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This Alluring Dark Elf
HAS THE HEART OF A
MIDDLE-AGED MAN!
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This Alluring Dark Elf Has the Heart of a Middle-aged Man! Vol.1
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WATASHI NO KOKORO WA OJISAN DE ARU Vol.1 by Yuhi Shimano
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Cross Infinite World
contact@crossinfworld.com
www.crossinfworld.com

Published in the United States of America

Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com
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Twitter.com/crossinfworld
crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com

Digital Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-163-4

Print Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-164-1



I’m a Middle-Aged Man on the Inside

I’M a middle-aged man. My name is Haruka Yamagishi. Even my siblings’ children can’t believe I’m in the same generation as their parents. I’m that over the hill.

As I approach my mid-forties, I work in middle management. I’m a tired, worn-out middle-aged man with otaku tendencies. I’ve been chugging along on the ordinary rails of life, busy with work. And I’ve arrived at this age without ever having a real romantic relationship, much less getting married.

The younger generation has never respected me, and the bigwigs at my company have always reprimanded me for not showing enough drive. Still, every day, I’ve done my part as a cog in society, and before I knew it, I was in my forties. A middle-aged man, older than my years, and decidedly past my prime.

There’s a reason I keep emphasizing the “middle-aged man” part. Normally, no one would need to point out such a sad and obvious truth, but I’m bound by unavoidable circumstances. Because every time I look down, my eyes catch on the bountiful breasts emerging from my chest, and I have to convince myself that I am, in fact, a middle-aged man (on the inside) by repeating it over and over again.

But even though clearly *this* has happened to me, I haven’t the foggiest idea what *actually happened*.

I need to calm down and think things through properly.

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LET’S rewind to this morning.

I should have been rubbing my sleepy eyes as I slowly stirred my aching body awake in my cramped apartment. For some reason, though, the pain I’d been prepared for never came, and I sat up in bed without any trouble. I remembered feeling this ease in my teens after a good night’s sleep. But that memory was from eons ago, a sensation this rusty body should never have been able to experience again.

I didn’t have time to think deeply about it. I was too busy being assaulted by a fierce sense of wrongness in my body. Just trying to move the slightest amount made me realize my balance was way off. The gut I’d developed recently from a lack of exercise was gone, and the area around my chest felt strangely heavy.

I stood up slowly, then I carefully, tentatively looked down. Only to discover I couldn’t see my feet past the ample swell of my chest. It wasn’t like I didn’t know the various names for this specific part of a woman’s body. I just hesitated to say any of them in my head, about my *own* body, so I stood there slack jawed, just staring blankly.

As a distraction, I decided to look around at my surroundings instead, and this was definitely *not* my cramped-but-comfortable home. For a while now, I’d been listening to the sounds of birds that didn’t chirp, caw, or hoot in any way I was familiar with. I’d initially assumed something was wrong with my hearing, but it turned out my ears were just fine.

Taking deep breaths of the cool, clean forest air around me helped calm my mind for a moment, but the rustling from thickets and unfamiliar floral scents tickling my nose left me more agitated than before. No matter how many gulps of fresh air I took, my emotions refused to settle down.

Even as my heart pounded, though, I remembered one more thing I *had* to check. I looked down again, over the obstruction of my chest, and stretched open the waist of my baggy trackpants. I could tell even without a close inspection. What should have been there was decidedly not.

This was now officially an emergency. Maybe it was time to figure out how to assemble a search party around here.

***

AFTER repeatedly checking to make sure I wasn’t dreaming, while mentally insisting over and over that I was still a middle-aged man, I finally stepped out into the forest. I couldn’t stay in the same place forever. And taking a long time to make decisions is a bad habit of mine.

I pushed my way through the thicket, then suddenly the view in front of me opened up to reveal a tranquil lakeshore. It occurred

to me that I could probably see my reflection on the water's surface, so I rushed over—and when I saw myself, I swallowed audibly.

Oh, okay, I was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. But how the *heck* had that happened?

While the eyes on my new face were unusually sharp, the features were well-balanced and symmetrical overall, giving a dignified, composed impression. Sparkling brilliantly in the sunlight, long hair like silver thread fell down to my hips. I carefully picked up a lock and stroked it—it was a part of my own body, so what I was doing definitely couldn't count as sexual harassment. The strands were so smooth to the touch it felt like they'd spill right out of my hands like water. I was careful because it felt so wonderful to touch that I found it hard to believe it was *my* hair.

For a little while, I trembled with emotion. Then, with a gasp, I returned to my senses and my observation of myself. I seemed to be around twenty years old, give or take a few years. It's hard to tell a woman's age, but it looked like I was done growing. My skin practically glowed and I couldn't see any wrinkles, so at the very least, this body was definitely younger than my familiar middle-aged one.

And there was one more thing worth mentioning—my pointed ears. Accustomed to the fantasy genre as we are, we indoor types referred to this race of people with long pointed ears, whom we thought of with affection and admiration, as elves.

I was an elf. The healthy shine of my dark brown skin made me think I was probably a dark elf. And with the added adornment of my glittering silver hair, I was a mystical vision to behold, if I did say so myself. The only disappointing thing was that it was *me* inside this body, but I was still thrilled by the sight of one of the fantasy elves I'd always appreciated.

For a few minutes, I tried to rein in my excitement while staring at the reflection on the water. Then I slowly lifted my head as questions and anxiety ran riot in my mind.

Why was I in an unfamiliar place? How did my body become like this? What happened to my old body? Who did this to me? Could I communicate with others? *Were* there others here?

There was nobody around to answer the questions that rushed forth one after another. No god to tell me, “You died, so I reincarnated you.” No noble to beg me to, “Save our world, Hero. That is why you were summoned here.”

I was so anxious. Somewhere far away, there was the howl of a beast. My feelings of hopelessness deepened.

I wandered around the immediate vicinity, restlessly hoping for some kind of new information, *anything*, my eyes scanning my surroundings. Finally, I spotted a tree stump that had been carved into a chair of sorts right next to the remains of a campfire. Closer inspection revealed telltale signs that people had been here.

Apparently, this place wasn’t completely off the beaten track. So that was good news. If I managed to survive, someone would definitely appear, eventually. I could only pray that whoever it was, they would be kind to this idiot from another world. I fervently wished that the first person I met in this place would be someone with a huge heart.

I sat down on the chair-like stump that *whoever* had made, picked up a fallen tree branch, and stirred through the campfire remains. I wanted to search for clues among any possible leftovers, so I knew what kind of food I might be able to find for myself. But just as I could easily have predicted, all I ended up doing was making a mess of the ashes. If I had known I’d wind up in a situation like this, I would have taken survival classes. *Hindsight really is 20/20, huh?*

In any case, I was hungry. Since I planned on staying where I was until people eventually showed up, I needed to find a way to stave off the elements and, most importantly, feed myself. Fortunately, the weather was nice and warm, only just verging on hot. It didn’t feel like the temperature would suddenly drop to freezing once the sun set, either.

However, the fact that I had to make all my decisions based on guesswork unsettled me deeply. I may have had the soul of a man in his forties, but I felt like breaking down and crying. I tilted my head back and looked up at the sky, holding back the tears that threatened to spill over. Already, I was missing Japan more and more.

It occurred to me that given my current appearance, even tears might make good weapons. But my pride as a man wouldn’t

let me weep, so I endured the pain silently. I couldn't just abandon that stubborn pride. After all, I was still a middle-aged man on the inside.

Here's an idea. Let's think about fun things. The existence of elves means this is definitely a fantasy world. A fantasy world means sword and sorcery, and adventurers too. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that magic is something all fantasy nerds love. When I was a kid, whenever someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I had always answered a wizard or a hero.

How about, say, fire magic?

It was a classic trope, easy to use and always handy through the very end of a story. I decided to give it a try.

I needed to approach this deserted environment with a positive mindset. It wasn't like anyone was around to mock or criticize me for being a little overexcited. Besides, the reality of the situation was that having fire would be incredibly useful—for avoiding monsters, drinking water safely, and eating. Humans had evolved by using fire and tools, so it was definitely worth figuring out whether or not I could use fire magic. This experiment wasn't just to satisfy my inner delusional teenager; it could ensure my very survival.

I was done with pathetic excuses. I thrust my arm out straight ahead, looking for anything to use for this, then picked up the stick I'd been using to search through the ashes. It was actually the first thing I'd used for *anything* since my arrival, and it looked like it would serve well as both a staff and a poker. Even when I swung it aggressively, it didn't feel like it would break, so I decided to use it as a weapon too, just in case some wild animal showed up.

"Right then."

Wanting to test my voice, I uttered those two words as I lowered my arm. Then I pressed a hand to my mouth, my mind racing.

My voice sounded strange to me. It made sense that my vocal cords were now also those of a woman. But I hadn't counted on my voice being exactly my type—melodic and a bit low. *That* was a pleasant surprise.

I hadn't said anything at all since waking up. Until just then, at least. If I had known my voice was so nice, I would have talked to

myself a little more. It might even have helped distract me from feeling so anxious and stressed.

Once more, I raised My Favorite Stick, this time holding it level with the lake's surface. Then I tilted it downward just a tad, pointing the tip at the lake itself. I was about to make my first attempt at using fire magic, and it would have been a disaster if I'd pointed the thing at the forest instead. Even if living trees were less flammable than dry wood, it was still safer to fire at the water.

I imagined a massive fire. An enormous campfire like something I'd seen on TV at some point. I closed my eyes and sharpened the image in my mind. A roaring blaze that climbed high and spread far, powerful enough to scorch the sky itself. I said only one word:

"Burn."

An instant later, a ridiculous amount of steam billowed up. *Fssh. Bwoosh.* It would have been hard to describe the sounds. The sky-burning inferno I'd visualized rose over the lake. The once-beautiful body of water began simmering gently, and fish flew up into the air one after another. It looked like the Buddhist cauldron of Hell.

Woohoo! You just caught tonight's dinner!

Those excited words echoed in my head as I tried to escape reality. This wasn't the time for flights of fancy, though. Because all I could do about the flames relentlessly evaporating the lake water was pray they would go out quickly.

Finally, the blaze burning above the lake gradually grew smaller and smaller until, without so much as a sizzle, it disappeared. All that steam and the poor, boiled fish were the only incontrovertible proof that the fire had ever even existed.

Magic. Fantasy. Amazing. But it was too much power for me. Where in the world did those flames get the energy to burn? Hopefully, not from my lifespan.

I clenched and unclenched my hands a few times to check if I was any weaker than I'd been a few moments before. It didn't feel like it. Which only made me even more curious about what exactly the fire had consumed.

Little by little, the steam rose up into the air, slowly dispersing in all directions.

I need to sit down and think. But the moment I turned around to do just that, I saw a man, staring at me in open-mouthed shock. And to my horror, he was holding a sword.

The First Town

Part 1: First Contact

RALF Vogan was a well-known adventurer in the area. It was no mean feat to become a Rank 2 adventurer, solo no less, when you couldn't use magic and weren't particularly good at building physical strength, either. Some of the lower-rank adventurers mocked him, saying he had used his looks to curry enough favor to rank up. But the upper-rank adventurers knew better. It simply wasn't possible to become a second-rank adventurer that way.

Although Ralf was a step or even two behind his peers when it came to combat, he had other skills to make up for it, which was the real reason he was a Rank 2 adventurer. He was eloquent, quick-thinking, knowledgeable, perceptive, and always prepared, a dependable man who always had just enough tricks up his sleeve to stay alive.

Both his looks and build were well-defined—his trademarks were his golden, shoulder-length hair and kind eyes with a slight droop to them. And unlike other high-ranking adventurers, there was nothing violent about his aura, which may have explained his popularity with women.

As an adventurer, Ralf prioritized his routine. He believed it was responsible for who he was, so he refused to change it or march to the beat of anyone's drum but his own. If he did, he knew it would be fatal. Having a way to switch back to his usual routine when he wasn't out adventuring was, he thought, key to an adventurer's longevity.

And his routine went like this: Finish a job, drink some liquor, and spend the night with a woman. Once he did that, he left town to enjoy a few quiet days of solace at his favorite lakeshore. Then, after recharging, he would once more go off in search of an adventuring party that needed him.

In fact, he'd completed a job for the guild just a few days earlier. He and his fellow adventurers had indulged merrily in

drink, and then later in the night, he had indulged himself merrily with a woman. So here he was today, at the lakeshore, humming a tune as he carried out the last part of his usual routine.

It took him half a day's walk through the forest to reach this stunning, secluded spot that few ever visited. A verdant clearing where the flora and fauna lived in peace, a pure land where neither humans, nor the undead, nor monsters approached. Ralf had always wondered if it might be under divine protection of some kind.

But today was a bit different from usual. For some reason, he felt restless, uneasy. Whenever he had this feeling, it was a sign of something new starting. And as someone who relied on his perception to detect danger and traps, Ralf never doubted his own sixth sense.

On the path to the lake, he abruptly stopped humming and slowed his pace. Through the thicket, he spied the lakeshore—and a figure by his usual open fire. If this space could be shared amicably, then great; if not, he'd have to do something about it.

The figure belonged to a woman, who looked completely out of place here. That was his first thought.

She was a beautiful, elegant dark elf. She wore loose clothing of a style Ralf had never seen before. He heard rustling sounds coming from the ash she searched through. And when her shoulders slumped and tears welled in her eyes, her expression still didn't really change, which was probably why she still seemed so dignified.

Most elves lived on the Northern Continent, specifically in a region called the Elven Forest, which they hardly ever left. But dark elves didn't live there. Ralf had heard they inhabited the southernmost edge of the Southern Continent.

Not even in his wildest dreams had he imagined meeting one *here*.

The dark elf staggered to her feet and pointed the long, ash-covered stick in her hand at the lake. Ralf braced himself for whatever would come next, and just as quickly, goosebumps broke out all over his body. The sudden torrent of mana assaulted him so intensely it made him want to vomit. If the magic had been directed at him, he knew without a doubt that he'd have fled as fast as his feet could carry him.

Ralf wasn’t a mage, but years of experience had given him the ability to vaguely sense the flow of magical energy. When mana moved dramatically like it did now, it rushed over his skin, making all his hair stand on end, and giving him a small advantage over the other adventurers in terms of ability.

But then the woman muttered something and the pressure vanished. Ralf slowly reached toward the sword hanging from his waist, quietly, carefully unsheathing it. An incantation was necessary to activate a spell. If this beautiful dark elf meant to harm him, then he needed to fight back. He wasn’t the most skilled fighter, but he was still a Rank 2 adventurer, not some novice dumb enough to lose to a mage who caught him off guard. At this distance, he judged his odds were better if he attacked than if he ran.

When Ralf took a stealthy step out of the dense forest, the wave of mana slammed into him again. All his experience up to this point told him the worst thing he could do in this moment was to stop moving. He knew this, but his body stiffened on its own, then began to tremble. Approaching had been an error in judgment. Running away without looking back would have been the correct choice.

By the time he tried to do something about his opponent, his sixth sense was going haywire. It had surely been driven nuts by the storm of magical energy. The sword he gripped tightly in his hands shook as violently as his body as Ralf stood there, helpless.

The flames that scorched the lake, the air, and the sky weren’t particularly enormous, considering how much mana was flowing through them. But to Ralf, who could feel magical energy on his skin, the energy itself was frightening enough.

The elven beauty turned around slowly, as if she’d known he was there the whole time. Even as he found himself reflected in her crimson eyes, she remained expressionless. It was the most terrifying thing he’d ever seen. But at the same time, the sight was also more beautiful, more enchanting, and more brilliant than he could have imagined.



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Part 2: Is He a Pervert or a Gentleman?

LIVING a normal life in Japan meant never risking my life in a fight to the death. Of course, that also meant I'd never had the chance to encounter anyone holding a blade longer than a kitchen knife. In school, they never taught us the correct way to deal with someone like that. But logic told me that a show of arrogance was dangerous against an opponent with a lethal weapon in his hands, because a person who points a weapon at another person is likely in a very desperate mental state.

I have to stay calm and collected. I definitely can't show him I'm panicking. I couldn't turn my back and just run away either. Actually, maybe I was remembering how you're supposed to handle an encounter with a bear.

