each other's weaknesses, avoids critical danger, and completes every quest smoothly is an ideal that's difficult to achieve." She said it plainly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Most adventuring parties max out at about six people."

I'd heard that before. Adventurers didn't like working in large groups. Unlike knights or mercenaries, adventurers valued mobility and worked in small, agile teams. That was supposed to be their strength, but that strength was also a glaring weakness.

"Any more than that and it's a pain to manage," the warrior chimed in. "You'd be squabbling over how to split the reward every single time."

"Huh? So it's just a matter of having no organizational skills?" Yune said with a disappointed frown. She sounded crestfallen.

My head throbbed a little, but maybe he had a point. The two adventurers sitting right here in front of us didn't *look* particularly suited for teamwork. That halfling who wasn't with them today had a strong personality too, as I recalled. Sure, it probably varied from person to person, but if these types of people were the ones gravitating toward the adventurer's guild, then forming a large, cohesive group sounded like a stretch.

"Too many people is a burden. It kills your freedom." Sheya's words sounded like they touched on the essence of what it meant to be an adventurer.

Freedom. Without that, how could you even call yourself an adventurer? If you were just going to take on burdens by choice, then there would be no need to be an adventurer. It felt like a heavy lump of lead deep in my chest had suddenly shifted and made itself known. My throat was dry, and I felt tears threatening to spill, but I held them back with all my strength. Now wasn't the time to cry. I

had to focus on what was being said.

"Responding to sudden requests, traveling quickly, maneuvering in tight spaces... There are many advantages to working in a small group," Sheya explained. "Above all else, it's less stressful. But—"

"That also means you're operating with the bare minimum number of people." I finished her sentence without even thinking. It was too obvious not to. There was a reason knights and mercenary bands prioritized numbers, and that reason was strength. Increasing personnel let them handle a wide range of scenarios and helped ensure the success of a mission. Of course, large organizations moved slowly and got bogged down with politics and rules. Its members were constrained by regulations, and there were logistic challenges like an ever-growing number of mouths to feed.

Adventurers were agile and straightforward precisely because they worked in small groups. In exchange, they carried the inherent risk of being far more vulnerable when things went wrong. And that was just something we had to accept when we chose to live as adventurers.

"You have to choose your companions carefully." Sheya tilted her mug as she said this.

It was the same advice we'd gotten from Chikka, the halfling scout. But hearing it again struck a completely different chord in my chest. I had been worried about those who tried to take advantage of my upbringing, but that didn't matter anymore. The very fact that I had let such petty concerns get to me was my mistake from the beginning.

What these adventurers had really been saying was this: Choose someone who won't bring danger upon you carelessly. Choose someone you can trust, someone who will stand with you when a crisis comes. And choose someone you won't regret being with, even if you end up dying together. If you want to be someone's companion, then become the kind of adventurer who's worthy of that choice.

"What should I do?" The words slipped out in a whisper so faint I could barely recognize them as my own. I hadn't understood anything. The adventurers had given me a direct warning, plain and

clear, but I'd taken it as superficial advice and never stopped to think deeper. And I hadn't met a single one of the conditions required to be a chosen companion.

My thoughts were a tangled mess. The smell of alcohol drifting from the table was nauseating, but this was the only place I could cling to. I just wanted someone, anyone, to tell me what to do.

"Just laugh it off, maybe?"

"It's not a big deal."

I slammed the table with both hands. No sound came from my mouth, but the stinging pain in my clenched fists screamed loud enough. My head was a storm of confusion and emotion.

"M-My lady..." murmured Yune, worriedly.

I heard Yune's voice. She was trying to stop me, but I ignored her.

"You two..." I had to take several breaths before I could continue. "You're just sitting there, laughing at people and drinking your drinks. Maybe that's fine for you..." I couldn't raise my voice. I didn't feel like I had the right to yell or throw a fit. Still, my voice trembled. I couldn't lift my head, so all I could glare at was the grain of the wooden table. But I still *had* to say something—anything—to the two people sitting across from me. "You're the ones who offered to listen. So if we ask something, you should at least answer us seriously."

"We *are* serious," the warrior said.

At that moment, I seriously considered firing off a magic blast. I honestly felt like I could blow a hole right through that idiotic face of his. "If you want to say you're taking this seriously, then put down the drinks. It's insulting to treat us like this just because we're new."

"Hey, look at you, you're getting your fire back," he said, grinning. "But sorry, no can do. To me, your little disaster sounds like a good old-fashioned rookie screwup. And when rookies screw up, the best way to handle it is to laugh it off over drinks. That's how adventurers do it."

"That's absurd!" I'd had enough. I felt fury burn in my throat and reached for my wand.

"You all came back alive, didn't you?" he asked.

That single rhetorical question stopped me. A chill ran down my spine, and my blood went cold. In that moment, I finally understood where we were—what kind of place this truly was.

"Nobody died, nobody lost a limb or suffered a life-changing injury. All of you came back in one piece. Congrats! That's a win. Our party would be throwing a party about now, saying, 'Whew, that sucked, but we made it!' Though, with *that* kind of reward, maybe we'd just get a nicer meal than usual." The warrior scratched his cheek, glancing at the coins sitting on the table.

"Reflection is important. Regret is optional," the mage added, sipping her drink as calmly as ever.

Adventuring meant risking your life, and death was inevitable sometimes. These two had accepted that as if it were as natural as breathing. Even though I had nearly died, I still hadn't fully grasped that reality. But the adventurer's guild was the kind of place where people really, truly understood this way of living.

"Honestly, watching you all mope around like this is a drag. You're alive. Being alive means you can make up for anything. Figure out what you did wrong, reflect on it, then hurry up and decide what to do next."

The warrior was gruff and blunt, like someone who had long since abandoned the idea of acting like a "normal" person. But everything he said made a cruel kind of sense.

"Save the real breakdown for when something happens you *can't* fix. You're adventurers now. There'll be times when something hurts so bad you can't breathe, when you can't move forward no matter what. When that happens, fine. Drink yourself stupid, curl up somewhere, and cry like the world's ending. You'll be just one of many in this place."

Kiri had once said that all adventurers were screwups. If that were true... If everyone who became an adventurer—who was still an adventurer—ended up with that kind of mindset, then they clearly lived by values that set them apart from ordinary people. To outsiders, those values might even seem downright heartless.

But adventurers had simply stopped living normal lives. Everyone here had been through experiences so harrowing, so punishing, that

no one with a typical mindset could have endured it. The place was full of people that society might label "damaged."

"Exactly," the mage said softly. "Like, say, someone whose crush married another party member and retired, leaving him all alone and heartbroken."

The warrior banged his forehead into the table, hard. The *thunk* of the collision was even louder than when I had slammed the table with my fists earlier. He raised his head with a slow, creaking motion like a rusty door and glared at the woman beside him with a look of pure betrayal. "You asshole. I was finally starting to forget that."

"You've never lost a comrade on a mission, so don't act all high and mighty, Waine."

"You haven't either, you lazy, good-for-nothing loner drunk!"

"Alcohol is meant to be enjoyed." Sheya took a serene sip from her mug.

A man howling like a stray dog and a woman drinking like his tantrum didn't exist—I supposed not everyone drank to forget their sorrows. The sight of these two filled me with a deep, overwhelming sense of secondhand embarrassment. No matter how I looked at them, they really did seem like just plain old screwups.

I sank back down into my seat with a dazed look on my face and stared blankly across the table at the adventurers in front of me. In the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the coins Kiri had left behind. I turned my head a little, and the rest of the tavern came into view.

Despite how noisy we had been, not a single person was looking in our direction. Other tables were even louder than us, and there were groups deep in conversation too. Near the requests wall, people were lined up reading job postings. The usual bustle of the adventurer's guild surrounded us, and we were just one part of it.