I feigned composure, but I was actually ridiculously terrified. I wanted someone to praise me for the fact that my knees weren't knocking together in terror. Were swords always that long? I'd definitely die if he stabbed me with that.

But what really scared me about Mr. Handsome, who looked to be in his twenties, was his slightly flushed face. I could tell at a glance that he was agitated. When people got like that, it was hard to have a rational conversation with them. He was probably the caretaker of this lake or something along those lines, so the fact that I'd destroyed the scenery had likely enraged him to the point where he wanted to kill me. And if that was the case, I had no way to save myself. Which was definitely not good.

We're not wild animals. First, let's try conversation. Talking is important when it comes to, well, everything. I'm against violence. But can we even communicate with each other, come to think of it?

I…didn't want to be killed, so I prepared myself to fire more magic, just in case. If I unleashed the same fire magic as earlier, I figured I could buy myself enough time to escape. I spread my arms wide and raised both hands in the air, tossing away the stick too, all in an effort to show that I had no desire to fight. I didn't want to hurt anyone, but I also couldn't afford to lose my own life.

So, I tried to think of a spell that would allow me to separate us peacefully. If I followed the same steps as before, I just needed

to concentrate on the location I would burn while visualizing the magic—though much smaller and less dangerous this time. Then, all I had to do was say the word “Burn” to activate it.

My eyes fixed firmly on the young man as I focused on completing my task. Then suddenly, his body quivered just the slightest bit. Wondering what he was up to, I observed him closely and quickly realized. A puddle started forming at his feet.

I averted my gaze from his humiliation. It took a lot of courage to look away from an armed person, but I would have needed even more courage to stare directly at a shaking, flushed, fully grown man who’d just lost control of his bladder. Put another way, when I considered things from his perspective, I felt so sorry for him that I simply couldn’t watch.

If someone like him appeared on the streets of Japan, he’d be all over the news for days. I could easily imagine headlines like, “The Darkness Lurking in the Heart of a Handsome Man.” And if *this* was how people in this world normally greeted others, I was ready to retreat deep into the mountains and become a hermit.

“...I won’t go anywhere,” I said, “so why don’t you change your clothes?”

I had no interest in letting people get angry at me, including this guy. As long as I acted in good faith, I figured he probably wouldn’t take my life at this point. Maybe he’d even forgive me, if I worked for a few years to restore the lake to its original state.

I waited with my hand pressed to my forehead, gaze averted. A moment later, when I heard the sound of footsteps, I realized the man was slowly moving around. If this was his plan to catch me by surprise, it would have made him an actual genius because he had me right where he wanted me. But he shouldn’t have had to resort to throwing his pride away by using *that* tactic. It would have been a piece of cake for him to kill a lone middle-aged man. I wanted to tell him it really wasn’t that big a deal.

Several minutes passed, during which I heard the sound of water splashing. Perhaps the remains of the hot lakewater I’d boiled had come in handy. *You never know what the future holds.*

“Thank you for your patience,” he said. His voice sounded clear and refreshed, like he wanted to forget his disgrace. His sword was now sheathed and he was wearing clean clothes,

standing a respectable distance away from me. I was most relieved about the fact that we could understand each other.

“Forgive me, beautiful mage,” he said. “My name is Ralf Vogan. I’m a Rank 2 adventurer based out of the city of Oranz.”

A world where the profession of adventurer *exists?* At the idea, excitement unsuitable for my age bubbled up inside me. I accepted the new information without question. After all, this was a fantasy setting, complete with elves.

But I had no idea how strong Rank 2 adventurers actually were. It would have been a lot easier for me to understand Ralf’s position if he’d told me he was a team leader or a managing director. Maybe in this world, the title spoke for itself. He’d used it to identify himself in our first meeting, after all.

Despite Ralf the young man soiling himself in front of me, he was still the *someone* I’d been waiting for. The fact that our first interaction had consisted of him pointing a sword at me and glaring was…water under the bridge, so to speak. I needed to play my cards right if I wanted him to guide me to the nearest settlement. Good communication was key.

He had introduced himself to me, so to start, I needed to return the favor. But just as I was about to introduce myself, a thought suddenly struck me.

Who exactly *was* I?

In terms of my consciousness, I was undoubtedly still Haruka Yamagishi. An unmarried, forty-three-year-old corporate stooge. Born male in the remote countryside of the Kanto region of Japan, I had studied at a university in Tokyo, then found employment there after graduation. Up until recently, I had been spending my days and nights working hard at a big company. In fact, I was beginning to wonder what everyone was thinking right around now, given that I hadn’t shown up for work. If I collected enough absences without notifying anyone, I’d definitely be fired. More importantly, what if I ended up reported as a missing person? That would definitely present a problem if I suddenly returned to my old world.

Or maybe my heart had stopped and I’d died in my sleep. The thought made me sad. All I could do was cross my fingers that someone would quickly notice I was dead and find me. I’d feel

awful if my decaying body caused damage to the property I'd been renting for so many years.

My thoughts had gone completely off track.

In any case, the question remained—whose body was this? My soul could have just taken over someone else's body, but that seemed unlikely. Why? Because I was still wearing the same baggy tracksuit I always wore around the house.

Then, I still *was* Haruka Yamagishi? While I waffled over a response, Ralf the young man came to my aid.

"I've heard that dark elves are pretty unusual, so if there's some reason you can't tell me your name, I understand."

What a truly considerate young man. Why didn't he show me this kindness from the beginning? If he had treated me like this from the start, I would have trusted him easily and neither of us would have had to experience the rest of that…unpleasantness.

I was happy to just ignore the part I played in all this with the whole "blasting magic at the lake" thing.

Anyway, I couldn't just be some John Doe to someone I'd be relying on. Operating under the assumption that this was, in fact, somehow my body, I would need a name.

"You may call me Yamagishi," I decided. "I was merely testing my magic. I apologize for ruining the scenery. Do you own this land? If necessary, I can assist you in restoring it to its original state."

Ralf's only reaction to my introduction was a slight twitch of his brow. Maybe he just wasn't used to hearing a Japanese name. "No, it doesn't belong to anyone," he said. "If anything, I guess this land technically falls under the jurisdiction of the Independent Commercial City-State of Pleine?"

I'd never heard of that place before. But the man's unexpectedly polite demeanor made me think a little better of him. Which only made me wish even more that our encounter hadn't caused him to disgrace himself. Unfortunately for both of us, though, no matter how affable he was, my first impression of him refused to leave my mind.

I knew nothing at all about this world. But given what I now looked like, it seemed like I really should have been a little less clueless. I already stood out enough and I needed a plausible reason to explain away my ignorance.

So why don't I tell him I have amnesia? Once I hit upon the idea, it felt like the only way forward.

"I…I seem to have lost my memory," I started. "I don't know where I am and I don't remember what I was doing before I got here. I apologize for the inconvenience, but might you be kind enough to show me the way to the nearest town or city?"

"Amnesia?" he asked, sounding concerned. "Are you hurt anywhere? I've heard rumors about things like that happening… and I guess they were true. I'd be glad to help. And if there's anything you don't understand, please feel free to ask."

"Thank you very much. I'm in your debt."

What an amazing young man. The only reason he'd even unsheathed his sword in the first place was because I'd done something to scare him. I was to blame. *It really is better to give people the benefit of the doubt.*

I was relieved the situation had calmed down.

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Part 3: Establishing a Knowledge Base

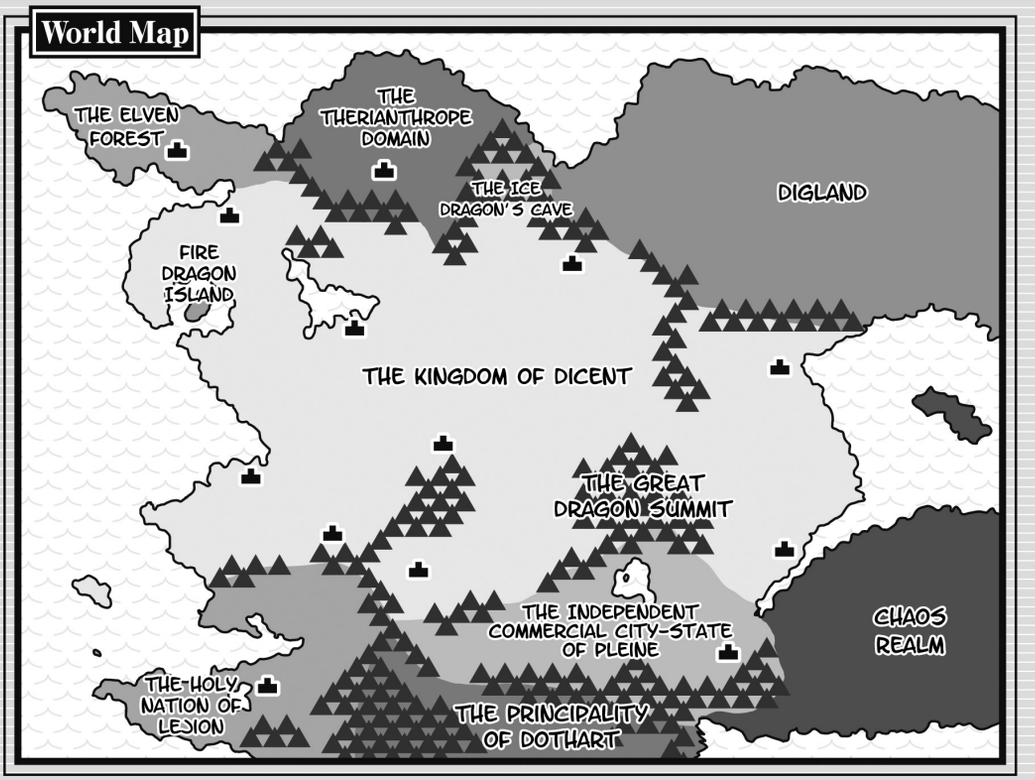
WE arrived at a town just as the sun started to set. I felt bad because I had probably wasted a ton of time just struggling through the unfamiliar forest paths. Normally, I wasn't the exercising type, so if I'd been in my old body, I definitely would have grown exhausted halfway through the trek. But this young woman's body didn't know the meaning of the word "tired"—and honestly, it was a lifesaver. It would have been difficult for me to ask Ralf for breaks when he was already doing me such a huge favor by guiding me to the nearest settlement.

As soon as we reached the town, the first thing Ralf did was, kindly, buy me shoes. I'd already gotten used to walking barefoot, but he must have thought it would be unsightly to keep doing so in town.

And that wasn't the only thing he did for me, either. Wonder of wonders, he also reserved a room at an inn where I could stay the night. In fact, I had the space all to myself—apparently, he wasn't staying there himself. I wondered how much he'd spent and whether I could even pay him back. Constantly being on the receiving end of someone's generosity was stressing me out.

I sat down on the bed, opened my notebook, and picked up a pen. I wanted to jot down everything the young man had taught me today while the knowledge was still fresh in my mind. Needless to say, he'd bought me these things too. My stomach dropped at the thought of being a kept man, which told me I probably wasn't suited to the role.

First in my notes, my current location. Situated somewhat south of the Northern Continent, it was a municipality called the Independent Commercial City-State of Pleine. The streets on the way to the inn had been vibrant with activity, the hum of lively voices floating over from the marketplace. The jovial atmosphere had reminded me of Japan's bustling shopping districts and street stalls during festivals. The growth of supermarkets and department stores had led to a decline in Japan's traditional shopping districts, so what I'd seen so far of this town had given me a sense of nostalgia.


World Map
THE ELVEN FOREST
THE THERIANTHROPE DOMAIN
THE ICE DRAGON'S CAVE
DIGLAND
FIRE DRAGON ISLAND
THE KINGDOM OF DICENT
THE GREAT DRAGON SUMMIT
THE INDEPENDENT COMMERCIAL CITY-STATE OF PLEINE
CHAOS REALM
THE HOLY NATION OF LESION
THE PRINCIPALITY OF DOTHART

Pleine was a city-state formed by a consensus between distinguished members of the Merchants' Association and the Adventurers' Guild. As a result, it was considered the freest country in the region, where ability was valued above all else.

Head a bit to the west and you'd find yourself in the Holy Nation of Lejion, apparently a theocracy. Not knowing left from right, I'd been fortunate not to wander there by accident. Religions usually had enough strict rules that if I'd ended up in Lejion, I would have been in danger of making some kind of fatal mistake simply because I didn't know any better.

Further north was the massive Kingdom of Dicent and to the south was the military power of the Principality of Dothart. I planned to learn more about all these places at some point soon, in books and the like.

Anyway, back to the most important matter at hand: finding a job. After all, I had to make a living in this world somehow, and to my delight, there was a profession in this world that required nothing more than registering to do it. Your background and status were irrelevant. And that profession was "adventurer." In Ralf's opinion, if you could use magic, you'd never go hungry.

He also told me things could be difficult for me because my striking appearance would probably attract trouble from unsavory characters. So I had two options: become an adventurer, do my job well, and find a protector quickly; or use magic to the best of my ability and show people what I was capable of.

Lacking both an identity and confidence that I could survive in this chaotic, unconventional world, I asked Ralf to show me to the Adventurers' Guild. He agreed without any protest and said he'd pick me up the next morning. Then I watched him leave, my hands pressed together in gratitude.

Before Ralf left, I'd also asked him about the system of ranking adventurers. It started at Rank 10, but that didn't mean Rank 1 was the strongest, because there was also a Special Rank designation. People who fell into that category were monstrously powerful, apparently. And first-rank adventurers were strong enough to influence entire cities and countries, so I couldn't even begin to imagine what the Special Rank were capable of.

All kinds of strange legends sprung up around those sorts of people. Like, one could destroy an entire nation's army on their

own. Another had defeated a dragon, or killed a king and took his place. It sounded like the smartest thing to do was *not* to get involved with them. Don't poke the bear, as the saying goes.

The real point of the Special Rank designation seemed to be to give titles and privileges to such untouchable people in order to keep a tight rein on them. In other words, the highest an adventurer should *actually* aim for was Rank 1.

Ralf had been kind enough to give me the names and aliases of several Special Rank adventurers and I noted them down in my notebook so I wouldn't forget. But I had promised myself that if I ever actually heard about one of them showing up in the flesh, I'd pretend I hadn't and immediately sequester myself if their name rang a bell. I'd treat them no differently from wanted criminals.

As for magic, it turned out that Ralf himself couldn't use it. Evidently, some people were suited for it while others just weren't.

Personally, I would have been devastated if I'd ended up in another world and couldn't use magic. So I was secretly pleased to learn I had a talent for it—emphasis on "secretly," because I felt bad about Ralf's lack of ability on that front. Still, he knew a lot about magic for someone who couldn't use it. He said that he made a point of accumulating a lot of knowledge on the topic just in case he got into a fight with a mage.

In general, magic referred to the manipulation of the magical energy that filled the world (also known as mana) to cause some kind of phenomenon to occur. A lot of it was still shrouded in mystery, with very little known for sure, and although magic had been divided into different categories, it didn't seem like one person was better than another at any given category. Each common spell had its own name, and after reciting an incantation, the magic activated when its name was spoken.

I couldn't have asked for a clearer explanation. *Incredible.*

But it also raised the question of what exactly I had invoked earlier. I hadn't used an incantation or said the proper name of a spell. Maybe that was why Ralf had assumed I was a powerful mage, because he'd just seen me perform an unknown spell. Maybe that was also why he was treating me so kindly. But in reality, I still didn't know much about magic, so I decided that going forward, I would pretend to mumble an incantation, low enough that people couldn't hear me, before casting.

A thought suddenly popped into my head as I wrote all I'd learned in my notebook. *When was the last time I ever coveted knowledge this greedily? When was the last time I worked hard, driven by the desperate need to make ends meet?*

I'd been a relatively well-off bachelor for a long time now. At some point over the years, I had given up on passionately seeking anything or striving after what I wanted. Instead, I just lived my life eating whatever I wanted and wasting my time on whatever pleasures were at hand.