Ah... I let out a soft sigh. *Isn't this what it means to be free?* I inhaled, slow and deep, and exhaled like I was trying to clear out the fog in my chest.

I felt a sense of conviction in my heart, like I had come to a decision, and I put that feeling into words. "When I become an adult," I announced, "I will *not* be anything like the two of you."

"Yeah, don't do that," said the warrior.

"Please don't," said the mage.

Their perfectly synchronized reply brought a wry smile to my lips.

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"Well... Think that was good enough?" I asked.

The two girls had just left, and I set my drink down quietly on the table. The mug was still half full—I liked alcohol, but I was no heavyweight. Two drinks were usually fine, but these had hit me fast. I'd downed them on an empty stomach while trying to keep up with the conversation, so I hadn't really paced myself.

Glad my tab is cheap, at least. But I'll be nursing a hangover tomorrow if I keep drinking... I blame the bottomless pit next to me. The way she drinks just isn't natural.

"'Good' is a bit of a stretch," Sheya replied, calmly finishing her fourth drink and setting her mug down.

I glanced at her. *We've been drinking the same thing, but her face isn't even turning pink.*

"But they'll figure it out," she added.

"That's fine, then," I said. "As long as it buys us a few days." The kid had only asked us to look out for those girls. It didn't really matter if they saw through the little performance Sheya and I had just put on.

People made mistakes in judgment, and getting into dangerous situations was part of the deal. To survive, you teamed up with others. But those two had made a mistake that could've gotten them killed. They weren't even part of an official party, just a temporary one, and they'd still ignored their leader's decisions and gone off on their own. That wasn't something you could just laugh off.

If the two of them had been more careful, things wouldn't have gotten so bad. But they'd made the situation into a matter of life and death. People like that were a liability no matter how many lives you had to spare. What they had done would get them kicked out of any party. If word got around, they were gonna have a hard time finding new teammates.

I had only laughed it off because the kid wanted us to help those girls out. It was still too soon to take something like that lightly. You had to reflect on your mistakes, then earn back the trust you lost and clear your name. Only then does it become a funny story.

"Well, that's just how it goes with newbies," I muttered. *Everyone starts out as a beginner, and beginners screw up. Guess it's okay to let a big mistake slide just once. If they screw up again, though? Then they'll get a real lecture.*

"We should have told them to quit," Sheya said. Having finished her drink, she folded her hands and placed them on the table. Her voice had taken on a quiet seriousness that cut through the noise. There was weight behind her words. "Those two aren't cut out for this."

"Yeah. I mean, you're not wrong," I admitted. I'd been thinking the same thing. That was why I'd gone out of my way to meddle with that mage girl's business in the first place.

You could tell from a glance or from the aura someone gives off. Those two weren't damaged goods like the rest of us. They didn't have that look in their eye, the kind that says *I'll climb to the top with a sword*, or *I'm here for quick riches,* or even *I just don't feel like working a normal job.* They were normal, serious, and earnest people who still had a sense of right and wrong. Those kinds of people were the ones most likely to do something reckless.

"Well, whatever." I shrugged. "I don't know what they plan to do from here, but adventurers are free to choose whether they keep going or quit."

"They got lucky this time. Next time, they'll die," Sheya responded.

Sure, we could let it slide once. But the second time? That's when you sat them down and gave them a proper lecture. If they screwed up a third time, maybe it would be better for everyone to just kick them out. *If* they came back alive.

"Adventuring's all about taking responsibility. But yeah, you end up worrying about the people you've crossed paths with, don't you?" I observed.

Sheya was the kind of person who thought being in a party was a

hassle and worked solo to avoid that. Just having a conversation was a chore for her, and she didn't seem to be close to anyone in particular. She didn't even really start hanging around me and Chikka until after we explored the sewers. Because of that, she'd never experienced losing a party member—never had someone close to her go out and not come back.

I grabbed my mug and stared at the drink inside. *When Old Badger died, and that kid was raring to get back out there, Sheya was the first one who offered to help. Guess this woman just isn't used to people dying. No wonder she's being so sensitive about those two girls. The guilt from thinking you might've gotten someone killed weighs heavy, even on a seasoned adventurer. If someone really dies because of you, that would haunt your dreams.*

"They told me I wasn't cut out for this too, you know." I took a long drink and grimaced at how the alcohol stung the inside of my nose. I knew it would hit me hard later, but I forced myself to swallow.

"People said stuff like, if you're gonna be a warrior, it's better to start off as a coward. Or, bravery's something you can pick up over time, but a brave fool trying to learn caution doesn't get the chance until after they're dead." I swallowed again and felt my throat burn. *A guy needs to be at least a little drunk to tell this kind of story.*

"I was a reckless little brat. Didn't know fear. People were always telling me I wasn't cut out for this." A soft chuckle slipped out.

Maybe it was just the alcohol talking, but the kid might actually make a decent warrior. After all, when we'd first met, I hadn't felt the urge to tell him to stop trying.

No, who am I kidding? That's nonsense. I can't imagine him becoming some kind of great hero. Anyway, we're talking about those other rookies. The two who screwed up, got themselves into a tight spot, and still made it back in one piece by some stroke of luck. Watching them feels like looking back at myself once upon a time.

"But hey, they faced death and came out alive. So maybe they learned something, yeah?"

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I gathered my mana, recited the incantation, and activated the spell. A light flickered to life at the tip of my wand. Even though it had been damaged by the goblin's club, I could still use magia without any issues.

The sky had already begun to grow dark when we left the guild, and it would likely be pitch black by the time we returned to the estate. It was dangerous for two women to walk alone at night. Having our own light served as a form of protection.

To the average person, magia was mysterious and frightening. Being able to use it was often enough to make other people wary or uneasy. A simple beginner-level spell like this served as a kind of introduction that announced the presence of a mage. No one halfway sensible would even think of trying anything.

Still, I could no longer confidently say, "Even if someone attacks me, I'll just beat them down." Not after everything that had happened. To think I had used that exact line as an excuse to turn down my family's offer to send someone for us...

"Let's take the main road," I said.

"Yes, my lady," Yune replied.

I had made that suggestion because it seemed like the safest route, but then I realized the main road was the only way home. It took some time to get from the guild to the estate, but the trip was straightforward with merely two turns.

I started walking, keeping my gaze forward on purpose to avoid looking at my friend's face.

"Yune. I'm sorry about today." I'd barely taken a few steps before those words slipped out.

"Ohhhh, it's quite all right. I underestimated adventuring too, you know." Yune spoke slowly, and her words were drawn out as usual.

We had light, but I couldn't bring myself to look at her expression. I could not deny that I had made a mistake in judgment, and she had nearly died because of it.

"Actually," she continued, "Grandfather Magnan asked me to accompany you to make sure you didn't get involved with anything dangerous. He was *so* worried since you absolutely refused to hire a bodyguard or anything."

"What?" That sudden revelation caught me off guard, and I turned to look at her before I could stop myself.

Yune met my eyes with a rueful look. There was concern in her expression, maybe, but not a trace of guilt. Her brows lowered in something close to sympathy. "Since Kiri-o seemed like the type who wouldn't do anything reckless," she said, her voice lilting as always, "I figured it'd be fine, you know. So I suggested you go along with him, my lady, and up to that point everything was going according to plan. But," she added, a sheepish note creeping in, "since I was already pushing you in that direction, I really should've told you to follow his lead all the way through."

I stopped walking and turned toward her, narrowing my eyes. "Wait a second. You were doing all this because grandfather asked you? He never told me anything about that."

Yune winced slightly but didn't back down. "He told me not to mention it, sooo..."

Of course. That old man knows I would object if I knew. And Yune, who's my friend*, clearly prioritized him over me. I wouldn't be surprised if he bought her off with another box of those fancy sweets he keeps ordering from the capital.*

"But," Yune continued, her tone softening as she looked ahead, "I've treated my fair share of people who got hurt by monsters. So I also thought what *you* said made sense, my lady."

I didn't respond right away. She didn't need to remind me. She might call me "my lady," but there was no real master-servant dynamic between us. Yune might seem timid, but she always spoke up when it mattered. She had a quiet kind of strength, and her sense of justice might've been stronger than mine.

She'd felt the same way I had. That much, I understood.

"Those adventurers made fools of us." This was the truth I *really* needed to say.

The sound of our footsteps echoed softly against the stone-paved street. It was getting late. With so few people around, even a quiet sound like that stood out. The passersby who spotted us flinched at the glow of my light spell like they'd just seen a ghost. The lord was open-minded about magic, so using it in public wasn't forbidden as

long as it wasn't dangerous. Even so, we still got *those* looks. Maybe that was because there just weren't many magic users.

"They sure did, didn't they?" Yune murmured beside me in agreement.

We continued in silence for about ten more steps, then both of us let out a long sigh. It wasn't the fact that we'd been laughed at. What stung, what felt downright pitiful, was the fact that those adventurers' flippant, haphazard words had actually managed to lift our spirits.

"I'm never doing that again," I muttered.

"Absolutely not," Yune agreed without missing a beat.

The magical light on my wand lit the path ahead. "Yune."

"Yes, my lady?"

"You'll still come with me, right?"

"Of course. We've still got unfinished business, after all."

Unfinished business. That wasn't quite right. No, it was simply wrong. That phrase didn't even come close, because we hadn't accomplished anything yet. I hadn't done a *single* thing.

"That rude man... Sure, he was just as insufferable as ever with the way he talks, but I suppose he did say one or two decent things. In fact, I'm willing to revise my opinion of him a little. *Just* a little."

It irritated me to admit I'd learned something from someone like him, but... *Well, he* is *experienced. Since he took the time to talk to us, even if it was more or less forced, the least I can do is give him that much credit. Call it a form of social grace. After all, we're still rookies in this world of adventurers.*

"If you're alive, most things can be made right. And right now, we're all alive. You and me. And Kiri. All three of us."

Beside me, my childhood friend smiled. That gave me the final push I needed to reach out toward a debt I could've just kept pretending not to see. I had never expected my adventure to start deep in the red, but...

"First, I'm going to make things right."

The road ahead was even dimmer than the light at the tip of my wand, and thinking about tomorrow scared me so much my legs were shaking. Still, in the clouds hanging over my heart, a sliver of

light had finally started to shine through.

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Dwarven blacksmiths were all insanely skilled and ridiculously stubborn. Every one of them was a top-tier craftsman brimming with confidence and pride in their work. Because of that, they tended to bring a certain aesthetic to their trade.

These guys turned up their noses at everyday items anyone could forge but obsessed over crafting top-shelf masterpieces too expensive for anyone to afford. And then, if someone they didn't like actually tried to buy one, they would throw a fit and shout them out of the shop.

If you tried to haggle, dwarves would never budge on the price. But if they took a liking to you, they might casually hand you something amazing for free on a whim. Thanks to that, they never made much money. But they boldly claimed that having enough coin to drink was plenty. In other words, they were terrible at business.

The forge, with its roaring crimson flame, was so blazing hot that just opening the door sent out a wave of heat that felt like it could scorch your skin. The dwarf inside swung his hammer without even breaking a sweat. People said dwarves were built rougher, physically and mentally, than other races. Seeing it firsthand made me kind of jealous. Summer heat wouldn't faze anyone with a body like that.

"Don't bring brats in here." At the sight of the kid I brought along, the bearded dwarf clicked his tongue and returned to hammering metal.

"You're lucky, tiny. He's in a good mood today," I said.

Tiny frowned. "What part of that made you think he's in a good mood?"

"He didn't throw his hammer at us for coming in, did he?" I grinned, and the kid's face turned pale.

He was so easy to read. It was honestly kind of funny. No wonder that Magnan girl looked down on him. Well, it wasn't like he had any real strength to speak of, so people underestimating him wasn't surprising at all.

But what about this old dwarf? Word is, he's been around for 110 years. That makes him the longest-standing resident here in Hiriyenka. What kind of verdict would a guy like him pass on tiny?

"Come on, don't be like that, old man. He's with me," I told him.

The blacksmith shook his head. "Forget it. Brats should stick to playing with toys."

"Ohhh, so dwarves have a thing for mocking kids? Like, 'You're just a little brat, so go play with toys while the grown-ups do their important work'? Wow. Look at you—such a high-and-mighty big shot. Can't believe *that's* what you have to say to a warrior who risked his life to take down three goblins. Guess that long lifespan really does make your standards sky-high. What's that masterpiece you're working on with your world-class forging skills? A nice ornamental sword, huh? Gonna hang it on some noble's wall? Bet it's worth a fortune!"

"I'm forging a barrel hoop. Every time you show up, I can't get anything done." The dwarf let out a deep sigh and finally stopped his work.

He didn't seem all that motivated about what was on the forge. Even skilled dwarven smiths ended up taking on jobs like that sometimes. Talented or not, being terrible at business meant making nails, pots, or farm tools instead of fancy weapons if you were broke or got roped into something you couldn't get out of. That explained why the shop was still open. If he'd been doing something and really didn't want to be interrupted, he would've shut the place down.

"What do you want?" the blacksmith asked.

I grinned again. "Well, actually—"

"You shut up."

Guess I ran my mouth too much. I shrugged and stepped back, then gave tiny a push forward toward the forge. He flinched at the wave of heat but walked toward the bearded dwarf. Well, this was more or less just part of the process. We could always go somewhere else if this didn't work out, so I could afford to relax and watch.

"I broke my spear fighting goblins. Can you fix it?" the kid asked.

"Let me see it." The blacksmith took the spear.

Is he in a good mood, or does he just think this is better than working on a boring job? Nah, the old man's clearly soft on kids. If anyone else had asked, they would've gotten an earful. Of course he can fix it. Asking a craftsman something like that is like insulting him.

To be honest, I didn't really get dwarves as a race. There were almost always a few dwarves living in all of the decent-sized human towns I'd been to. They tended to settle in as craftsmen, like blacksmiths, carpenters, and artisans, or they did physical labor as lumberjacks and miners. They weren't always itching to travel like halflings or holed up in their own secluded dwellings like elves.

Was it a sense of leisure that came with a long life? Or was it some kind of cultural tradition? I didn't really know. Whatever the case, they left their own kingdoms behind and settled down in human towns, almost like they were blending in.

"Hmph. Sloppy technique." The bearded dwarf snorted after inspecting the spearhead. "You forced the tip in at a bad angle and shattered the bone by brute force. The chipping on the blade's rookie stuff."

"You can tell just by looking?" Tiny stared in disbelief, clearly impressed that the dwarf could judge his skill just by examining the weapon.

That was craftsmen for you. Their eyes were sharper than any scout. One of them had once scolded me for what felt like hours just because I had bounced a throwing knife off a rock.

The old man grunted. "With those skills, I'm surprised you're still alive."

"I agree," said the kid.

"Then why did you fight?" The blacksmith's voice was deep, with a weight that seemed to shake the floor. "You fought out of anger, didn't you, boy?"

The furnace flames roared higher. Maybe the fire spirits responded to his emotions, heating the room like fury itself and casting a blistering glow.

"Yes."