I sighed when I realized I didn't have much of an attachment to my old world at all. Maybe that explained why I wasn't particularly upset about being unceremoniously tossed into a different body in a different world. Once I became aware of it, I couldn't help feeling like my life until that moment had been insignificant. And strangely, that made me sad.

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Part 4: Unaccustomed to Things

AFTER I finished writing everything down, I ended up dwelling on lots of concerns I couldn't do anything about. Then I fell into a deep sleep without even realizing it. When I woke up the next morning, I felt so refreshed from a good night's sleep that I decided my killjoy mood of the previous night had probably been a result of my mental fatigue.

The bed I slept in was made of wood, with a bunch of parts that had been carved and fitted together. Very little metal was used, which made it a magnificent piece of craftsmanship. A mattress stuffed with dried plants or something of the sort rested on top of the frame. The fibers or whatever in the mattress were a little prickly, and it bothered me at first. But after a while lying there, the sensation went away, likely thanks to my body weight, and the bed turned out to be surprisingly comfortable.

To be perfectly honest, it felt a thousand times better than my decade-old futon, which had gotten hard and thin over the years. I had grown so used to it that I hadn't even realized until now that it was basically the same as sleeping on the floor. In hindsight, that had probably been why I'd had such a hard time waking up every morning.

It was embarrassing to admit, but I'd never been good at spending money on myself. For appearances' sake, I regularly bought well-tailored new suits for work, but my everyday fashion sense? God awful.

For example, the tracksuit and tank top I was currently wearing were pretty much at their limit. The elastic waistband of my pants was so loose I had to knot the string tightly or else my pants fell right down. Actually, while walking through the forest the previous day, my pants *had* started to drop and I'd almost panicked. My waist had slimmed considerably since finding myself in this new body.

I sat up in bed and stretched before turning my gaze to the window. Except I couldn't see anything through the foggy glass. Nevertheless, the sunlight streamed through cheerfully, the rays strong enough to warm the room up a bit. I tried opening the window to breathe some fresh air, but it turned out to be the kind that didn't open, so I gave up after a few seconds.

I got out of bed and the track jacket I had placed over myself as a substitute for a blanket fell to the floor. When I crouched to pick it up, I didn't feel a single creak or ache anywhere. This body really was young.

Ralf had told me the inn served breakfast. I could eat it in the lobby or in my room, but either way, I had to go down to the first floor to get it. I decided to help myself before Ralf showed up.

Yawning, I walked down the stairs. By the time I reached the first floor, there was already a crowd of people eating breakfast. I headed to the small window attached to the inn's kitchen to give my order, then looked around while I waited for it.

Compared to the people I'd seen around town the night before, most of the folks in here appeared well-dressed. And whenever anyone looked over at me, they'd look away quickly before glancing back like they didn't want me to know they were looking. It made me uncomfortable. *Clearly, dark elves really stand out around here.*

Nobody was exactly ogling me or anything overt like that, but it still felt like I'd be disturbing their breakfast if I stayed. I didn't want to make the atmosphere any more awkward than it already was, so I dejectedly trudged back to my room with my breakfast, which consisted of some hearty soup and a brown bread that

smelled strongly of rye. I was so used to eating soft white bread that it was a bit of a shock to bite into something so flavorful, but it didn't take me long to grow accustomed to it as I dipped it in the soup and ate. I didn't hate it.

I normally skipped breakfast, so this was more than enough for me, and when I drank the last drop of soup, I couldn't help the contented sigh that slipped out. I hadn't remarked on the meal looking delicious or anything before I ate, because I was so used to eating alone, but I did press my hands together in silent gratitude out of habit once I finished.

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AS soon as I sat down on the bed to digest a little, there was a knock on the door. The young man, Ralf, was the only person in this entire world who had business with me. *He's earlier than I expected.*

Or maybe I'd just woken up late. I wasn't wearing a watch because I'd been dumped into this world with literally nothing but the clothes on my back. Every so often, I heard the sound of a bell coming from the town, and I suspected it told the people living here what time it was, but I didn't know how the system worked, so at the moment it wasn't much help.

I decided to tidy up after myself and let Ralf in at the same time. With the tray holding my empty dishes in one hand and my other hand wrapped around the doorknob, I called out to the other side of the door.

"One second!"

I pushed the door open slowly, and Ralf greeted me before he even saw my face. His voice was enthusiastic, like a fresh new employee who'd just started at a company. It warmed my heart a bit to hear it.

"Good morning. Are you ready to…"

When I stepped out into the hallway, he abruptly stopped talking. *Huh?*

"Good morning," I said. "We can leave once I return this downstairs, and…is something wrong?"

"No, not at all," he said awkwardly. "I'll take care of that for you. And, um…I think you should put on your jacket."

Ralf snatched the tray from my hand and strode briskly down the stairs, quickly vanishing from sight. It didn't take a genius to understand what the problem had been. I quietly closed the door, and once back in my room, slid back into the jacket of my tracksuit. Then I zipped it *all* the way up, shaking my head at myself.

Roaming around town in *this* body wearing nothing but a raggedy tank top would definitely give the wrong impression. It struck me that the people downstairs hadn't been staring at me because dark elves were unusual. The elderly gentleman, the rugged warrior, even the lovely blue-haired young lady had all had good reason for quickly looking away after first seeing me, before sneaking more glances.

The young lady in particular had scrutinized me for a good long while on her second look. I had just written her off as being a little strange, but she might have been silently trying to caution me. I had screwed up by going downstairs like I was taking a short walk to the mailbox to retrieve my morning newspaper. *I'll be more careful from now on.*

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Part 5: My Impressions of the Town

IT was so sunny and warm outside that I wished I had a straw hat. Wandering around wearing my long-sleeved jacket wasn't helping cool me down, either, but it was better than taking it off and having people start staring at me again. Even though it would have been just fine if I'd been walking around wearing a tank top in my old body. *I wonder if there's a way I can return to my original form?*

In any case, a lot of the townspeople were wearing clothes you could have found in the Middle Ages or, you know, in a fantasy setting, which meant I stuck out like a sore thumb. I guess I was destined to attract attention even if I wasn't walking around half naked. The gazes sent my way made me uneasy. Were they staring at me because of my weird clothes or because of my looks and my race? I had no idea. Maybe I'd discover the answer over time as I settled into life here.

As we walked around, I also got the sense that the standard of living around here wasn't consistent. I saw well-groomed folks as well as those who looked like they might not make it through the day. It made me wonder if I myself could live a decent life here. If I had to rely on my own abilities to survive, what in the world could I even do? I saw my future self in the hollow-eyed people sitting on the ground in the back alleys, and it made me anxious.

Children, blissfully unaware of my inner turmoil, ran around energetically. At that age, maybe just running around the neighborhood with your friends was fun. But when I tried to think back to my own childhood, all I had left were faint memories. *Did I use to play like that too?*

The melancholic dream of going back to that time and running around innocently was too on the nose for the middle-aged man I was inside. But on the other hand, I was still too young to smile indulgently and say things like, "Ah, youth." Maybe I was at just the right age to be sentimental, actually.

A group of boys raced straight in my direction, fast enough to crash into me if I didn't move. Not wanting to get in the way of their fun, I took a half step to the side. They brushed against my baggy tracksuit as they flew past and I turned around to watch them go. When you're really caught up in something, you lose awareness of everything around you. *I hope no one gets mad if they crash into them.*

While I was ruminating on such things, Ralf suddenly grabbed one of the boys' arms, aggressively. Had he done something to offend him? Considering the way Ralf treated me, I hadn't thought of him as a particularly violent person.

Then again, he *had* pointed his sword at me when we'd first met. I'd been trying to forget that memory, to let bygones be bygones and all that. But now that I thought back to our initial meeting, I realized it wouldn't be totally out of character for him to snap and attack a child out of nowhere. *Are adventurers just common street criminals in this world?* I sincerely hoped not, because that would mean I was indebted to a dangerous individual.

"Now, now," I said. "Let him go." When I mustered up my courage and encouraged Ralf to release the boy, he surprised me

with his calm voice.

"Give that back to her," Ralf told the boy.

"Shit! Screw you, I don't need this crap anyway!"

Then the boy hurled something at me. I caught it reflexively. He'd been holding a black leather notebook about twice the size of my palm. I only realized it was mine when I flipped through it and saw all my notes from the night before.

The boy angrily shook himself out of Ralf's hold and disappeared into the crowd.

"Should I have held onto him longer?" Ralf asked.

"No… Thank you very much for getting this back for me."

I bowed my head in his direction, feeling both apologetic and incredibly grateful. It was the best I could do to convey how I felt, given how bad I was at showing my emotions on my face. Hopefully, it was enough. In the past, I'd unintentionally made new, younger employees cry when my intention had been to teach them gently and they had misunderstood. In that light, I naturally worried about Ralf's reaction.

Boys running around innocently? Blissfully, foolishly unaware of my presence? Adventurers being common criminals or whatever? Not so much. And the only fool around here was me.

"He probably thought your journal was a wallet, because it's made out of leather," Ralf reasoned. "Pockets are definitely useful, but they also make easy targets, so I suggest you be careful."

I'll do just that, thanks. I'm sorry for being so ignorant I almost had my most important possession stolen so soon after receiving it.

Feeling both embarrassed and pathetic, I asked Ralf a question, staring in the direction the kids had run off to. "Is it… normal for such young children to be pickpockets?"

"Yes. They generally go after women because chances are high that women will let them get away with it," Ralf explained matter-of-factly. "Pickpocketing is a valuable source of income for children living on the outskirts of town."

The surprisingly detailed piece of information gave me possible insight into his own background. Although he looked like a well-put-together man now, he might not have grown up so privileged.

"Maybe I should have punished them a bit," he went on. "If he and his friends keep stealing like that, they're bound to get a hand

cut off or worse, someone might kill them."

What a cruel world. It seemed like a peaceful fantasy if all you did was watch the throngs of people pass by without getting involved, but take one step into a shady alley and you could immediately glimpse the harshness of society. Because of my unrealistic transmigration and gender change, I'd felt like I was watching it all through a screen. This was different from the video games I played once in a while, though. All the people I saw here were actually *alive*.

As long as the profession of adventurer existed, there had to have been dangers out there I couldn't even imagine. And I would have bet that the hurdles to living a peaceful, normal life were high. Those boys attested to that. They had been flung into this cold world at such a young age.

Drop your guard for even a second and this world will devour you. I really *need to be careful.*

We resumed walking through the streets. A few people addressed me as a "beautiful young lady" and such, but unfortunately for them, I was still a washed-up middle-aged man on the inside. *Don't be fooled by appearances, folks.*

Then there was Ralf, to whom people called out constantly: People, presumably other adventurers, teasing him for walking around with a woman, i.e., me. Women inviting him to spend time with them in honeyed tones. All of this told me he was a ridiculously popular young man.

With the gentle way he talked and his kind, handsome features, it made sense. And I didn't want to be jealous, but I couldn't help muttering the following words in my mind:

He wet his pants yesterday, you know.

Even thinking it made me feel ashamed and on the verge of hating myself, though, so I stopped right away. I was being way too disrespectful to someone who had been nothing but kind to me. Not touching upon that topic was a silent promise between us, man to man. Never mind that I was the only one who'd actually made the promise, with myself.

Ralf came to a halt in front of a large building that sprawled out horizontally on either side of us.

"This is Oranz's Adventurers' Guild. Let's head inside and get you registered."

I stopped and stared at Ralf's back. There was something I wanted to ask him before we started on the formalities of becoming an adventurer. "Wait, please," I said. "This might be rude of me to ask, but why are you being so kind to me? Just so you're aware, I fully intend to repay you and then some for all the money you've spent on me. But I still can't explain the extent of your kindness."

"Well… Hmmm."

Ralf turned away from the building and walked toward a nearby bench. I could hear him "um"-ing and "uh"-ing the whole time, so maybe he really *had* done all this out of the kindness of his heart, and didn't know how to explain it. He sat down on the bench, then patted the empty spot next to him, inviting me to sit too. I shook my head in refusal. I didn't know why, but something told me it was better to stand while I listened to him.

"I'm not that good a fighter," he said. "I'm the type who survives through careful planning and instinct. And that instinct is telling me to nurture the connection I have with you, Miss Yamagishi. Is that enough to convince you?"

It sounded to me like he had forced himself to say that much. I knew it wasn't good to force someone to say something they didn't want to, especially someone I was relying on. But I was scared that if I *continued* to rely on him, I would soon find myself in something of an indentured situation. Maybe that was why my intuition was telling me to have a proper discussion *now*, before it went any further. So I remained silent, waiting for him to continue. Finally, Ralf sighed and began to speak again, in a low voice.

"The first time we met, your magical energy hit me like a wave, Miss Yamagishi, and…well, I really botched that, didn't I?"

By that, does he mean the part where he wet himself? His vagueness told me he was aware of his own faux pas. And I had to admit, it was a relief hearing him say it out loud because now I knew for sure he wasn't the sort of person to take pleasure in the act of wetting his pants in front of others. Honestly, it had been worth asking my question just to have that kernel of doubt cleared up once and for all. One of the walls between us came crashing down.

"More than anything though, you were so beautiful when you used magic that I couldn't take my eyes off of you," he confessed.

“I guess you could call it love at first sight.”

Goosebumps erupted all across my skin and dread raced down my spine.

Imagine it, if you would. The sight of a handsome young man in his twenties saying this to a middle-aged man approaching his mid-forties. Maybe, if I’d seen it happen with someone else, I might have been able to ignore it, but it was a completely different story now that it was happening to me. Because, despite how I looked, I was still a middle-aged man on the inside.

Even so, Ralf *had* treated me kindly. *Kindness is kindness.* No matter what feelings it stemmed from, the kindness I had received from him was genuine.

“Which is why I’m trying to get on your good side, Miss Yamagishi, so that someday, you’ll think of me as someone worthy of your affection.”

“Please don’t get your hopes up.”

I said what I said. I didn’t want him to get any ideas, nor did I want to hurt him. First of all, I’d been living a life far removed from romance ever since my mid-teens. I was way too old now to think about falling in love.

And besides, Ralf was a young man who was clearly popular with the ladies. Instead of tying himself up in knots over someone like me, he should have been throwing himself into a relationship with one of the many women who would reciprocate his feelings.

“Seriously, I’m just being selfish by even bringing it up, so please, don’t worry about it, Miss Yamagishi.”

Despite looking somewhat despondent, he rolled with the punches. If I’d been in his shoes, it would have taken me a *lot* longer to recover from the rejection, so I was pretty impressed.

This definitely brings up a tricky question though. It hadn’t occurred to me that having a body like this would have such a negative effect. I’d always envied good-looking people, but I felt like my mindset on that front was about to change.

The Adventurers’ Guild

Part 1: The Guild Lobby

THE Adventurers’ Guild was full of people—adventurers, clients, staff, and so on. And it boasted all sorts of amenities, like a canteen, an in-house general store, even an annex with inexpensive rooms for adventurers to rent. In short, the rambling structure itself was a very lively place, and if you went around back, there was a spacious training ground too.

Oranz was a large, commercial city, and the country as a whole prioritized the adventuring community—depending on a city’s size and a country’s national policies, the number of facilities available to adventurers could be added to or decreased.

You didn’t need qualifications to become an adventurer, and though there were penalties if the authorities discovered a criminal background after the fact, they didn’t conduct a close investigation during the registration phase itself. It would be a different story if you were a known fugitive or a crime boss or something, but otherwise, the cost of checking into each and every registrant wasn’t worth it.

As an aspiring adventurer, all you needed to do was write down your name and age, pay a small registration fee, and voila, you were part of the adventurer community. The only additional fee was the cost of making a dog tag, which served as an ID of sorts for adventurers. You could easily save up that amount just by skipping a few meals.

There was a reason the door was wide open, so to speak, for adventurers. They were jacks-of-all-trades in a way, especially among those Rank 6 and below, some of whom had no desire to fight at all. They tended to be people who earned a living by doing menial jobs, or academic types who taught others. In short, adventurers were temps or day laborers by another name.