From where I stood at the entrance, I could only see the kid's

back. So I had no way of knowing what kind of expression he was making. But that was a surprisingly bold voice for him. *Not bad at all, tiny.*

"Hmph. I hate eyes like that," the blacksmith grumbled. "The worst. Figures you'd bring me trouble, Chikka."

Wow. He trusted me more than I'd thought. Guess he knew I wouldn't bring someone here unless they were real trouble.

"I'm sorry," the kid said.

"Don't apologize. That's pathetic." Even when speaking to a child, the dwarven smith stared him down. There was no mercy in his voice.

What did this old dwarf read in that spearhead? Or was there something about how tiny answered him?

The blacksmith's response was very sullen, extra earnest, and extremely rigid. Like speaking that way was his duty. "You had your reasons. You had your righteousness. You were angry, and you fought with no hesitation. That's naive, textbook logic for an ignorant brat. Letting yourself be ruled by that anger is easy. 'My anger is justified. I'm not wrong, no matter what kind of mess I make.' Your spear is the result of that thinking."

I still couldn't see the kid's expression. From where I stood, I only saw the back of his head. It seemed like he was listening in silence.

"Anger will burn your enemies. It will also scorch everything around you before taking you too. In the end, all that's left is ash." With a *clink*, the blacksmith set the spearhead down on a stand beside the forge. Flames reflected off the blade in a glowing red. "I feel bad for any weapon you wield. You'll break every last one. No matter how carefully it's forged, you'll ruin it. You've got the eyes of someone like that. So do me a favor and don't buy anything from this shop."

I narrowed my eyes with a small grin. *Good for you, tiny. That means he'll sell to you. Not that you can afford anything from this shop yet.*

Weapons were tools for battle. Sure, it was nice when they were taken care of. But they were better off used and worn down than collecting dust. Fulfilling their role before breaking—that was when a

weapon was truly complete. The grumpy old man's worldview ran along those lines, and that kind of craftsmanship-as-a-creed was just so very dwarf.

As I grinned to myself, the bearded dwarf clicked his tongue and shot me a glare. The guy was terrible at business. Was that any way to treat a customer? No matter how skilled he was, just that look in his eyes would be enough to send plenty of folks running.

"No money, no skill, no talent. What a shitty customer. Bring someone better next time."

"Glad to hear he made an impression," I replied, smirking.

The kid blinked at our exchange in confusion.

Hey, he called you a customer. That says everything.

"Well then, old man. I'll leave the repairs to you. Make it quick if you can." With a casual wave, I tugged on tiny's arm and pulled him out of the shop with me. *If we stay any longer with that stubborn old blacksmith, who knows what kind of nasty remarks he'll start throwing at us. No more long-winded lectures for me, thanks.*

"Come back this time tomorrow," he called after us.

Oh? I was so surprised I almost blurted something out. The old man was putting off the barrel hoop job and taking care of the spear repair first. *They say dwarves can hear the voice of the iron. That chipped spearhead must've told him so much, he was itching to get started.*

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"In human towns, we halflings are considered a different race, y'know? Leads to all sorts of trouble. When that happens, it's real handy to have a dwarf acquaintance who's already settled there. They're serious about their work, and that gives them a good reputation. They hate lying or beating around the bush too. If they like you, they'll at least put in a good word for you. So I always look for the oldest one in town first. Oh, by the way, dwarves who are adventurers don't count. Those guys are just a bunch of drunk rowdies. Townsfolk don't trust them at all."

"Wait, is that why you brought me there?" the kid asked. "I

mean, I'm human."

"You're still an outsider, aren't you?"

After handing the spear over to the blacksmith, we headed back toward the adventurer's guild. It was already dark, so things had probably wrapped up over there by now. *Wonder how everything turned out?* I thought. *Probably pretty bad.*

I shrugged. Not that it mattered. If those two decided to quit adventuring, they'd probably be just fine. They had options. And if they kept going? Well, that wasn't my problem either. Adventurers were free to do what they wanted.

Whatever happened, happened. That was my take. I was more worried about having to listen to Waine rant and Sheya sulk about the whole thing.

"Hey, tiny. That dwarf said that you fought out of anger, didn't he?"

He had seen right through the kid. Any old blacksmith could've fixed a cheap spear like that. We didn't *need* to bring it to him, but I really wanted to hear from a dwarf who could listen to the voice of the iron.

"You charged in recklessly out of anger and took down three goblins. All you got was a broken spear, a cut on your forehead, and a dirt-cheap reward that wasn't worth any of it."

I stopped in a dark alley. The moon was hidden behind the two-story buildings all around, and even the torchlight from the main road didn't reach us. It was the perfect place for this kind of conversation.

"Anger clouds your judgment. It keeps you from thinking clearly about the little things. Everything gets sloppy. When you try to force your feelings through, of course nothing good's gonna come of it. Getting hurt and getting screwed over is what you signed up for. But anger makes you stop thinking. So I guess I'm saying anger is a kind of weakness. If you swing a weapon like that, then you *should* get chewed out for it."

The kid stopped too and looked at me. It was hard to see his face in the dark, but he seemed a little dissatisfied. Like something didn't sit right with him.

"You're weak, and you still chased after them and ended up where the goblins were waiting. Even though you told them not to go." That mess was on those two girls. That was why tiny got mad and fought. He was fueled by that anger. "You should've just left them behind."

The kid finally spoke up. "You're gonna make me mad."

"Why?"

So that anger was justified. Sure, he might regret parts of it, but he didn't think it was wrong. He believed he'd done the right thing. That was why his voice had that gutsy edge to it. And that was probably why the blacksmith liked him. There was no way a dwarf wouldn't respect someone who got mad for someone else's sake and fought for them too.

"You're weak like they are, but you still went somewhere with dangerous monsters. If you didn't want to end up involved, you should've left them behind." I was a halfling, and we were better suited to running than fighting. So I had to ask, "If the same thing happened again, do you think you could leave them behind?"

He didn't answer right away. That was honest of him. He could've just said something vague and been done with it.

"Those two girls, well... I'm guessing they've been putting in a decent amount of effort. And that's probably why they overestimated themselves. They figured they could handle it, especially if it was 'just goblins' and not something stronger. But that kind of thinking? That's how people die. Happens to a lot of newbies," I said.

I heard about stuff like that happening all the time. But plenty of people survived, so stepping in might just be meddling. At the end of the day, goblins were monsters even a kid like this could take down. If they underestimated that kind of danger and died for it, maybe they just weren't cut out for adventuring. The most you could do was offer a little advice and hope they took it.

"That fancy girl... I'm guessing she's the type who actually prepared and studied hard to become an adventurer. People like that always have stars in their eyes. They end up doing all kinds of dumb stuff. Real pain to deal with."

This was just a guess, but as the granddaughter of a powerful

merchant—especially the one who headed up the sea salt guild—she probably led a pretty restricted life. It wasn't hard to imagine someone like that idolizing adventurers, becoming one herself, and getting her first taste of freedom. Everything she saw had to feel fresh and thrilling, whether it was good or bad.

When Waine told her to quit because she wasn't cut out for adventuring, right after she showed up at the guild, how did she feel? On her first adventure, what did that scenery look like to her? How bright did it shine in her eyes?

A girl like that probably looked down on the older adventurers who spent their days drinking, fooling around, and slacking off. She probably thought she'd never be like them. And when tiny gave her that *you're just gonna leave the party anyway, right?* attitude, I bet it hit her like a punch to the gut.

She had underestimated monsters, almost died, and needed to be rescued. She was probably feeling like absolute crap right now.

What kind of look did tiny have in his eyes when he saw her like that?