The Adventurers’ Guild often worked together with the Merchants’ Guild. The higher someone’s rank, the more trust was

placed in them. That way, the Merchants' Guild didn't have to conduct background checks, plus it was an easy way to secure labor, so there was no reason *not* to work together.

Be that as it may, leading adventurers were, of course, the ones who fought outside the city. Quite a few folks became adventurers thanks to extravagant legends of stars in the field, but such up-and-comers first had to do their time accepting jobs from the guild and steadily building up their ranks before they could finally leave on adventures that took them away from the city.

The guild had several counters set up in the lobby, for registration, getting work, reporting results, and more. A woman stood at one of those counters. She was the center of everyone's attention, with skin a dark brown and long, pointed ears. Her beautiful, silver hair, which hung down to her waist, complemented her other stunning features that contrasted with her odd clothing. Next to her was a Rank 2 adventurer who had quite a reputation around the city.

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I didn't know how this world's language had been implanted in my brain, but I could read and write its alphabet. While the ability was a lifesaver, I still felt a bit creeped out at the thought of someone or something fiddling with my brain's language center.

I finished writing my name, but then I stopped when I got to the age and gender sections. I stared fixedly at those fields. Although I desperately wanted to circle the option for "man," I also didn't want to trouble the young lady at the counter, so I gave in and circled "woman."

I was forty-three years old. However, that age too belonged to my former self. If I wrote it down, it would also put the receptionist in a weird position.

I stewed over the problem for a moment before finally asking for help from the pretty young woman with a bob who stood behind the counter.

"Um, how old do I seem to you?"

I knew I'd screwed up the minute the words left my mouth. It was the kind of question an annoying boss pestered his subordinates with at a drinking party. There was nothing more

obnoxious than quizzing someone who couldn't care less about your age. When the receptionist stared at me in confusion, I averted my eyes.

"She lost her memories, so she doesn't know her age."

Luckily for me, Ralf stepped in and ran interference.

"Oh, really?" the receptionist asked. "Then please wait here just a moment."

Now that she understood the situation better, the young lady went into the office behind the counter and came back carrying a book. She trailed her finger down the table of contents, looking for what she wanted, then opened the book to a specific page, tracing the words with the same finger while reading silently. She gazed intently at my face for a few moments and snapped the book shut.

"Dark elves evidently wear cuffs once they reach the age of majority, which is eighteen. You aren't wearing any, so it's likely you're not yet an adult. Therefore...I think the safest choice would be to write down a number below that."

What a sharp young woman. She was more than just a pretty face, clearly capable of doing her work well, up to and including unexpected tasks. I complimented her profusely in my mind. I was sure individuals like her within the organization would go far in life. Unlike people like me who could only perform the duties they were given.

So I took her advice and wrote down seventeen on the application. When I submitted the piece of paper to her, Ralf paid the registration fee like it was the most natural thing in the world. I felt bad having someone so much younger than I was spend money on me, but I had no choice because I was penniless at the moment.

"Your dog tag will be ready by this evening," the receptionist said. "Please come back again then. And we're holding a seminar later today for new adventurers, so if you don't have other plans, I recommend you attend it."

Perfect. I asked her when and she told me it would take place in the afternoon. Then, when I mentioned wanting to brush up on things until then, she said I was free to use the reference room. Honestly, I'd expected a colder reception from the staff because of the dangers inherent in the title of "adventurer," so I breathed a sigh of relief at the surprisingly warm treatment.

I was planning on staying in the same place all day, and I felt bad about keeping Ralf from whatever else he might be wanting to do. I bowed my head slightly at him as he stood next to me and I told him about my solo plans.

"Ralf, thank you so much for staying with me all this time," I said. "I'll spend today in the Guild. You must be busy yourself, so please tend to your own affairs."

"I've stayed with you so far because I want to, you know."

He sounded reluctant to leave, which was nice, but I couldn't see any advantage to him remaining with me. Plus, wouldn't he want time alone to cool his head after his earlier love confession? The young man seemed to mull things over for a bit before facing me to speak once more.

"I booked a week for you at the inn, so once you're done for the day, feel free to head back over there."

"Actually, about that…"

I'd already figured I could camp outside for the few days it would take me to make some money, but before I could tell him that, Ralf adroitly slipped through the throng of people inside the guild and exited the building. I thought about chasing after him, but I ultimately gave up because I lacked his skill at threading through crowds.

He had expertly indebted me to him again. Resigned, I scratched my head and walked toward the reference room the nice young lady had pointed out.

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Part 2: The Day It All Started

THE reference room turned out to be a lot smaller inside than it looked from the outside. The sign at the entrance read "Reference Room and Storage," so the area behind the grumpy-looking man at the reception desk was probably the storage room, and that took up most of the space. As far as I could tell, he and I were the only ones there. He looked at me when I stopped at the entrance. I inclined my head in a polite greeting and to my surprise, he returned it with an easygoing nod of his own before seemingly losing interest in me and focusing once more on the book in his hands. If he'd been up to no good, I would have disliked him

instantly. But at the moment, my only impression of him was, *Seems like a serious guy*.

I roamed the aisles for a while, browsing the spines of the books. After doing a full circuit of the room, I chose two thick tomes to examine more closely. I placed them on a table, sat down in a chair, and opened the one provocatively titled, *An Idiot's Guide to Money*.

You've gotta be really confident to give your book a title designed to offend people, huh? But it lived up to that title because it turned out to be extremely easy to understand.

Two types of currency existed in this world—one issued by the overarching Merchants' Guild and one issued by countries. Adventurers usually only used commercial currency since their activities took them across borders. However, out of the Merchants' Guild's consideration for sovereign nations, their currency was valued a bit lower than national currencies.

A copper coin with a hole in the middle was the first unit of currency, then at each increase in the tens digit, you had a silver coin and then a gold coin. Anything above that was often handled with bonds or certificates. Some countries issued currency denominations higher than gold coins, but apparently that was a rare sight. It was unsurprising really, considering how huge the amount of money involved would be for ordinary folks.

You only needed a few coins to buy something to eat from the food stalls—I had already been drawn in by the delicious smell wafting from one and seen the prices—so one copper coin was probably about the same as a hundred yen in Japan.

I wrote down everything useful in my notebook, moved that first book to the edge of the table, and opened the second one. It was titled, *Read This and You Too Could Become a Mage!* With hopes of learning the rules of magic in detail, I turned to the first page, only to be met with cute illustrations. *What is this, a picture book?*

But even while wondering if this volume was geared toward children, I tried not to have any biases as I flipped through it. My quick skim surprised me because I discovered the information I wanted laid out in a succinct, easy-to-understand format. The author's name, along with a note, was included at the end of the book.

By Tri Sorcerer Jill Spring. Glory and bright future to all mages.

The book was probably written for the purpose of training mages and improving their status. A mysterious excitement was bubbling in me as I turned the pages. *This doesn't bode well.* It wasn't always easy for adults to be bold and surrender to our wildest dreams, because we were long past the age where we would be easily forgiven for making mistakes.

I closed my eyes and slammed the book shut. Then I inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. It did nothing to suppress the restless eagerness whirling around inside me, but that was probably just because I wasn't used to this world yet. That had to be it. Once my feet touched solid ground, surely these feelings would disappear. *I have to believe that.*

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THE bell outside started to ring. The seminar would start soon.

I hurriedly stashed my notebook in my pocket and returned the books to their original locations. As I exited the room, I nodded to the man at the front desk again. He returned the greeting and I couldn't help but think, *What a conscientious man.* Then I continued swiftly down the hallway.

The Guild's main lobby was as enormous and overwhelming as before. Luckily, I'd already scouted out the lecture hall where the seminar was being held, so I wasn't worried about being late. I walked straight ahead to the room around the corner and gently put my hand on the door.

I opened it very slowly to peek inside. It was empty. A flood of emotions swept through me, relief that I wasn't late mixed with unease that I had the wrong room. I stuck my head out in the hallway again to double check the sign plate. It definitely still read "Lecture Hall," so I stepped inside and closed the door softly behind me.

Several desks and chairs were tucked into the back of the room. I was reminded of a school classroom from my old life as I dragged one of the desks to what seemed like the front of the room, then grabbed a chair to go with it. I sat down, opened up my notebook, and reviewed what I'd learned so far. I figured the teacher and other new adventurers would eventually arrive while I waited.

***

I knew I had the right time and place, but the longer the room remained empty, the more anxious I became. I went out into the hallway again to check if anyone was coming, but as of now, no one. Another ten minutes or so passed as I waited, fidgeting nervously. Then the door I'd been staring at so hard opened with a rattle and I could finally relax a little.

A small person entered, with fluffy ears and a bushy tail that bounced with his every step. He was an adorable little boy, with hair a vibrant green color that matched the fur on his ears and tail. His big, round eyes were a slightly deeper green. On the left side of his belt, he carried a dagger. On the right, for some reason, was a hammer. He seemed to be wearing clothes that had been designed for someone taller, and his overly long sleeves billowed around his arms.

He must be one of those therianthropes. Ralf had mentioned them yesterday. The boy picked his own desk and chair from the back of the room and brought them over next to me, leaving a bit of space between us. In the process, his sleeves had rustled against the desk a few times and made a strange clanking noise. I realized he'd turned all that extra fabric into pockets.

The beast-boy thrust his hand into his sleeve, rummaged around for a bit, pulled out a few eye-catching gemstones, then arranged them on his desk. He proceeded to examine them. He didn't seem at all bothered by me staring at him, which made me wonder if he was a little eccentric. If anything, though, I was the one who was being rude by watching him so openly. Curiosity was no excuse, so I dropped my gaze back down to my notebook and tried hard not to let myself be distracted by him.

A short time later, I heard a strange clacking coming from the boy's direction, so I looked back at him. Apparently he'd taken out a chisel at some point, and he was now chipping away at one of the stones on his desk. *Huh. Stonework seems a bit too intricate a hobby just to pass time while we wait.* It only made me wonder if this really *was* a lecture hall after all. Maybe it was a workshop. But then I remembered the sign hanging at the entrance of the room, which I had checked numerous times, and crossed out that possibility.

A few more minutes passed in silence except for the sound of the boy's chisel. Then I heard a commotion from outside and the door burst open. A boy and a girl, both of whom looked slightly older than the beast-boy, walked inside, talking a mile a minute with each other.

"Are you *sure* this is the right place?"

"I'm sure. Will you relax? Look, desks and chairs in the back of the room just like she said."

The boy grabbed a desk and the girl picked up two chairs. They set them down on my other side, effectively sandwiching me between them and the therianthrope boy. *I'm the only old guy in here.* If this were a game of Othello, I could flip myself over and become a young man. The idle thought reminded me I was actually young enough now.

The pair's chatter brightened up the lecture hall. It always amazed me how much young people could change the atmosphere with nothing more than their lively conversations.

The boy had brown hair and carried a sword at his waist while the girl's reddish-brown hair was tied up in a bun. She was dressed lightly while he wore some minimal armor. They both looked really energetic and projected a quintessential adventurer aura. I eavesdropped on their conversation and learned they were here for the beginners' seminar too. So I had the right room, after all. What a relief.

"Honestly, I'm surprised we made it straight here," the girl said. "That hardly ever happens."

"Yeah, well, that's 'cause I don't get lost all the time like *you*," the boy retorted.

"Right, you're just *lightly* directionally-challenged."

"Put a sock in it, Corinne! If we left you in charge, we'd never get anywhere. Which makes me a better navigator than you."

"Whatever. I guess you can have that. I'm good at other things anyway."

Even as they snuck glances at me and the beast-boy, the two of them kept talking to each other. It was obvious they were trying to find the right moment to speak to us, but for some reason they were holding back. I couldn't deny that the beast-boy gave the impression that he was kind of an oddball, so maybe that was why.

After a while, the pair lowered their voices to quiet murmurs, though not because they'd lost interest in us. I still caught snatches of them whispering things like, "You don't see that every day," and, "Are they both newbies?"

As for me, well, I'd never been a particularly sociable person, so I didn't know what to say to break the ice. When you got to be in your mid-forties, it felt weird to strike up a conversation with people so much younger than you. Plus, I knew my feelings would be really hurt if I found out they'd secretly gossiped about me later.

Then I heard the words "dark elf" coming from them. I lifted my gaze just a tad to discover them looking right at me. They looked excited. It seemed like they'd been staring at me the whole time they'd been whispering to each other. When our eyes locked, the girl took it as her chance to finally talk to me and stood up from her chair. But just as I was thinking I would have preferred for the boy to approach me instead, the door opened and a woman who appeared to be the instructor finally entered.

She walked to the front of the room, then faced us with her hands on her hips and her chest puffed out. Age-wise, she was probably just a few years older than the other people in the room.

Hey, I remember seeing her this morning. Well, technically speaking, I remembered *her* seeing *me*.

"I see all four of you are here. Excellent. Oh…"

A young lady with blue hair. That "Oh…" told me she remembered me too. She was the same young lady who'd been in the inn's lobby when I'd gone out that morning…*underdressed*. And she turned out to be this seminar's instructor.

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Part 3: An Invitation

I had the feeling it would be all over if my eyes met hers, so I focused on my desk instead, counting the scratches on it.

The young woman introduced herself as Ellie Hitstan. She was the Rank 3 adventurer the guild had hired as the seminar instructor this time. I got the sense she wanted to say something to me, but I refused to yield to the pressure radiating from her. With a sigh, she finally gave up and started class.

She talked about the adventurer's mindset, types of jobs, and the people who populated this world. Humans, therianthropes, dwarves, halflings, and elves were all recognized as sub-species of Humankind that could work together. In contrast, there were the Destroyers: imps, vampires, giants, and other groups like mermen and lizardmen who were treated as the enemy. The people here considered all Destroyers aggressive and destructive—in ancient times, apparently, the Destroyers had split the world into two after starting a great war against Humankind.

Some parts of the Northern Continent, where I currently resided, were still overrun with these hostiles. For example, Digland, a vast area to the north, was the nation where the giants lived. Go east from Oranz, cross a wide swath of forest, and you'd find yourself in a place called the Chaos Realm, where Destroyers fought each other to this day.

And those weren't the only opponents adventurers fought. There were wild animals and monsters transformed by rage. There were the undead, who kept attacking even after they'd died. And then there were the bandits, who had put down roots in rougher areas and mountain roads outside the cities.

To put it bluntly, this world was ridiculously dangerous.

I thought about my life going forward. As a low-ranking adventurer, I'd gain clients' trust by doing simple manual labor, then gradually switch to more complex work. An adventurer's job could be divided into four broad categories. Manual labor, exploration, escorting, and hunting. If you wanted to aim for the higher ranks, you needed to take on the more dangerous jobs. But if that wasn't your goal, you could easily make a living just by doing manual labor within a town or city's walls.

Exploring a fantasy world sounded appealing in theory. In reality, of course, it was fraught with peril. Having lived my entire life in a safe country, violence was way out of my wheelhouse. I was equally scared of inflicting it and having it inflicted on me.

For a while, I just stared at my notebook, imagining myself living in this world. Swords and sorcery, a multitude of fantasy races, and tales of adventure. I closed my eyes quietly and shut my notebook with a soft snap, locking away the heart of my excited inner child as I did so.

In reality, I was way too timid to live as a full-fledged adventurer. That kind of life came with no guarantees if things went wrong. I began to think I should find a way to live a safe and comfortable life instead. No, I *had* to. It was the only way I knew how to live.

In the meantime, class ended. *I'll live in this world the way I did in Japan, an ordinary, honest life.* That was the way of life that would best suit me.

I quieted my overeager heart, firmly telling myself to turn away from any risks and flee. *That's how a smart adult needs to live.* I stood up, still trying to reason with myself internally. It would likely take a while before I could repay Ralf all the money he'd spent on me. *It is what it is.* I just needed to explain the situation to him well enough that he'd be understanding and wait.

With my mind full of realistic, grounded thoughts only, I started to walk out of the lecture hall—when a voice from behind called out to me.

"Hey, wait up! Let's talk a little."

It was the girl of the pair, the one who'd been trying to find the right moment to talk to me since before the seminar started. I could see her friend talking to the beast-boy behind her.

"What is it?" I asked.