"You're not like them, are you?" I asked, flashing a toothy grin. "You became an adventurer, but you didn't do it for your dreams. You did it because you didn't have any other way to survive. You're still learning how to use a spear, and goblins still scare you. You're nothing like those two. Heck, you had no reason to go chasing after some idiots walking right into a monster ambush. You could've left 'em. You should've left 'em. So why'd you go? You're weak, and you *know* you're weak. What made you jump into a fight?"

Helping them just because they were in danger isn't a given. If anything, letting them learn the hard way makes more sense. Just head home, grab some food, maybe say something sarcastic when they get back—if they get back. And if they don't? Oh well. Get some sleep and move on.

That was how adventurers worked. Everything was at your own risk. Arguing with your party mid-adventure happened all the time, and no one was gonna call you coldhearted for leaving them be.

"I..." Tiny opened his mouth, but it seemed like the words were hard for him to say.

I closed my eyes and listened.

"I was planning to grab those two amateurs by the scruffs of their necks, drag them down the mountain, and then totally chew them out."

I laughed. A lot. No one could blame me for that. *Not bad, tiny. If you started spouting soft and sentimental junk, I would've had to tell you off. But I've got nothing to say. This is what being an adventurer is all about.*

"So? Did you give 'em a piece of your mind?"

"Not yet."

Ah... As an adventurer, you're still kinda half-baked, huh? That's not how we do things.

"Why didn't you?" I pressed. "You should've. They ran off on their own and almost got themselves killed by goblins. You got hurt saving them, so you have every right to say whatever you want."

"Uh, I..." He was really struggling to get his words out now. "I kinda, um...slapped Liluetta. Things got awkward after that."

Aha. Yep. That explains it. That was why he hadn't said much after getting back to the guild. He'd just left their share of the reward money before running off.

I shrugged. "You don't really get what it means to be party members, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Adventurers are all strong-willed, so party size usually caps at six." I took in a breath through my nose to savor the cool night air. I wondered if this kid, being human, could feel this soft breeze the same way I could. "Six is about the max number of strong personalities who can function together and still keep their egos intact. That's why we form small parties in the first place. What I'm trying to say is, don't hold back. If something pisses you off, say it. Let the others say what they need to say too. Throw some punches if you gotta. That's how you find middle ground. If you really just don't get along, disband the party. It's no big deal. Actually," I said with a grin, "if you're gonna break up, make it loud. Put on a show. The bigger the blowup, the better. Gives everyone something to talk about over drinks."

"I'm not trying to be bar gossip, you know," he muttered.

"Sure you are. At least, you should be." I gave a little shrug. "If word gets around that someone's gone solo, folks might start thinking, 'Hey, maybe I'll ask them to join my party.' It's good for an adventurer to stand out. Doesn't matter how."

Tiny looked startled, like the idea had never even crossed his mind. It wasn't a groundbreaking idea or anything. I still had a gripe, though. It wasn't about *what* caused their falling-out, but *how* it had happened. Adventurer party breakups weren't rare, but that kind of awkward, unresolved mess was a rookie mistake. Leaving things murky like that just made it weird every time you bumped into each other. Eventually, someone would switch guilds just to avoid the tension.

But if you had a full-on shouting match, with maybe a couple punches thrown in, you could keep it clean. Then you just glared at each other and moved on. *That* was way more refreshing.

"Sulking and moping? Adventurers hate that stuff. So next time you see those two, let loose. Yell as loud as you want."

"Ugh." He groaned and made a really awkward face. The kid was clearly not a fan of the idea. Well, just getting to see that expression made the whole talk worth it. Maybe.

"All right, that's enough of that. So, hey, tomorrow. You're not going out adventuring since you don't have your spear, right? You're free all day?"

I wasn't as intense about promises as Sheya was, but I did try to keep my word. Old Badger had asked me to help the kid out, but playing mentor wasn't really my thing. It was exhausting, so I figured it was best to just get it over with quickly and cleanly.

But what we were gonna do tomorrow was way more important than that. Waine was teaching the kid how to fight, and Sheya was planning to tutor him in magic. I was the only one left. Since Old Badger had asked all three of us to pitch in, it was my turn to pass something on. So, as my troublesome little apprentice and I headed toward the main street, I told him what I was planning.

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I remembered the sound of scissors snipping through feathers.

My older cousin had a pet bird. It was small, white, and adorable—the kind of friendly little thing that would tilt its head toward your finger, wanting to be petted.

I once saw someone clip that little bird's wings. They had taken the bird out of its cage and placed it in their lap. The windows and doors had all been shut tight, but I'd opened a door by accident. Although the bird hadn't flown away, my normally quiet cousin had let out a surprisingly loud scream.

A bird raised in captivity couldn't survive more than three days if it escaped. A bird that had never known life outside the cage didn't know how to find food or protect itself from predators. It was doomed to die quickly. So you clipped its wings and made sure it couldn't fly. That way, even if it did somehow escape, it wouldn't go far.

Snip.

I returned to my room. My birdcage.

I let my body sink back onto my bed and stretched out my arms. My fingers were trembling. Even though I'd returned safely to the Magnan estate, to my room—the one place I could call my own—fear had caught up to me. Truly grasping the fact that I had almost died made my whole body quiver.

I stared at my fingertips. That was when I finally understood I had made it back alive. I had flown out of the birdcage, seen the wide-open world beyond, and come back home.



I savored the warmth and softness of my bed.

"I wonder how she's doing now."

My cousin had taken that little bird with clipped wings with her when she married. It was a political marriage between merchant families. According to rumors, her husband was a bit unreliable but earnest, and the two of them were living happily.

I'm sure the little bird was doing well too. It spent its days in a locked room, inside a cage, with its wings clipped so it couldn't fly. In other words, the little bird was living out its life peacefully until the end. I didn't know if you could call that happiness. But dying easily out in the world was definitely misfortune. The cage existed to confine and protect the weak.

If I stayed at home, inside the cage, I'd be safe. If I just sat and waited, maybe happiness would come to me someday.

"But my wings haven't been clipped yet."

If my feathers grow in, and I leave the cage... If the window opens, and sunlight pours in bright and warm...

If the little bird had the chance to escape, I was sure it would have taken to the sky. Even if it didn't know how to fly and its wings broke from the fall, even if it were attacked by some terrifying predator, even if it ended up battered and bruised and was taken back in and tearfully embraced by its owner...

Even after all of that, if the opportunity comes for the bird to fly again, I think it would foolishly, thoughtlessly take off toward freedom. Every single time.

"They say all adventurers are failures and lost causes."

Surely that was an excuse for those who kept chasing adventure because they couldn't choose a peaceful life, for those who told themselves they were adventurers because they were screwups. They acted like fools to forget their fear. That excuse was like a spell cast to protect their uncut wings.

"Adventurers... Huh. I really underestimated them."

If I didn't want to become a lost cause, then I couldn't make excuses. So even though I was scared... Even though rejection would probably break my wings for good...

Even so, I was resolved to face tomorrow head-on.

Chapter 7: Blue Sky, Blue Sea

I woke up to the morning sun streaming through the wooden window. It was still early, but my bed wasn't the kind of place that made you want to roll over and go back to sleep. It was just a thin layer of straw over a hard surface—all stiff and scratchy and uncomfortable. Luckily, I usually passed out as soon as I went to bed at night.

I planted my hands on the bare dirt next to my bed and pushed until I was sitting up. After brushing straw from my arms, I rubbed my eyes and reached my hands up high to stretch my body.

It wasn't a very pleasant morning.

I wondered how things had gone yesterday. By the time I'd gotten back to the guild, Waine had been passed out drunk at the table and Sheya had already disappeared. I hadn't felt like doing any spear training or reading the magic book, so I'd wandered over to the stable instead. After I'd decided to lie down, I must've slept like a rock.

Fatigue clung to me like a heavy coat. The feeling of battering a goblin with the broken shaft of my spear still lingered in my hands, and I could still feel my own blood dripping thick and slow down my forehead. Behind my closed eyelids, the image of a girl crying was burned into my memory.

I couldn't bring myself to stand just yet, so I sat cross-legged on my straw bed and rubbed my forehead. There was no wound, no pain, and no scar. Touching where I'd been injured almost made me feel like none of it had really happened—like it had all been a dream.

I wanted to believe that, but I couldn't. All I had to do was shift my gaze to see the scratched-up, bloodstained browplate in the corner of my stable stall. My spear was gone, but I knew it was just at the smith's for repair. Reality wasn't kind enough to let me pretend nothing had happened.

I heard a loud growl and clutched my painfully empty stomach. "I'm hungry," I mumbled.

Too much had happened yesterday. It'd been so overwhelming that I'd forgotten to eat dinner last night. That gnawing, empty feeling inside me made everything feel worse. I couldn't think of anything in particular I wanted to eat, but I knew I needed to get something in my stomach.

So I dragged myself up to my feet, changed clothes, grabbed my coin pouch, and stepped out of my stall. The big dapple-gray horse, Valenwort, was still sleeping in the stall next to mine. I waved at him without saying anything because I didn't want to wake him, and he just kept on snoring peacefully. Somehow, seeing that made me feel a little bit better.

I squinted against the sunlight outside, annoyed by how clear the sky was today. The weather was perfect for an adventure, but I couldn't go without my spear. Leaving town without a weapon would be way too dangerous, so I had to take the day off.

I let out a long breath and circled around to the front of the guild. Since I'd gone to bed early last night, the sun was still low in the sky. At this hour, the kitchen was probably only serving raw vegetables. Thinking about eating unpeeled veggies dipped in salt felt kind of nostalgic, but that didn't mean I was craving them or anything. Still, I figured I'd be fine with that for breakfast. If vegetables were all I could order, it would at least save me the trouble of deciding.

With one hand pressed to my stomach, I reached for the doorknob with my other hand and pushed the door open... And there they were.

I saw a girl with lustrous cherry-red hair, eyes that radiated determination, and a slim, delicate frame that might be called graceful. At the same time, she gave off a fiery intensity like a burning flame. Beside her stood a girl in an apprentice cleric's robe and a large hat, her fluffy chestnut hair framing a face lit by a kind and gentle smile.

"Good morning, Kiri," Liluetta said.

"Good morning, Kiri-o," Yune chimed in.

I blinked in surprise at their greeting. “Liluetta... Yune...”

Liluetta looked like she was ready for a challenge, standing there with her hands on her hips. Yune had her hands clasped in front of her chest, and I wondered if she had been praying. They seemed like they were waiting for someone.

“Um, what are you doing here so early in the morning?” I asked.

“We were waiting for you, Kiri-o.” Yune’s voice was soft and light as usual, though there was a hint of tension behind her answer.

Liluetta had been glaring at me, but then she dropped her hands from her hips. “Yes, we were waiting for you,” she said stiffly.

Ah, there she is, I thought. Something about her response made me feel relieved. That timid girl sitting with her head bowed low yesterday was gone. The strength of will I associated with Liluetta had returned to both her voice and her striking jade-colored eyes staring straight into mine.

Liluetta and Yune had said they were waiting for me, so I figured they had something they wanted to say now that I was here. I waited for one of them to start talking.

That brief silence must’ve given Liluetta the time she needed to steel herself. “I’m sorry about yesterday,” she said.

Her eyes were still locked on mine, and her voice was so bold and confident that I wondered if I’d misheard her somehow. She *was* apologizing, but she sounded like she was picking a fight.

“I made the wrong call,” Liluetta continued. “I stormed off on my own, left the party without a word, and threw myself into a dangerous situation. Because of that, you ended up in danger just from coming to help us. I understand all of that now. So I want to apologize.”

She was still looking right at me. Her expression was composed as she stood with a hand resting over her chest, but her voice trembled as she spoke. She wasn’t trying to get out of anything or making any excuses. Instead, she was standing firm and ready to shoulder every bit of blame for the mistake she’d made.

Seeing Liluetta like that made me understand something at last. That unwavering, righteous resolve, so noble it was almost painful, was what I’d been missing all along. What I really needed—what

would let me move forward—was not anger.

"I'm sorry for hitting you," I said.

Last night, Chikka had told me to yell and get mad at the girls the next time I saw them. She'd said that was what adventurers did. But I couldn't do that. All I could do was say the words that wouldn't come out until now and apologize to Liluetta.

My memories of the fight were in pieces. Things had gotten hazy when I saw goblins attacking Liluetta and Yune. I could remember the scenes, but they were disconnected, scattered flashes. Maybe it was the adrenaline from being so angry or the blow to my head. Either way, I couldn't really remember what I'd done, and I found myself wondering how *I* had taken down three goblins.

Chikka had told me that wasn't uncommon after a life-and-death battle. But there were things that had seared themselves into my memory: the burning, uncontrollable rage, the sickening, vivid sensation of taking a life, a girl's tears...and the fact that I'd slapped her.

"That was only natural. I was wrong," Liluetta replied.

Thoughts filled my head when she said that. *No, it's not natural. There's no way. There should've been a better way to stop the two of you. Why didn't I grab you and drag you back before you left? Did I really need to hit you?*

If even one thing had gone differently, maybe the outcome would've changed too. Regret pierced my heart like thorns, and I had been trying to ignore that pain.

Liluetta and Yune were wrong, and I was right, but that was only the result. The process, the path that had gotten us here, wasn't so clear. Of course, those thorns remained. If this moment hadn't come along, they probably would've stayed buried in me forever.

We had left everything unfinished. We hadn't resolved or accomplished a single thing, and I had ended up running away. But Liluetta had broken through all of that, even though facing your mistakes head-on was one of the hardest things you could do. She really was amazing.

"And so," Liluetta continued, "Kiri, we came to ask you something today."

"Yes, it's a request from me too," Yune added with a gentle smile.

A *request*. That was the same word I had used when I'd asked Waine and Sheya for help.

Liluetta and Yune were probably here today thanks to those two. They must've talked to Waine and Sheya, then realized that things couldn't stay the same—that they had to do *something* because this couldn't be the end. Meanwhile, I'd had no idea what I'd wanted last night. Instead of figuring it out, I'd just thrown out a half-formed request with no explanation before running away from a situation I couldn't handle.

There's no way that was the right thing to do, and now I have to face the consequences. I didn't know what kind of conversation had led us here, so all I could do was brace myself for the words that were about to circle back to me.

"Would you accept us as official members of your party?" Liluetta asked.

Her request was so unexpected, so surprising, that all I could do at first was scratch my cheek with my finger. *What kind of magic did Waine and Sheya use on them?* I wondered. I'd thought Liluetta and Yune were going to quit being adventurers for sure. Even if they didn't, I figured they would go back to their original plan and move on with new companions. At the very least, I didn't think the three of us would ever go on another adventure together.

But now...

I nodded. "Yeah. Okay." I didn't think it through. I just knew what I wanted and said so.

"Of course, I know it's presumptuous of us to ask," Liluetta said. "But we don't want things to end like... W-Wait. What?"

The three of us had come dangerously close to dying. If someone was reckless enough to endanger the whole party by underestimating monsters, they were not the kind of companion you wanted no matter how good they were with magic. Waine, Sheya, or even Chikka probably would've said no in my place. Old Badger would've laughed in their faces before turning them away.

But Liluetta had owned up to her mistakes. After regret and reflection, she had come straight to me and apologized. I was

moved by what she had done, and I admired her for it. Maybe that was enough.