Still standing, I turned around and tilted my head curiously. I immediately felt bad about my aloof attitude, which I could blame on a combination of the fact that such a young girl was talking to me and my mood, which was somewhat gloomy. I knew I should be trying a little harder to be friendly, but I'd never been good at socializing.

As for the beast-boy, he remained seated, staring silently with only his head turned in the other boy's direction. But the boy-and-girl duo weren't the least bit deterred by either of us. The two of them moved all our desks around until they faced each other. I was wondering why they were bothering to create a makeshift round table, so to speak, when the brown-haired boy smacked one of the desks enthusiastically with his palm.

"This means we're in the same cohort," he announced. "Didja guys know it's rare for adventurers to register at the same time?"

"Exactly," said the girl. "What he said! We should be friends!"

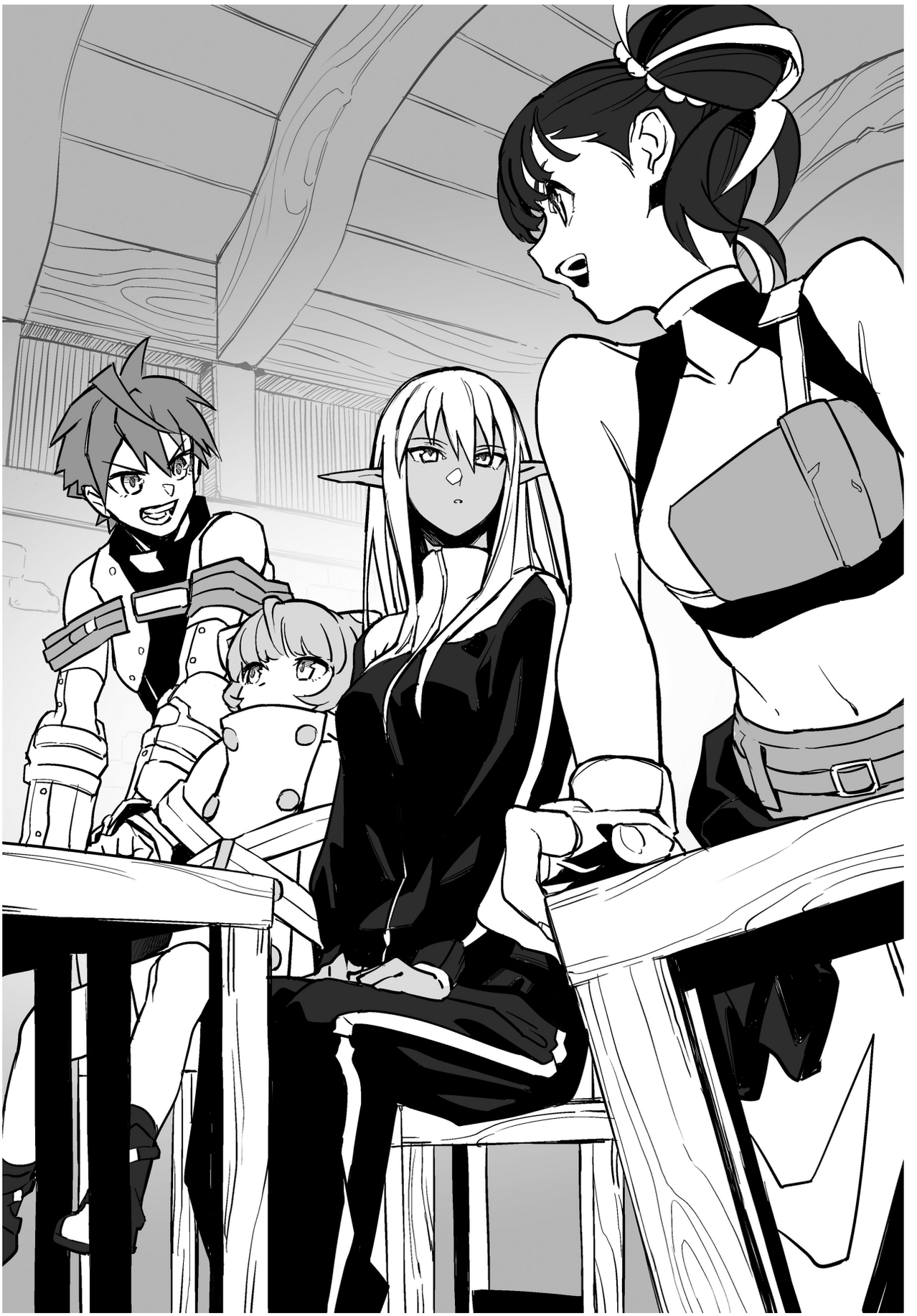
"Hm..." I said. "I suppose you have a point."

I mulled over whether or not to accept their invitation. On the one hand, I didn't know how to carry on a conversation with a couple of teenagers, and I wanted to leave this lecture room as quickly as possible to find work for myself.

But on the other hand, I just couldn't bring myself to reject their kind overture. The boy and girl sat down again in their chairs and stared expectantly at me, practically vibrating with anticipation. Their adorable behavior charmed me and I could feel my resolve softening.

A few minutes won't change anything. It's important to form strong relationships with people when I'm in an unfamiliar place.

I pulled out a chair and sat down, then placed my hands on my lap and straightened my spine. *Maybe my posture should be a little more relaxed when talking to kids?* After I took a seat, the beast-boy also dragged his chair over to his now-shifted desk. Apparently, he'd decided to join this conversation too.



“Jeez, you guys could act a *little* more excited.”

The pouting boy sounded dissatisfied but not angry. He was probably the type to say whatever popped into his head. A smile immediately transformed his face and he spoke again.

“I’m Albert Careggi, fourteen years old! My old man used to be an adventurer and I always looked up to him. He’s still *super* jacked and strong!”

He patted the sheath of his sword with his hand. It wasn’t at all ostentatious and looked worn by long years of use. Perhaps his father had handed it down to him. From its immaculate condition, I guessed Albert took good care of it. He was obviously more serious and sensitive than I’d initially taken him for.

“I’m Corinne,” said the girl. “The same age as Albert, and I’ve been stuck with him since we were little. I was afraid he’d up and die if I left him alone, so I decided to become an adventurer with him.”

“Hey, they didn’t need to know that!” Albert huffed in annoyance, then they both looked at me simultaneously. The little beast-boy sitting next to me hunched in on himself a little at their synchronized movement. Despite not having said anything to each other yet, he and I exchanged a meaningful glance in response to the pair’s sparkling, expectant eyes that had now turned on us. It was like we were both silently saying, “You first.”

I was technically an amnesiac, so I needed to get my story straight to avoid any contradictions. And while I thought about what to say, the therianthrope spoke first.

“...I’m Montana Marteau,” he said. “I’m the son of a dwarven blacksmith. I fight using a dagger.”

He spoke haltingly, but it sounded less like he wasn’t used to speaking and more like he was choosing his words carefully before saying them. But his eyes glowed with his hopes for the future, maybe because he too was a child who’d always aspired to be an adventurer. At least that was how he looked to me.

And that meant that the only one among us with dull, lackluster eyes was me. I felt awkward going last, like the star headliner finally taking the stage, but there was nothing I could do about it. *I should have just gone first and gotten it over with instead of overthinking it like an idiot.* Even as the thought flashed through

my mind, I knew it was too late for me to just leave without saying a word, so I gave up and spoke.

"My name is Haruka Yamagishi," I started. "Um… I suppose confrontation is…not my strong suit."

I contemplated the meaning of my own words. I was the oldest in terms of mental age, but for some reason, my self-introduction felt the most confusing and unhelpful.

"Huh," said Albert, before quickly recovering. "Then I'll call you Haruka. You guys can call me Al."

"I'll call you Haruka too!"

While I tried to manage my shock at how quickly they had closed the emotional distance between us, their conversation went on without me. *Youth is something else.* Despite my young body, I was still old on the inside, so I had no way of resisting in the face of such youthful energy. And actually, being there with them made me feel younger and surprisingly comfortable.

When I glanced at Montana next to me, I found him staring at me in a daze. Even while I'd been introducing myself, I'd sensed that he was looking at me exactly the same way. At this rate, the kid was going to bore a hole through me. I couldn't remember doing anything off, but clearly he was upset about something.

I would have rather he spoke to me directly, because I didn't enjoy being stared at. But I said nothing, just studiously kept my eyes down. That was when Albert hopped up on his desk and asked Montana a question.

"Sooo, Montana, you're the son of a dwarf?"

"Yes."

"Even though you're a beast-person?"

"Yes."

"How does that work?"

Wow, he's digging pretty aggressively into Montana's private life. I immediately glanced at Montana to see his reaction, but his expression remained basically the same as before. My plan had been to change the subject if he looked upset or uncomfortable, but I also didn't want to come across as a busybody, so I decided to wait and watch instead.

"A giant bird snatched me away from my birth parents and my dwarf father is the one who found me," he said calmly. "Now

that I'm an adventurer, I'll be able to look for my blood father and mother. I want to travel everywhere."

To my surprise, he didn't seem particularly bothered by the circumstances of his birth. His dwarf parents must have been so amazing and dependable that their lack of a biological connection didn't matter to him. Warmth unfurled in my heart at the thought.

Albert and Corinne glanced at each other and grinned after Montana said his piece. *They look like they're up to something.* I had to admit that my own thoughts made it sound like I didn't trust those two.

"Hey, hey, hey, I've got a brilliant idea," Albert said excitedly. "Why don't you team up with us? Then we can go on adventures together all over the world!"

Montana pulled his fluffy tail into his lap and fussed with it absentmindedly for a bit. He looked at the ceiling, then at each of us three in turn, taking his time, before finally giving Albert a simple response.

"All right."

This is bad. Their goal with this gathering hadn't been to form a friendship. It was now crystal clear to me that they'd wanted the two of us to join their party all along.

My plan was to find some honest, steady work in town and pay back the debt I owed to Ralf, after which I hoped to be hired by a shop or merchant so I could live a peaceful life. And that was what I thought I *had* to do. But now the adventurous itch I had wrestled into submission earlier reared its eager head once more.

This anxiety was different from the kind I felt when something bad happened. It was much more like the kind of feeling that throbbed in your chest when you were looking forward to seeing what would happen next in an amazing story, or when your heart raced during a suspenseful fight scene.

"The offer's on the table for you too, Haruka! You'll go adventuring with us, right?" Albert pressed.

"Huh? What? *Me*?"

"You don't have a weapon, so does that mean you can use magic?" Corinne asked.

"Yes, apparently so, but, wait, that's not the issue here," I started, almost getting carried away. "I'd rather live in town doing menial labor and things like that…"

“Oh, gosh, that’s amazing!” Corinne was already saying. “Yay! We have a mage! Mages are *so* valuable in an adventuring party!”

My words of protest got stuck in my throat at the sight of Corinne, who was now practically shrieking in delight. I hadn’t even agreed to join them, but they were already talking like it was set in stone. And when I imagined turning them down, I got a bad feeling somewhere in my chest or stomach. I couldn’t pinpoint it exactly, but I pressed a hand to my abdomen.

I don’t even know how much magic I can use or what level of magic I have in general. I can’t just say yes so easily with things the way they are. I don’t want to cause any trouble.

“May I have the night to think things over?” I asked.

In the end, my answer wasn’t a “no.” I didn’t even think about how I *could* refuse. Instead, I was worried about not wanting to cause them trouble after joining up with them. In fact, the direction of my thoughts had changed irrevocably the minute the thought of joining them had entered my mind. And I had to ignore that, because I couldn’t afford to get swept up in outlandish dreams.

“I’ll do my best to consider your offer positively,” I said instead. “You have my word.”

With that, I rushed out into the hallway, where I agonized over whether this was really the right decision. Could I surrender to the thrill of excitement buzzing in my chest? Even though I knew I shouldn’t?

I could still turn back and do the proper thing. I would give them my answer after I thought this through carefully and thoroughly. *It’ll be fine, I still have time.*

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Part 4: Observation and Experiment

I dashed through the guild. Well, “dash” might be an overstatement, but my steps definitely felt light as I headed for the training ground. Regardless of my chaotic thoughts, I couldn’t stop tomorrow from coming. I had to do what I could to prepare, even as the gears turned in my brain.

The clashing of wooden swords and the chanting of spells echoed from the training ground. I saw everything once I stepped

out of the hallway. Under the sunny sky, adventurers were throwing themselves into their training. I made a beeline for the group of mages among them.

I'd seen all the spells they were unleashing on their targets when I'd flipped through *Read This and You Too Could Become a Mage!* Their loud, assertive recitations of the necessary incantations made it easy for me to understand which spells they were using, and I was grateful, not having much else to go on.

From my perspective, they seemed very confident showing off their talents to everyone around them. Maybe they had the same idea I did: that by demonstrating their abilities, they'd prove they were worthy of joining someone's party.

While I observed them firing off their various magics, I went over the process in my own mind. *Chant the incantation, point the tip of your wand at your target, and your spell will fly straight toward its mark.* Many of the mages in the training ground were taking short breaks after using several spells back to back. Seeing some of them grimacing and holding their heads in their hands, I figured they'd hit the average number of times they could easily cast spells in a row.

According to *Read This and You Too Could Become a Mage!*, continuous magic use caused severe headaches. Even if the pain got really bad, it would eventually subside, but if you fully exceeded your magical limits, you would pass out on the spot. These headaches were widely known as "mana sickness."

Apparently, mana sickness was caused by excessive concentration while using magic, and the strain it put on the brain when mana passed through it. The limit to the number of consecutive spells you could cast was directly proportional to your aptitude, but it could also be increased through training. Just as knights wielded their swords every day, it was also important for mages to train like this.

I stepped up to the front of one of the targets, replacing one of the mages who was taking a break. Replicating what I'd just gone over in my mind, I slowly went through each step of the magical process, this time externally.

"...Arrow of flame, arise, sharpen, soar, pierce, burst where I command you."

Chanting the incantation, practicing magic in front of people, and the slight hint of something gathering at my fingertip—it all roused my emotions to a fever pitch, and my pulse raced.

The power coalescing around my fingertip finally materialized into the shape of a flaming arrow. It should have been blazing hot, but it didn't burn my finger at all. It just remained there steadily. I swallowed nervously, then commanded the still-immobile arrow of flame.

"Shoot, Fire Arrow."

The fiery projectile launched from my fingertip at the same speed as a regular arrow, flying straight toward the target, and pierced it before being engulfed in a small explosion.

I could hear my heart pounding rapidly. My head heated and every hair on my body stood on end as a feeling of exaltation surged through me. Then I noticed the slight unconscious smile on my face and rushed to smooth out my expression. Clearly, my ability to use magic was triggering a level of excitement very unsuitable for a middle-aged man.

Next, I fired the following spells in succession—Wind Cutter, Water Ball, and Stone Bullet. I was having such a blast I couldn't stop myself from shooting them off. In the forty-plus years of my life, I'd never enjoyed myself this much.

Every spell launched through the air just how I'd visualized it. I wondered if I could use more types of magic by constructing mental images of other things, but I didn't want to stand out too much on the training ground. I surveyed the area around me surreptitiously to see if I could somehow test my theory anyway. Unfortunately for me, no one else was using any novel magic.

So far, the mana sickness I'd been dreading hadn't hit me. But if I truly planned on living my life as a mage, I needed to learn my limits. And there was only one way to do that, so I fired off spells one after another.

Ten times. Twenty times. Fifty times. And I still felt no mana sickness.

I became so absorbed in my task that I stopped paying attention to my surroundings. When I suddenly snapped back to reality, I realized that at some point, I had become the center of attention. A wave of embarrassment threatened to drown me at the thought of other people watching me amuse myself like a

child. Cloaking myself in a calmness I didn't feel, I fled as quickly as I could and tried to blend into the crowd of spectators.

Fifty times. I could fire magic at least fifty times without slowing any hypothetical fellow party members down. I idly kept watching as other adventurers trained, but just like the ones I'd observed earlier, they could only activate their spells a few times before they needed to rest. There were even a few adventurers who had to crouch on the ground clutching their heads in pain because they'd gone overboard.