Because the truth is, I don't want things to end either.

"Let's make it official. Welcome to the party, Liluetta. Welcome, Yune." I held out my hand.

The girls were still frozen in surprise. They must've thought I would turn them down or at least be upset. But they were the first friends around my age I'd made in this town, and I really was happy to be going on adventures with them again.

When they finally reached out and shook my hand, I smiled from the bottom of my heart.



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"So, how did we end up here again?" Liluetta's disgruntled voice reached me as I scratched my head.

Spread out before us was the sea and the sky blending together in a stretch of blue. The salty breeze felt a little sticky, but there was something about it that made my heart race. The gentle sound of waves tickled my ears, and the feel of sand beneath my feet was odd but interesting as we left clear footprints on the beach with every step.

It was only my second time seeing the open sea. This time, there was a girl with a pouty face walking beside me.

"The smith told me to go pick up my spear in the evening," I told her.

Liluetta flinched. The spear had broken during our fight with the goblins, which was partly her and Yune's fault.

"Oh, that explains it. I was wondering why you weren't wearing your armor or carrying your basket, Kiri-o," Yune said, walking beside Liluetta.

Yune seemed like she was back to her usual easygoing self. She had her armor on under her robes today, and her long-handled mace was strapped to her back. I felt a little bad about that, but I hadn't gotten the chance to tell the girls we weren't going adventuring.

"But it's kind of refreshing to see you out of your armor, Kiri-o," she added. "You look really different without your headband too."

"True. That leather armor really doesn't suit you. Right now, you look like a normal kid," Liluetta said.

"Yeah. I guess I do." Honestly, I had never even imagined I would become an adventurer until not too long ago.

"Hey! Over here!" Chikka waved to us from a rocky outcrop just ahead. The sandy beach gave way to a rugged area where massive rocks piled one on top of another jutted out into the sea. "Watch your step. These rocks are wet and slippery. If you fall into a crevice, we might not be able to pull you out!"

"Then don't bring us to dangerous places like this," Liluetta

grumbled.

"Oh, come on! You're an adventurer, aren't you? This spot's a hidden gem. Fishing is just like treasure hunting. Step one is finding the right place, tiny," Chikka said cheerfully.

Fishing's just like a treasure-hunting adventure? Huh. Haven't heard that before.

"Hey, Kiri," Liluetta whispered, "is it just me, or is that halfling way too fired up today?"

"Chikka loves fishing," I replied. "I think she became an adventurer just so she could fish."

I was more interested in gathering herbs than fishing, so I'd always turned Chikka down when she'd invited me before. But yesterday, after my spear broke, she'd introduced me to that smith. He'd told me it would take a full day to fix my spear, and she'd jumped on the fact that I would have nothing to do while I waited. I really didn't have anything planned, so I couldn't say no.

I'd tried telling her I wasn't in the mood, but then she'd launched into this whole speech about how that was exactly why I should go, that sometimes a change of pace was best, and that listening to the waves helped clear your mind. She'd worn me down, and that was how we'd ended up here today.

But I did *not* expect this many people to come with us.

"Hey! Is it okay to leave our stuff here?" Waine shouted.

"Sleepy..." Sheya murmured.

"Of course, *those* two showed up like it's the most natural thing in the world," Liluetta said.

"Yeah, I have no idea why they're here either," I admitted.

Waine was hauling a huge pile of gear by himself, with Sheya still half asleep and shuffling beside him. Liluetta clenched her fists so tightly she was trembling and scowled at them with a bitter expression on her face.

That's odd. Didn't they have a nice heart-to-heart yesterday? If that's the case, she definitely shouldn't be making that face right now.

"Hey, tiny. You two newbies too. I'll lend you some rods, so give it a try," Chikka called. She wasted no time tossing us some fishing

rods once Waine had set down the supplies. There were enough rods for everyone, and I happened to know this wasn't even her full collection.

"Oh, right. Here's the bait. You okay touching it?" Chikka pulled out a small container.

"Eep!" Yune squeaked.

"Wha... Bugs?!" Liluetta gasped. "Are those bugs?!"

Why are they so freaked out? I'm pretty sure the ones you use for bait aren't poisonous.

"Well, that's not surprising," said Chikka. "You okay, tiny?"

"Huh? Yeah, I think so."

"Cool. I'll show you how to hook the bait once, and then you can do it for both of them."

"Uh, sure?" I tilted my head and thought about asking why *I* had to, but Liluetta and Yune looked so terrified that I just accepted it. Besides, after I watched Chikka, dealing with the bait didn't seem hard at all. I didn't mind being put in charge of something so simple.

I carefully climbed the wet, slippery rocks and found a spot where three people could sit. Then I called Liluetta and Yune over, baited the hooks on both of their rods, and did the same for my own.

"Kiri, you're amazing," Liluetta said in awe.

"Kids from the countryside really *are* tough," Yune added.

What the heck? Why are they more impressed by that *than anything I did during our actual adventure? That doesn't seem right...*

There was something really unsatisfying about that, but I decided to sit down and cast my line. I didn't really know what I was doing, though I knew I was supposed to give the line a little flick from time to time.

"Catch a lot. Enough for me too," Sheya called from down below.

"You're not going to fish?" I asked.

"I'll get the fire ready," she replied, then wandered off to settle herself a short distance away.

Sheya could light a fire with magic in no time, so what she'd really meant was that she was planning to slack off. She did say she was sleepy, so she was probably just going to start napping right

there. She liked eating fish, but catching them seemed like too much trouble for her.

"Fishing's not really my thing," Waine grunted. "I don't like sitting around waiting. Gets on my nerves after a while. I'm gonna go dive for shellfish or something." Just like that, he grabbed a wooden bucket and started swinging it like a weapon as he marched toward the beach.

It's warm out, but is the water cold? I wondered. *Or maybe the sea's different from a river?*

"Well, I'll be a bit farther down. If anything happens, just holler real loud," Chikka said, taking her rod and bucket and heading off. Maybe she had a favorite fishing spot, or maybe she didn't want our voices to scare off the fish.

I watched as the adults all went their separate ways to do their own thing. *That's just like them,* I thought with a sigh. *Adventurers are free spirits. Even when they go out together, they scatter. Well, maybe that's just* these *three, but still.*

Liluetta, Yune, and I glanced at each other with the same exasperated look, then chuckled. It felt like we were all silently agreeing: *There's no point saying anything to the three of them, so let's just let it go.*

We settled back into our spot on the rocks, sitting side by side as we recast our lines.

The sun was warm, the sea breeze felt good, and the sound of the waves was soothing. In the distance, a seabird drifted through the sky. Compared to yesterday, which had been like a firestorm, today felt almost too peaceful to be true.

"Hey, Kiri," Liluetta said.

I turned to look at her. "What is it?"

She held her fishing rod with both hands and kept her eyes on the tip as she spoke. "I'm going to become the kind of adventurer you would *want* to ask to stay in your party."

I remembered what Yune had told me when I'd made Liluetta angry. *"Basically, the young lady wanted you to ask her to stay."*

Back then, I'd assumed the two of them would soon leave and join another party. The idea of asking them to stay hadn't even

crossed my mind.

I peered at Liluetta. “Even if I did ask, wouldn’t you just leave anyway?”

Someone who chose to leave a party might want someone to ask them to stay, but that didn’t change the fact that they wanted to leave. *If I’m no longer useful to Liluetta and Yune, then letting them go for their sakes is still the right thing to do.*

“That may be true,” Liluetta said with a nod.

But she looked dissatisfied, with her cheeks puffed out just a little. The waves rolled in and out a few more times before she spoke again.

“So you should work hard too, Kiri. Make sure we don’t want to leave you behind.”

I looked up at the wide blue sky, then closed my eyes and relaxed my shoulders.

“Yeah. Got it,” I said.

That, I finally realized, was what it meant to be in a party.

Epilogue

The adventurer's guild was a place where screwups and good-for-nothings tended to gather. Among the newbies, though, you'd occasionally find someone who still had their head on straight. But decent ones like that ended up getting themselves into trouble, making mistakes the screwups never would, and letting those failures weigh on them.

It was a pattern I'd seen often enough. The two new girls fit that mold pretty well.

"They ended up formin' a party with him?" I asked.

It was still early morning, and most of the adventurers hadn't shown up yet. Two young girls walked in through the front doors and spotted the kid having breakfast alone at a table. They gave him a quick greeting and slid into seats across from him. This shaky new trio of rookie adventurers had become a familiar sight. But back when they had brought down the goblins, I had assumed I would never see them together again.

"Yep, that's right. Kinda surprising, huh?" The red-haired halfling grinned. "I never thought they'd pick tiny. You see that coming, Barque?"

Playin' innocent even though she had a hand in it, I thought.

"A lopsided party," muttered the mage with the pointed hat.

If that's what you really think, you shoulda told 'em to disband instead of bein' their part-time counselor.

"Well, it'll probably work out," said the warrior. "You never know until you try, right?"

Shut up, idiot. I sighed. These people always had to complicate things.

A mage and a healer were valuable magic users. What kind of party members should they have picked? Vanguards, obviously. But they went with a kid who specialized in gathering herbs. I was

stunned.

Their party was strange, lopsided, and hard to understand. Sure, they had a decent spread of skills with a field scout and two magic users. But they were lacking when it came to combat, the most crucial part of any adventuring party. At the same time, they had a healer even though they weren't cut out for fighting.

Most parties looked for members with skills that fit the kinds of requests they wanted to take. Those three clearly didn't go through that process, and that was why their party composition was off-balance.

Damn it... Gotta quit doin' that. My role as guild leader forced me to see everything from an administrator's perspective. But party structure was their business, not mine. Even if it wasn't efficient, or even if it seemed like total nonsense, I couldn't just shuffle them around like game pieces.

"So, Barque," Chikka said, turning to me with a sly smile. "Don't you have something for tiny?"

Sheya followed up calmly. "Defeating goblins should earn him Rank E."

"We basically did everything for him last time, so that didn't count." Waine grinned as he leaned against the reception counter. "This time, he took down three of them by himself. Looks like the little guy's finally earned his license."

So *that* was why these three had shown up first thing in the morning, even though they weren't here for a request. They were always sticking their noses into things that were none of their business, and that wasn't because they were sincere, upstanding types who would say, "Let's celebrate with the kid! This is a big deal!" The only reason they would gather together like this was because they were idiots with crappy personalities.

"He abandoned his team, acted selfish, and nearly got the whole party wiped out. I don't see how any of that proves he can complete a goblin extermination request. I'm not givin' him the license yet," I said.

"Aww, so stingy!" Chikka threw her hands in the air.

"Abuse of power," Sheya muttered, her voice as dry as ever.

“Huh? Come on, it’s just a rank license. What’s the harm in handing it over?” Waine asked with a crooked grin.

Each of them were trying to act like they were taking the kid’s side, but I knew they just wanted to mess with him.

“Morning!” someone called out. “What are you all talking about?”

The voice was high-pitched and still unbroken. I looked over and saw the boy in question, who had finished his breakfast, standing nearby. He wore a halfling’s leather armor, a battered browplate across his forehead, and a spear along with a basket for herb gathering strapped to his back. This was the rookie adventurer Old Badger had taken a shine to.

Flanking the boy were the two others everyone had been talking about: the cleric who looked like a bit of an airhead and the sharp-eyed, strong-willed mage.

“Good morning! You all seem so lively today!”

“My, so chipper this early. If this isn’t a work-related conversation, do you mind letting us use the front desk first?”

Izus and Magnan... One came from a long line of clergy, and the other was the granddaughter of the man who ran the sea salt guild.

“Morning, tiny! Get this. Barque over here...”

“He’s stingy. Tight as a clam’s ass.”

“You’ve got every right to be pissed, kiddo. He’s just being lazy and doesn’t want to do the paperwork.”

Of course, the trio of idiots was still here. Having this many weirdos around was enough to make my head spin. If we were talking weirdos, though, the biggest one was probably Old Badger. Maybe being surrounded by weirdos really was just fate.

“A pointless conversation,” I said, brushing the others aside. “Ignore these fools. You off to gather herbs again today?”

The boy nodded with a bright, cheerful smile. “Yup. We’re heading out!”

His face was so open and honest, it practically gleamed.



Afterword

I was a boy scout as a kid, so I actually have a fair amount of experience foraging for wild plants. They're surprisingly tasty if you fry them up as tempura, which also takes some of the bitterness away. Oh, have you ever tried a "dark hot pot"? Hello from KAME, your mountain-veggie-loving author!

When most people hear about a kid who likes to read novels, I think they tend to picture someone who's into indoor activities. I was definitely a homebody as a child, so I was no exception. On weekends, I just wanted to lie around on my bed and read books I liked all day instead of going outside. I wasn't very athletic to begin with, so I can't say I ever liked doing all the physically demanding scout activities.

But now that I'm writing about adventurers as a novelist, I often find myself digging back into those childhood memories of outdoor experiences for inspiration. Life really is funny. You never know what's going to come in handy. And the human brain is conveniently wired so that all the painful and miserable memories, like huffing and puffing just trying to keep up with the rest of the group because I didn't have the stamina, get tidily sorted away. In fact, now I can look back and say, "That was actually kinda fun." Pretty amazing, don't you think?

Well, even though I say I was an indoorsy kid, I was the type who had fun once I was outside. So I really do have fond memories of those times. Mountain climbing, foraging for wild plants, camping—we did all kinds of things. I sometimes find myself reminiscing and thinking, *Man, I'd love to go back to those lush natural places and take a deep breath of that fresh air again.* Maybe the old me was more in tune with the outdoors than I give myself credit for.

However, allow me to say just one thing: If you're going to climb a mountain, wear shoes that are broken in. Seriously.

And with that, how did you enjoy volume 2 of *They Don't Know I'm Too Young for the Adventurer's Guild*?

This series began as a web novel on the site *Shosetsuka ni Naro*, and this book is a revised and expanded version of what I originally posted there. For this volume in particular, I made some fairly extensive changes and additions. Back when I posted it online, I prioritized momentum and energy over polish. Volume 2 gave me the opportunity to revisit and refine the story with the goal of truly completing it. I think that process turned out to be a really valuable experience for me, and I really hope readers who had already read the web version discovered something fresh and enjoyed the story in a new light.

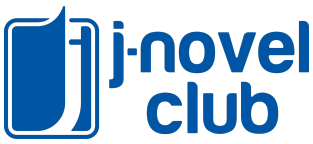
Now, I have some news to share. This will probably be announced around the same time as the release of volume 2: A manga adaptation of this series is currently in the works! I was shocked to hear about this myself, as someone who's always loved manga, but it's not a dream. When I first received the offer, I was so stunned I could hardly believe that day had actually come. I'm incredibly excited to see how Kiri and the others' adventures will be portrayed. I hope you'll give the manga version lots of support like you have with the novels so far!

Finally, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who made this second volume possible. To my editor, Yuri Wada, who worked so hard on its release; to ox, who once again created such stunning illustrations; and of course, to all of you who picked up this book. Thank you so very much. I'll continue doing my absolute best with the writing, so please stick with me for the next volume too!









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They Don’t Know I’m Too Young for the Adventurer’s Guild: Volume 2
by KAME

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