Casting my gaze down, I considered the drawbacks of magic. From my observations of the other adventurers, I learned that a spell fired from hands or wands didn't always strike its target. It was similar to a ball's trajectory in baseball. The more power you used, the harder it was to have perfect aim. No matter how fast a pitcher throws the ball, it doesn't help anyone if they miss their target. But throw too slowly and you can only hit something close and stationary. Veteran athletes make up for this problem by training.

I recalled the first time I had used magic. Flames had suddenly burst forth from a spot in front of me. Something like that didn't require any control. *I wonder if there's a known technique like that.* I didn't intend to use it lightly again until I understood it properly, but it seemed like it would be useful in an emergency.

After that, I continued my observations of the training ground for a while longer. Then I noticed one adventurer off in a corner eating a sandwich. I hadn't realized it had gotten so late in the afternoon. As soon as I realized how long it had been since I'd eaten, hunger hit me hard. Just like a child, I'd been so obsessed with a new project that I'd forgotten to eat.

I now knew for sure that I could use magic—and I was starting to grow uneasy from all the stares directed at me by the other adventurers. My best course of action would be to leave the training ground before one of them approached me. So, pretending not to notice all the curious eyes on me, I headed for the exit.

Does the inn serve lunch? And that reminded me, I had no idea how much it cost to lodge there. I knew I had to leave as soon as possible and find somewhere cheaper to stay, but I couldn't even do that on account of being broke. It only strengthened my desire

to earn money quickly and get my life on an even keel. I decided that when I saw Ralf again, I would try talking to him about finding a cheaper inn.

I turned the corner with every intention of walking toward the Guild's main exit only to find my way blocked by a woman. She wore a mage's robe and had long, blue hair.

"I've been waiting for you," she announced. "We need to have a little chat."

Miss Hitstan, today's seminar instructor, stood there imposingly. A high-ranking adventurer had deliberately been lying in wait for me. *Uh oh, is she going to rip me a new one for how I acted this morning?* Having my status changed summarily to "good-for-nothing" before I even became a real adventurer was no laughing matter. I tried desperately to think of an explanation that made sense, but not a single good idea popped into my head.

"Right then, off we go."

She didn't wait for a response, just started walking. I stood there motionless, staring at her retreating back. I really, sincerely hoped she would just walk away without noticing I wasn't following.

Miss Hitstan took a few more steps, then turned around with a laugh. *Does the laugh mean she's actually not that bothered by what happened earlier?* Or was her relaxed demeanor her way of saying I could no longer escape her clutches, so I should just accept my fate?

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Didn't you hear me say we need to talk? I'll treat you to lunch, so come with me."

It felt like I was being led to my execution, but at least I'd get to have lunch on the way there. I decided to watch what I said so that this meal wouldn't be my last. I wouldn't say my hunger won out exactly, but I did find myself silently following Miss Hitstan while I continued to wonder how I'd explain myself.

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Part 5: Advice

"HAVE a seat. Is there anything you can't eat?"

"I don't think so."

“You don’t *think* so? Well, that’s a bit strange. I won’t pry though.”

During my life in Japan, I didn’t have any allergies or food I particularly disliked, but I wondered if that still applied here. That was why I’d answered the way I had. I might have overthought it though. Or maybe I hadn’t thought it through enough.

Lots of people went in and out of the canteen Miss Hitstan had led us to, and she threaded through the crowd like this was something she did every day. She picked up a pitcher and two cups from one side of the room, put them down on our table, then went to speak to one of the staff members before returning to her seat.

“Thanks for waiting,” she said politely.

Across from me, she poured a pale purple liquid into our cups. I didn’t sense any aggression from her at all, so it was entirely possible she really did just mean to treat a novice to a meal. After taking a few sips of her drink, she started talking. Her expression remained relaxed.

“We were in the same inn this morning, right?” she asked.

Uh oh. I might have jumped the gun on the non-aggression part.

“Oh, yes.”

She frowned at my audibly timid response. I was fully prepared to accept her judgment, so of course, I couldn’t muster up any energy to defend myself. She didn’t look especially stern or disapproving, but to me, she still seemed like a veteran prosecutor or judge ready to cast judgment on me, a criminal with no defense lawyer to speak of.

“W-Will you stop looking at me like I regularly go around bullying newbies?” she said nervously. “Are you always like this?”

“Um, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“Then do something about your depressing aura, will you?”

“I will. I’m sorry.” I bobbed my head apologetically a few times while gauging her expression, which was a combination of exasperation and discomfort.

“Look, I’m really *not* going to say anything bad, all right?” she insisted. “It’s just that I saw you leave with Ralf this morning and I was wondering about the nature of the relationship between you two.”

I could tell Miss Hitstan was being honest because she didn't seem at all angry or critical. *So she knows Ralf.* He really did seem like a popular guy, so maybe my presence had inadvertently obstructed his romantic prospects. In that case, all I needed to do was clear up any misunderstanding.

"We don't *have* a relationship," I explained. "When I was lost in the forest, he was considerate enough to guide me here and help me out while I get my bearings. He's kind. He's a very kind young man."

I was doing my best to convince her that all I felt for Ralf was gratitude for his kindness—and nothing else. It was only my second day in another world and I did *not* need to be caught up in some kind of love triangle already. Thanks, but no thanks.

"Oh? Well that's good then," Miss Hitstan said, sounding relieved. Then she continued, "Just so you know, he'll chase anything in a skirt. Sometimes, his philandering gets him in trouble. Which is why I wanted to talk to you. I was worried he was threatening you or using you or something along those lines. Not to mention, I've never seen someone dress like you do. I mean, who even walks into the lobby of an inn practically *naked*?" she chided. "Then poof, you show up in my class. Naturally, that made me even more curious about you. Plus, that inn isn't the sort usually frequented by fresh adventurers, you know. Also, you're the first dark elf I've ever seen. In short, you're an unusual sight around these parts."

Halfway through her monologue, a member of the staff brought over some bread and sausage with an appetizing aroma. Miss Hitstan tapped her finger on the table twice to indicate where to place the dishes. Chopped pickles garnished the edges of the plates.

It was unfair to Ralf if my estimation of him dropped based on what a stranger said. But I couldn't deny I'd had my own reservations about him from the start. *His confession might just have been his way of making a pass at me.* That being said, he'd still been incredibly kind to me.

What would he think if he found out that on the inside, I was actually a middle-aged man? He would probably have been disgusted. I couldn't imagine him believing me even if I tried to explain the circumstances, though. And I didn't want him to think I

had a screw loose, so I only entertained the thought as a hypothetical. I didn't plan on acting on it. As far as I was concerned, Ralf had shown me kindness when I desperately needed it and that was that. Whatever his true motives were, the fact remained that I was indebted to him.

"Truly, all he's done is be kind to me," I said. "He even loaned me some money, though I'm determined to find a job quickly and repay him."

"I see," Miss Hitstan said thoughtfully. "Then you should leave that inn, the sooner the better. It's expensive. Adventurers around my level are the only ones who can even afford it."

"Meaning Rank 3...? Okay, in that case, you're right," I agreed. "But he said he's already paid for a week's stay for me. I planned on discussing things with him when I see him next."

Considering the income of a third-rank adventurer, I had to admit that inn was way out of my price range. Rank 3 was much closer to the top than the bottom, so adventures on that level probably earned a pretty good living. At the very least, the inn wasn't somewhere some novice could stay for days on end.

I didn't like being in a position where I owed something to someone. I couldn't say for sure because I'd never really compared myself to others, but I probably had more of a tendency to feel that way than most people. Even just the thought of owing someone something made me feel guilty about anything I did. Whenever I came across something interesting or ate something delicious, I'd suddenly feel a pang in my chest and wonder if I should really be engaging in such activities. I knew it was wrong to rebuff kindness, but continuing to rely on it wasn't good for my mental health.

"How about this," Miss Hitstan offered. "Why don't I cancel your room for you and return Ralf's money to him? Then you can move into the Guild dormitory. And if you're serious about not wanting to owe him anymore, I can help you figure things out." She paused to take a breath there, leaning back in her chair, then took another sip of the drink in her cup before continuing, "As long as you're not opposed, of course."

Now I was starting to wonder why *she* was being so kind to me. Her status and the inherent power imbalance between us made it even harder for me to guess at her reasons. Not to

mention her final suggestion only moved my debt from Ralf to her, which on a fundamental level, wasn't a real solution.

If you can't figure something out even after racking your brain, the best thing to do is ask. I lacked both experience and knowledge in this world. Therefore, I needed to gather more evidence before making a decision.

"While I'm grateful for your offer, I have to ask, why are you so concerned about me, Miss Hitstan?"

"It's not a big deal," she said. "I belong to an all-women team and that jerk made one of my friends cry. When I became your teacher, for some reason, I felt like it was fate. Especially after you left such a striking impression on me this morning."

When she brought up the morning's debacle, I curled in on myself and bowed my head in embarrassment.

"Oh, I'm not criticizing you or anything," she quickly clarified. "Anyway, I don't have any ulterior motives. You can think of this as a bonus lesson."

She waved her hand in the air as if to say she'd had enough of this conversation, then proceeded to clumsily split the bread in half and stuff the sausages and pickles into it. Because of the rough tear, it looked like she was forcing it all in. Then she poured some kind of sauce over the misshapen bun, while hastily picking up the pickles spilling out with her free hand, bringing them to her mouth and eating them. Despite her neat appearance, her behavior was pretty rough around the edges. Maybe that was typical for adventurers.

"Is that how it is…" I said. "In that case, I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but would you help me vacate the inn? I also want to talk to Ralf about the money I owe him, face to face, so if you see him somewhere, I'd appreciate it if you told him I was searching for him. I still haven't familiarized myself with the city enough to look for him myself."

I wanted to stop my debt from increasing any further as much as possible—and if I could get rid of the lodging fees from today onwards, that would help considerably.

While Miss Hitstan listened to me talk, she kept stuffing her face with bread, and her puffed cheeks made her look like an adorable squirrel. In an attempt to answer me, she covered her mouth with one hand before giving up trying to talk almost

immediately, instead opting just to make an “okay” sign with her fingers. Then she picked up her cup, washed down some of the food, and grinned at me.

“Then it’s settled,” she declared. “I’m satisfied if this means I can pester Ralf even a little. And now that that’s done, tell me more about yourself. Why do you want to be an adventurer, and so on?”

Conversing with women wasn’t one of my fortes, but I at least had enough social grace to know I couldn’t just leave with a “Well, thanks in advance”—not with everything she was about to do for me. I didn’t have much to tell her since I’d only been at the inn for a day, but maybe I could come up with something that might satisfy her curiosity.

Before I started talking, I downed a few gulps of the mysterious drink in my cup. It tasted slightly bitter and smelled like alcohol. The scent was nice, but I wasn’t so sure about the flavor.

“Good grief,” Miss Hitstan said, bursting out laughing when I grimaced. “You shouldn’t expect anything more than watered-down wine at a cheap canteen like this! What kind of fancy stuff do you normally drink?”

During the seminar, she had seemed serious and mature, but talking to her one-on-one like this, she acted just like any other young woman.

Once I started telling her the backstory I’d invented, she listened, occasionally responding with a hum. She expressed sympathy for my amnesiac state and did her best to provide some guesses about where I came from. Simply put, she continued to be kind to me.

I’d been really lucky with my encounters since arriving in this world.

By the time it had started to get dark out, we were on a first-name basis. Maybe it was embarrassing at my age, but I couldn’t have been happier to have made a friend. And then, right around the time we decided to leave the canteen, Ellie gave me some advice.

“Haruka, you were using lots of magic in the training ground earlier, weren’t you?” she asked, even though she probably knew

the answer. “You know, if you don’t want to stand out, you should probably stop doing that.”

“Was I really that conspicuous?”

“Yes,” Ellie said. “In fact, there’s already a rumor going around about a beautiful woman who fired off spells dozens of times without getting exhausted. I actually went over to the training ground myself after hearing it. It was beginner magic, but even I would have grown tired and needed a break after doing that many spells in a row.”

“…I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“Well, with that face and figure, you’re going to stand out anyway.”

The topic of my appearance had come up several times in our conversation. When I’d first seen my reflection in the lake, I *had* thought I was beautiful. But apparently my beauty was really exceptional. I had never given much thought to looks, so it was difficult for me to judge the different levels of beautiful. Personally, I thought Ellie and Corinne were both lovely young women. Past a certain point, the distinctions among beauty become meaningless. To me, beautiful people were simply beautiful people.

However, after having my looks pointed out to me so many times, I was starting to realize that I needed to be more careful. I made a note to myself that I should buy some hooded clothes as soon as possible so I could live my life without exposing my face so much. I wanted to avoid unnecessary attention.

During a comfortable lull in the conversation, Ellie stood up, taking her dishes with her. “I’ll take you to the Guild’s housing. Follow me.”

I did as she asked and rose from my chair, trailing after her like a baby duckling. Or a duckling that was rather long in the tooth. *It’s sort of funny how pathetic I am.*

We kept on chatting when we got back out into the corridor and walked in the apparent direction of the Guild dormitory.

“Hey, Haruka,” Ellie said suddenly. “If you’re really serious about becoming an adventurer, would you like to join my clan? It’s all women, so I think you’d have an easy time of it, you know.”

That sounded awful, actually. As a middle-aged man, I knew I’d have a hard time deciding where to look if I were surrounded

by women all the time. Plus, I didn't think I'd be able to fit in. I couldn't say anything like that to Ellie, though. I didn't want to open that Pandora's box.

"Well, I *was* planning to just work somewhere like a normal person…" As I answered, I thought back to Corinne and Albert's invitation to join their party.

"Even though you can use magic?" Ellie questioned. "But wait, you're using the past tense, so does that mean you've changed your mind?"

"Well, yes and no," I hedged. "The other kids in the seminar today asked me to go adventuring with them. Honestly, I thought they were fascinating. They don't know the first thing about me, though."

"Hmmm," Ellie hummed, pursing her lips. She continued after a brief thoughtful pause. "All right, all right, I understand. You're more intrigued by their invitation, right?" Then she pouted. "No fair that their idea gets you looking so excited all of a sudden."

"O-Oh, was I that obvious? I'm sorry if I offended you."

"Don't worry about it," Ellie said with another wave of her hand. "It was probably fate that you met them first. From my perspective, you four do seem like you'd make a well-balanced party, so why *not* join them?"

In response, I awkwardly scratched at my cheek. But one of Ellie's best features was apparently that her domineering attitude didn't come across as nasty at all. So I decided to open up a bit more to this veteran who just so happened to be younger than me.

"You say that, but another thing that concerns me is…won't it be a burden for them to have someone they hardly know join them? What do you think?"

Maybe I asked because I wanted someone to give me a final push. My current looks, gender, and age were *not* the real me. So wouldn't I be deceiving the rest of the party if I accepted their invitation? I didn't have dreams or goals like they did, so should I even be allowed to join them with such a dried-up old spirit? *If I become a part of their group, it would be like staining a clean sheet of white paper with a drop of ink.*

So far, in my life, most of the things I had willingly decided to do hadn't worked out. Starting something new was a terrifying

prospect, and I just wasn't a strong enough person to be capable of making snap decisions. I must have asked Ellie for advice because I wanted to dispel those fears.

Ellie stopped walking and turned to stare at me. I flinched a little when she suddenly jabbed a finger in my face. Then she gave me her answer, her tone admonishing.

"What are you saying?" she said, and it sounded like an accusation. "*They* invited *you*, right? Haruka, you're a stunning woman, you can use magic competently, *and* you're polite and mature. I firmly believe that the others should be doing their best to make sure *they're* good enough for *you*. I don't know why you have such little confidence in yourself, but why not just try working with them once?" she suggested. "Oh, one thing though—be careful not to die. Because I've taken quite a shine to you myself, you know. I wasn't trying to recruit you to my team as a joke either, so keep that in mind too. Got it?"

Overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, I could only give her a small nod. Ellie nodded back, satisfied by my reaction, before resuming her walk down the corridor a step ahead of me.

I really was lucky to have met everyone I had since coming to this world.

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Part 6: Trial by Fire

AFTER poking around here and there in the Guild, I went back to the counter up front to apply for a room in the dormitory. The lobby was much more crowded than it had been when I'd arrived that morning. Some of the people milling around seemed to be novices like me, while others were carrying well-used weapons and looked like seasoned adventurers. There were a lot more rowdy folks now than there had been earlier too, as well as people who wouldn't stop shamelessly staring at me. I really needed to buy some heavier clothes—and the sooner, the better.

I had borrowed just enough money from Ellie to get me through the immediate future. Once I finished my application for housing, I bowed my head deeply to her.

"Truly, I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me."

“It’s fine, it’s fiiine,” Ellie said with yet another dismissive wave. Then she placed a hand on my shoulder and her expression immediately turned serious. Her face was a bit too close to mine, and I didn’t know where to look. “Besides, I invited you to join my team, Haruka. As long as you don’t forget that, we’ll get along swimmingly.”

“Oh, right, of course,” I said. “I’ll do my best to keep your offer in mind.”

I had no idea why she was so obsessed with recruiting me. But I found her unwavering attitude on the subject even more reassuring than her inexplicable kindness. *Why does she keep reminding me, though?* Did I come across as the forgetful type? Or ungrateful? When I thought of it, it hadn’t been all that long since I’d told her about my amnesia. Suddenly, things made sense. Or at least, that was what I convinced myself.

“By the way, what are your plans after this, Haruka?” she asked. “I’m heading to my lodgings once I make my report for work.”

I snuck a glance at the job board out of the corner of my eye. It had been difficult to get close to it that morning because of everyone clustering around it, but nobody was there now. The lobby was still buzzing with activity, but I could peruse the postings on the board much more easily. I’d been curious all day about the kinds of work pinned there. I’d still have to wade through a throng of people to reach it, but this time, my curiosity was strong enough to make it worth it.

“I thought I’d take a look at the job board real quick, then head to my room in the annex.”

“In that case, let’s look together.”

I shook my head. It might have been too late at this point to have reservations, but I didn’t want to tie her down any longer, and certainly not with something so trivial. Even I was perfectly capable of checking out the board myself.

“Thank you, but I’ll be fine,” I said. “I really only want a glance. I *am* an adult, after all.”

“That’s…not the problem,” she said, sounding a little strange. “Hmmm… You know what? You’ll understand when you’re alone. Go ahead.”

I barely caught the tail end of her comment because her voice had lowered to a near-inaudible mutter. Doing my best to put on a happy face, I thanked her once more.

"I truly appreciate everything you've done for me today," I said cheerily. "I would love it if I could come to you for help again, if I need it."

I didn't know if I pulled off the smile properly. Even in my original body, I'd never been very good at smiling at others. From their perspective, it probably looked like my lips were just twitching awkwardly, but in reality, I was doing my darndest to express my gratitude.

When Ellie smiled back at me, I felt a rush of relief. *Looks like my feelings got through to her.*

"You don't have to be so formal, you know," she said. "Let's grab a bite together whenever you happen to be free. We're friends now, right?"

With her face turned slightly away, she sounded bashful. I was charmed by the sight. I covered my mouth with one hand, worried this particular smile would look creepy or weird.

How careless of me to become even the slightest bit smitten with a girl so much younger than me.

No, I wasn't "smitten." The little flutter in my heart was just because I was so happy to make a new friend. Or so I persuaded myself.

"Well, time's a wastin', so go inspect the board already!" Ellie shooed me away.

"Message received," I said, hand still hiding my mouth. "Next time, I promise to treat you with the money I earn."

"Okay, I get it, I get it! Just go, will you?" Then she leaned against the wall and sent me off. "Especially because you'll be back sooner than you think."

I thought I almost heard her say something, but it got lost in all the commotion in the Guild. I was more bothered by whether she'd interpreted what I'd just said as a pick-up line and would find me creepy.

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GIRDING my proverbial loins, I set sail through the sea of chattering adventurers packing the space between me and the job board. I threaded my way through them, apologizing profusely whenever I crashed into someone or stepped on someone's foot. So many of them were tall and rugged, it was almost impossible to avoid bumping into people, especially when they strode through the crowd completely unconcerned about their surroundings.

For the first time, I could understand why I hardly ever ran into other people in my old world, even during rush hour at the train station—because we were all considerate of each other's personal space. The adventurers here walked around blithely without a care in the world, and I struggled with that. Did it really not bother them at all to keep bumping into people? If some hooligans showed up in this world, they'd have the time of their lives starting fights whenever someone jostled them. Though they would certainly also be *risking* their lives, challenging adventurers.

I finally made it to the job board while my thoughts rambled off in odd directions. A split second later, something bumped into me from the front. When I looked down, I saw a feminine head covered in golden locks buried in my chest. I thought she'd move out of the way immediately, but her head and its pigtails stayed right where they were. *Should I be the one moving instead?*

"Um, are you all right?"

To my confusion, she took a deep inhale, her face still buried in my chest, then finally she pressed both hands against me to push her head away, even though there was absolutely no need to use her hands. For a moment, when I first saw her face, she seemed delighted, the look in her eyes reminding me of nothing so much as a dirty old man. But the next instant, she schooled her features into a neutral expression. *I must have imagined it.*

"Oh, I beg your pardon!"

That was all she said before striding off briskly, threading her way through the crowd of adventurers without colliding into anyone, somehow. *What in the world just happened?* Afraid I'd been pickpocketed again, I checked to make sure my money was still in my pocket. It didn't feel like anything had been taken. I couldn't figure it out no matter how hard I thought about it.

I took a few steps forward and finally looked up at the job board. The jobs were divided by rank. *What sort of work should we*

accept? I was staring blankly at the listings for a few moments before I noticed what I'd just thought, without meaning to.

We.

The word had popped into my head because I had been imagining being on a team with the kids from class earlier. Apparently, my brain was already going full speed ahead even though I had yet to give them my answer. They could very easily change their minds before tomorrow and rescind their invitation—and then I'd end up a middle-aged man with egg on his face.

I needed to stop getting my hopes up, or else when things inevitably didn't go well, I'd be the one hurt.

While I was admonishing myself, I started browsing the job postings, starting with the ones all the way on the left. In almost no time at all, a group of brawny men approached me.

"Oy, you Ralf's woman?" one called out. "Gotta say, I was pretty curious when I heard about you. He's got good taste, huh?"

For a second, I didn't know what he meant, but then I saw that he was leering at me, his eyes roaming up and down my body. Someone Ralf had offended must have been suspicious about my relationship with him and started a rumor.

"You're mistaken," I explained calmly. "Ralf and I don't have that sort of relationship."

Not to mention, I'm actually a middle-aged man. Respectfully, give me a break.

Despite my unambiguous response, the man and his cronies guffawed, clearly not listening to anything I said. I had no idea how to handle someone like this.

"The hell're you doing looking at job postings anyway?" he taunted. "Think you're an adventurer, do you?"

I knew nothing good could come from interacting with people like this, even if they *were* listening. The best course of action would have been to simply ignore them, but it was too late to just say, "Goodbye, take care," and walk away.

I did my best to let his words go in one ear and out the other. I didn't want his nasty comments lingering in my mind, thanks. Showing I was offended and picking up the proverbial gauntlet he'd thrown would have meant playing right into his hands.

In any case, I might not have known how conversations worked in this world, but I definitely knew this guy was mocking

me. I decided he would go away if I made myself as boring as possible, so I responded politely enough that he couldn't misconstrue my words or tone as provocation. I made extra sure not to look terrified either.

"Yes," I said carefully. "In fact, I recently completed my adventurer registration."

"Bwahahaha! Lady, it'll be helluva lot easier for you to earn money with your looks than as an adventurer!"

It was obvious now that regardless of what I said, he was intent on hassling me. However, his anger seemed to be directed at Ralf, not at me. I'd only met good people so far, so I supposed it was about time for me to encounter the not-so-good.

The man was armed and dressed for combat, so I didn't stand a chance against him in that department, though I was sure someone would intervene if he tried to start a fight in the Guild. After all, this place was designed to manage adventurers, right? I wanted to believe the staff wasn't heartless enough to ignore the plight of a newcomer being harassed.

"I'll be working as an adventurer just like everyone else here starting tomorrow," I said, "so please don't make fun of me. And I'll certainly do my best not to get in anyone's way."

I chose the path of humility and waited for his reaction, trying my best to silently convey that I didn't want to fight, and that I was a boring person. Meanwhile, the fact that I found myself embroiled in a situation like this the moment I was left alone for more than a few seconds made me wonder if Ralf and Ellie had been protecting me all this time. But just as I felt myself about to start gazing off into the distance with gratitude once more, the man, now irritated, roughly grabbed my shoulder. It didn't hurt, but now *I* was annoyed.

"You don't even look scared," the guy said. "You better not think you can take me on."

"Of course not," I replied calmly. "I'm no good at all with confrontation."

He'd been holding on to my shoulder for a while now and nobody had stepped in yet. I looked around. A few scared-looking people were pretending not to see us, while others were keeping their distance, clearly not wanting to get involved. At some point

in the past few minutes, everyone immediately around us had disappeared, leaving us in a small empty bubble.

I wasn't sure to what extent this man's actions constituted a punishable offense in this world. I'd been assuming that violence was a crime, like under Japanese law, but the definition of conflict here could have been very different from what I was used to. It could present a problem for me if a little assault resulting in injury was fine, as long as it didn't cause permanent damage.

Should I prostrate myself on the ground and beg for forgiveness for whatever I did? I felt like this wasn't the time or place to wonder if doing something like that was too pathetic or humiliating. Random violence against middle-aged men might have happened every so often back on Earth, but I certainly hadn't been expecting it here.

As I've said, there was never any violence in my life, so I had no clue how to handle a situation like this. I couldn't even think of a possible solution. All I could do was let myself go with the flow.

The man shifted his grip from my shoulder to my arm and started walking, dragging me, silent and frozen, behind him.

"How 'bout we take this outside?"

His lackeys smirked nastily. I thought about asking for help, but I didn't want to inconvenience strangers. I, for one, didn't want anyone getting hurt on my account.

So he dragged me all the way outside, and down a back alley.

"Um, I'm really sorry for whatever I did to upset you," I said, "so please forgive me. I can't compensate you, because I don't have much money on me…"

"I'm sure you can find another way to repay me for putting me in a bad mood."

Confusion was the first emotion I felt when he reached out toward my chest. *Why do people keep wanting to touch my chest?* On the heels of that thought came another one, like it was coming from someone else. *I've been groped quite a few times today.* Then the sense of danger finally hit me.

Ahhh, I'm an idiot. I completely forgot I'm in the body of a beautiful woman. I quickly realized the kind of danger I was really in, and I did *not* want to think about that. But I did want to give myself a little pat on the back for figuring things out before his hands made contact.

Taking a step back instead of smacking his hands away, I balled my hands into fists.

“Excuse me, but if you don’t stop, I’ll have no choice but to resist.”

The man and his flunkies looked at each other, then burst out laughing, as if saying, “Go on, do your best. Show us what a newbie can do.” It was true that no matter how skilled a new adventurer might be, there was only so much they could accomplish. In the eyes of experienced veterans who risked their lives every day to do their jobs, novices probably seemed like children. And in my current situation, I was outnumbered, too, so their dismissive reaction was warranted. Four men, each of them muscled and extremely manly in appearance, probably thought they had no reason to quake in terror in front of a new adventurer who also happened to be a petite woman.

While they cackled and taunted me, I tried to think of a way to break through this stalemate without injuring them. *Water Ball.* During my practice on the training grounds, I’d thought the spell was a bit iffy because it didn’t have much force behind it, even when it collided with a target. It was likely effective against enemies that cloaked themselves in flames or creatures that melted on contact with water, which effectively meant it had very few practical uses.

But right then and there, I came up with an idea to make it a little more useful. If it worked, I could settle things relatively peacefully.

“Orb of water, arise, multiply, gather.”

The men laughed even harder when I started reciting my Water Ball incantation. They doubled over, clutching at their stomachs and positively howling in their amusement.

“Bahahaha! Gonna give us a cold by splashing us with water?! Oooh, I’m so scared!”

“Go on, hit us with as many as you want! Hahahaha!”

I continued chanting the words clearly and carefully. If they were just going to wait for me to finish, who was I to look a gift horse in the mouth?

“Soar, strike, stay where I command you.”

Globes of water formed in front of me, floating happily in the air. There were four of them, all slightly larger than a human head.

Nice work, I thought to myself.

Facing the still-guffawing men, I flicked my hand like I was shaking off water and uttered the final words.

"Shoot, Water Ball."

The globes raced through the air toward their targets, and when they arrived, they wrapped themselves around the men's heads—without exploding. The men were caught completely by surprise. Arms and legs flailing, they frantically tried to peel the water from their faces, but they couldn't get a grip on it.

Generally, magic disappears as soon as it hits an object and causes an effect. Just like a line of code performs based on what's written, magic is meant to work exactly as chanted. My idea was that if I changed the incantation a little, the spell might have a different effect. So I had envisioned the number of water balls increasing and ordered them to stay in place without exploding. That was all, but I was glad it had worked.

How long can someone hold his breath underwater? The answer was playing out right before my eyes. And while it was definitely unpleasant to see the men's suffering, I was afraid that if I let my guard down, they'd exact vengeance on me right away.

A short thirty seconds later, the men tumbled to the ground, clawing at their faces. Then, they finally stopped moving. I was worried I'd end up killing them if I let the water stay wrapped around their heads any longer, so I allowed the spell to dissipate. A sigh of relief escaped me at the realization that I'd overcome this hurdle, but it was almost instantly followed by self-loathing. I had just deliberately attacked others. I felt sick about it.

Unease spread through my chest as I watched the fallen, unmoving men. If I had handled things just a bit differently, I could have killed four people. It had only been a little magical experiment. Something to try when I was in trouble. In hindsight, though, that felt like poor justification given what could have happened.

"Haruka, are you all right?! Wait? Did you kill them?"

I heard Ellie's voice, but I struggled to understand what she was saying. I was too overwhelmed. It sounded like there was a radio blaring somewhere very far away, and I could only vaguely make out the words. This was something that happened whenever

I was really nervous or angry. Things would seem smaller, sounds would seem further away…

“H-Hold on! What’s wrong?!” Ellie was calling out. “You don’t look so good, Haruka! Did they do something to you?! Was I too late?!”

She was shouting now as she aggressively shook me by my shoulders. Seeing her panicked expression made me realize I needed to calm down, and I managed to regain some measure of composure. I pointed at the men lying on the ground. My finger shook a bit, but otherwise my body obeyed me.

“Um, they’re alive, right?” I asked shakily. “I didn’t kill them?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, they’re fine. Just unconscious. Forget them, Haruka. Come with me, right now!”

After double-checking that she was right about the men, Ellie immediately returned to my side and took my hand. Just like how the men had dragged me out here in the first place, she now dragged me away. All I could do was follow.

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Part 7: Anger and Regret

TOTTO had been feeling irritated lately. His childhood friend—with whom he was secretly in love—went on and on about a certain adventurer at every opportunity. Not only that, but she had started wearing makeup too. Totto had always preferred her natural look.

“You know I’m stronger than him, right?” It didn’t matter how much Totto tried to show her that he was a better match for her. She would always respond with a laugh: “You can make jokes like that after you surpass him in rank.”

There shouldn’t have been much of a disparity between Totto’s and Ralf’s respective combat abilities. (Ralf was the adventurer in question.) A Rank 1 adventurer with whom Totto occasionally drank in a particular tavern had said as much, so it had to be the truth. But then he’d kept talking:

“Still, the fact that he outranks you means he has something you lack and you could stand to learn from him.”

Those words had hurt to hear, but Totto had forgotten them as soon as he finished his pint in one gulp. He always drowned

anything inconvenient in spirits. It was a bad habit of his.

Totto was a Rank 4 adventurer. Though he looked to be in his thirties, he was actually only twenty years old, a young adventurer with a promising future. To prove himself, and not wanting others to underestimate him, he devoted himself zealously to adventuring every day.

But his childhood friend only talked about Ralf. And everyone knew, so he was basically a laughingstock.

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LIKE on any other day, after having accepted a job at random and finished it recklessly, Totto was back at the Adventurers' Guild. The fact that he was able to manage despite his daredevil nature made him a talented adventurer, but the object of his affection didn't even notice, let alone appreciate that about him. On this particular day, a few like-minded adventurers with whom Totto sometimes worked soon showed up and started talking about *that annoying man*. After each completing their respective jobs, they'd all had a drink together before heading to the Guild, so the whole crew was already pretty buzzed.

From the start, Totto hadn't been planning on actually listening to anything they had to say. But once they got on the subject of women, specifically how that damn Ralf had been bringing a dark elf around with him, a woman he seemed to be on intimate terms with, Totto's curiosity was piqued. Apparently, the dark elf had registered as an adventurer that very same day. Totto was infuriated to learn that Ralf was getting cozy with another woman all while the object of Totto's affection was in love with him.

Why is it always that *guy?* As Totto's resentment intensified, one of his friends pointed at the job board. A beautiful dark elf stood there. She radiated such a dignified beauty that for a moment, Totto forgot what he was feeling. All he could do was stare, bewitched. Then he shook his head and forced himself to be angry. Convinced that any woman Ralf associated with couldn't possibly be a decent person, he huffed furiously and stomped toward her, taking huge strides.

Totto had only intended to scare her a little. But even though he towered menacingly over her, the woman appeared unfazed, responding to him matter-of-factly. She must have been comparing him to that bloody bastard, looking down on him. Totto wasn't going to stand for that.

So he clamped a hand around her arm and started dragging her outside. Surely, she would fight back. Surely, she would cry out for help. Except she did neither of those things. Instead, she walked behind him, letting him drag her out. At this point, he knew without a doubt that she was ridiculing him. His anger grew sharper by the minute, until it mutated into an emotion he could no longer control.

He had only intended to scare her a little. By the time he was about to touch her chest, he realized he'd screwed up. He'd gone way overboard, and he regretted it. Even as he frantically tried to think of a way to sheathe his weapon again, the woman balled her hands into fists.

"Excuse me, but if you don't stop, I'll have no choice but to resist."

Totto considered his choices for a moment, then glanced over at his friends and laughed. He decided to take the hit from a new adventurer's wimpy magic, use it as an excuse for having his fun spoiled, and then walk away. While he laughed to keep his friends riled up, he strategized calmly in his mind.

When the dark elf started chanting the incantation for the Water Ball spell, the other men crowed hysterically. But Totto remained cautious. She was saying the unfamiliar words without hesitation. Her cold eyes were piercing. At least, that was how she looked to him.

And then Totto trembled in fear at the sight of the floating Water Balls. Because he knew.

In general, mages could only invoke one spell at a time. Those capable of casting multiple spells of the same type simultaneously were therefore considered to be extremely skilled. Among adventurers, there was a special rank designated Tri Sorcerer, someone who could conjure three spells at the same time—in other words, a monster. Yet this woman had generated *four* Water Balls.

Even as the water wrapping around his head nearly drowned him, Totto stared at the woman through his blurred vision. Her expression impassive, she stared down at him and his fallen comrades like they were nothing more than test subjects. He felt the water obstructing his windpipe. As his consciousness faded, Totto deeply regretted attacking someone he now knew he never should have messed with.

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IN a daze, I let Ellie drag me for a bit before I snapped back to reality and stopped walking. Although the men had still been alive when we left, what if all that water had entered their lungs and would kill them soon enough anyway?

"Oh my gosh, don't just suddenly stop like that!" Ellie cried out, turning around to look at me as I stood there in shock. "You almost tore my arm off!"

"I'm going back to make them cough up the water."

I didn't know how to save a drowning victim, but my conscience told me I *had* to check on them. Even when I whipped around and started walking back, Ellie refused to let go of my hand. Apparently, she was willing to follow me despite complaining the whole time.

"Haruka! I told you, don't worry about them! How are you so dang *strong*?!"

When we got back to the spot where I'd left the four men on the ground, I pushed one onto his side and vigorously thumped him on the back. I didn't know if this was the right method, but I'd heard it was how you forced people to cough up whatever they were choking on. With an exasperated sigh, Ellie watched us from a short distance away. Just her presence alone was reassuring.

The man finally coughed, spat up water, and opened his eyes in a daze. Ellie had been right. They had never been in any real danger.

I helped the man sit up against a wall before taking care of the other three in the same manner. Once they'd all coughed up the water in their lungs, I went back to the first man and lightly slapped him across the cheeks. The first slap ended up being

stronger than I'd intended and left a red mark on his face. I had failed to control my strength because I was so nervous. *I'm sorry.*

His lack of response worried me, so I stopped slapping him and instead shook him by the shoulders.

"Hello, hello," I said. "Are you all right?"

A few more moments of shaking and the man finally started groaning, then his eyes cracked open just a bit. I sighed in relief when his gaze met mine.

"I'm sorry," I said in all sincerity. "Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

I apologized to him because even though I had acted in self-defense, my reaction had been excessive. If the men were even the slightest bit angry, I planned on compensating them. Not much, mind you, but it would be better than nothing.

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TOTTO'S first thought when he woke up was, *Shit, she's still pissed at me.* He was still totally out of it, and all he could feel was pain in his back and cheeks. He had no idea what had gone down, but whoever was shaking him had succeeded in waking him up. He slowly opened his eyes, and he saw that the dark elf from earlier was peering into his face.

She spoke to him, her expression as impassive as always. "Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Totto and his boorish friends, all fairly low in the adventurer pecking order, interpreted her words as, "If ya still wanna go, I'd be happy to oblige."

Unable to hide the quaking of his body, he threw himself on the ground. His intuition as an adventurer screamed a warning at him to apologize, the sooner the better. The pain in his back and cheeks burned something fierce now. He wondered if she'd burned him while he'd been unconscious, too.

"I'm sorry. I was in the wrong," he said. "I'll do anything you want, so please just forgive me."

"Huh?" she responded. "Oh, um, all right. I'm just glad to see you're feeling better."

"Yes, I'll do whatever I can to repay you," he promised. "I'll never do anything bad again."

“Really? That’s good then.”

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TOTTO’S sudden transformation seemed to scare Haruka, and she hurriedly left the scene. Ellie, the only one who actually understood what had just happened, tried desperately to contain her laughter. With an eye to the future, she didn’t bother clearing up the misunderstanding, instead silently taking Haruka’s hand again and leading her back inside the Guild, leaving Totto still prostrate on the ground. He had yet to move a single muscle. When Haruka glanced back and forth between the two of them in confusion, Ellie stopped fighting the grin pulling at her lips.

From that day on, Haruka unwillingly acquired an entourage of four rugged underlings. They shadowed her wherever she went, barely ever leaving her side. She hadn’t asked for any of it, but she wasn’t strong enough to give them a clear and resounding “No.” It embarrassed her to see the way people looked at them like they were weirdos, so she tried to give them gentle hints so they’d stop, but the oblivious men didn’t pick up on them.

At dinner that night in the Guild canteen, the four giant men, who now referred to Haruka as “Boss Lady,” surrounded her and showered her with adoration. A very small part of her regretted going back to save them.

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Part 8: Formation

THE *clang* of a bell rang out across the city. The sound wedged itself into my fuzzy consciousness as I slowly woke up and realized it was morning. The incessant chirping of unfamiliar birds reached my ears. In every world, birds were loud in the morning.

Right now, I still had a tendency to compare every little thing in this world to Earth, but I wondered if someday, even the sound of the birds here would become normal to me. It wasn’t like I held onto any lingering attachment to my old world. Thinking about never being able to return made me a little bit sad, though. If I had someone or something important to me there, would I be desperately wishing to go back? When I imagined how someone

would feel being separated from their loved one, I realized I was glad I didn't have anyone like that.

"...Time to wake up."

Saying the words out loud cleared my haze of drowsiness. In my currently unstable state, I had to remain alert. I stared up at the ceiling, then sat up using only my abdominal muscles. I never would have been able to move so smoothly in my old body. Back then, I always got out of bed, moaning and groaning, flailing my legs. Compared to that, life in this body was incredibly comfortable.

The night before, I had allowed Totto and his friends to treat me and Ellie to dinner. She had seemed somewhat displeased by the situation, but nevertheless ate and drank her fill of everything in sight, much more than me. Apparently, she was disgusted that Totto had attempted to touch a woman's body without her consent. It made perfect sense that she couldn't forgive him so easily, considering her status as a female adventurer herself.

For my part, I had been amazed by the sheer volume of food Ellie had devoured. Where in the world did she even store it? I also remembered the sad look on Totto's face as he had opened his wallet to pay for all her food.

Speaking of Totto, he had pretty much been apologizing nonstop ever since I'd revived him. Then the alcohol had finally hit him and he opened up to us about all his hardships in life. His friends—Dennis, Dominic, and Roman—interjected repeatedly with jokes, usually at his expense. Naturally, it took a while for him to get everything out around all the interruptions. Even as the intensity of his jealousy made me uneasy, I still found myself feeling sympathetic toward him.

Totto seemed genuinely remorseful about his behavior. But the other three? Judging by their nonchalant expressions, not so much. Maybe they were just the type who believed, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

By the time we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways, I was on a first-name basis with them—though they insisted on calling me "Boss Lady." The men seemed happy enough that we were friends now, so it seemed like this level of easygoing camaraderie was normal between adventurers.

Once our puzzling drinking party ended, Ellie walked me back to my room, where I slept like a log. And that brought us to the next morning.

The Adventurers' Guild dormitory consisted of a number of small rooms up and down either side of a long hallway. Each room measured about eighty-seven square feet and came with a worn-out bed, a creaky chair, and an old desk that seemed to be holding itself together through sheer force of will. A line of rope across the windows could be used to hang laundry to dry.

I had at least managed to wash my underwear with water the night before, but I'd have to do something about the rest of my clothes soon. Personally, I didn't mind my new body odor—I even thought I might have been emanating a floral scent—but you could never be too careful because these things were hard to tell on your own. Also, my breasts bounced around pretty much whenever I moved my body, which bothered me. I wondered if there was anything I could do about that.

Anyway, at the top of today's agenda was the meeting with Albert and the others. I wanted to tell them I'd join their team, but I had no idea where they were, or how to go about looking for them. The lack of cell phones here was ridiculously inconvenient. It was hard to believe that people had gotten through life just fine without them only a few short decades ago. *But once humans get used to a luxury, it's difficult to go back.* I racked my brain trying to think back to what I'd done when I was a child, but all I could remember was memorizing people's landline numbers.

Nothing else came to mind, so I decided that if I waited in the cafeteria long enough, I'd surely run into the group eventually. They were new adventurers too, so their living situation was probably similar to mine.

So I got dressed, stepped out into the hallway, and turned back around to lock the door. The rusted old key was slightly warped, and it took some effort to twist it hard enough to lock the door properly.

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IN a sunny spot in the canteen, I spied fluffy ears and a tail in a striking pea-green color. I sat down across from Montana after I

retrieved my breakfast order of bread and soup. He also had a tray of food in front of him, but instead of eating, he was just sitting there, staring into space. *What is he doing?*

"Good morning, Montana," I ventured.

His eyes finally moved, focusing on me at the sound of my voice. He blinked slowly once, twice, and then a third time. "I was asleep," he said. "Morning."

The previous day, I'd thought he was a little…different, and my impression didn't change upon learning that he slept with his eyes open. I chose not to comment. Maybe it was something that was unique to therianthropes, though I didn't know what the point of sleeping like that would be, given that they had eyelids.

"I wanted to give you all an answer to yesterday's invitation," I said. "Do you know if Albert and Corinne are going to eat here, too?"

"I don't know, but probably, since it's breakfast time."

"Then I'll eat while I wait."

We made conversation here and there. Montana wasn't the type to take the initiative, but surprisingly enough, he always responded thoughtfully to my overtures. Around when we finished eating, Corinne and Albert, his hair mussed from sleep, finally showed up.

Corinne noticed us right away and quickly walked over.

"Morning, you two!" she greeted us cheerfully, immediately taking the seat next to me. As for Albert, she had left him behind. He continued plodding sluggishly toward us. The lack of food at Corinne's spot had me wondering if she'd eaten elsewhere.

"No breakfast for you?"

"I ate before I got here, so I'm fine!" she said. "More importantly, what's your answer, Haruka?"

"Yeah, Haruka, tell us already!" Albert had finally arrived. He set down his tray, which contained a few foods seemingly chosen at random, took the seat next to Montana, and leaned expectantly forward over the table.

"That's actually what I wanted to discuss with you all," I started. "So first, thank you very much for your patience."

Three pairs of eyes focused intently on me. Honestly, the kids all looked so adorable, I couldn't help but smile.

“If the offer is still open, I would very much like to join your party,” I said.

It wasn’t like we were setting up a base and writing anything in stone. We were just putting together a small party of people who just so happened to be in the same class. And despite knowing they would accept me, I still found myself waiting nervously for their reply.

“Woohoo! I can’t wait!”

“Yay! It’s going to be *so* much fun, Haruka!”

“Agreed.”

All the tension drained from my body at such a warm welcome—and at the same time, anticipation for my upcoming life as an adventurer absolutely skyrocketed. I’d soon be taking on all sorts of work with my new companions, just like a character in a fantasy story.

While doing my best to rein in my excitement, I tossed out a suggestion to the group. “I took a look at the job board yesterday. Do you all want to go check it together after breakfast?”

“Heck yeah!” Albert said right away. “Give me a few minutes. I’ll wolf all this down in a jiff.” He started shoving bread into his mouth, followed by several spoonfuls of soup.

“Hurry up, hurry up!” Corinne impatiently pestered him to go faster—and meanwhile, Montana’s tail was swinging energetically from side to side. My companions’ shining eyes told me I wasn’t the only one who was excited, and for some reason, that made me incredibly happy.

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Part 9: A Gathering

UNABLE to hide his eagerness, Albert led the way to the job board. And when we emerged from the corridor into one side of the lobby, I saw an unhappy Ralf standing with an equally unhappy Ellie. The foreboding atmosphere around them made them difficult to approach, but I couldn’t just ignore them. After all, given what had happened the day before, chances were good I was the topic of conversation. So I let my new friends know I’d be right back, then headed over to Ellie and Ralf.

“Good morning,” I said. “Is everything okay over here?”

“Good morning, Miss Yamagishi.”

“Morning, Haruka.”

They both immediately turned to smile at me, and then continued their conversation. It was terribly tense.

“Oh, is ‘Yamagishi’ Haruka’s family name?” Ellie asked innocently.

“…Are you trying to make some kind of point?” Ralf retorted. “Do you really think you’ve got something on me just because you’re on a first-name basis with her? Gods, you’re hopeless.”

I didn’t know if they were old acquaintances or what, but it appeared they had spent the moments before my arrival quarreling, and Ralf’s words were decidedly barbed. I heard a rhythmic tapping sound and found that it was coming from his fingertips drumming on his sword. Ellie, meanwhile, kept twisting and untwisting a lock of her hair around her finger in irritation.

“And another thing,” Ralf said. “Why do I have to find out news about Miss Yamagishi from the likes of you, *Miss* Hitstan? I’d like to speak to her myself, so kindly give us some privacy, won’t you? Don’t you agree, Miss Yamagishi?”

“Well unfortunately for you, *she* already made her decision,” Ellie snapped back. “So why don’t *you* buzz off? Isn’t that right, Haruka?”

I pressed a hand to my forehead. Why were they fighting over me like dogs with a bone? I may not have gotten mana sickness, but aggravating situations like this gave me a serious headache.

Ralf’s irritation was only natural. I should have sought him out the day before and explained my reasoning to him myself. In my frazzled rush, I had left it all to Ellie, which hadn’t been ideal.

Knowing I was causing others to argue was taking a serious toll on me, especially given that it was two people who had been nothing but kind to me in this unknown world.

“I should have told you directly,” I said. “I’m deeply sorry for any upset I caused, Ralf.” I bowed my head deeply and continued, taking advantage of the pause in their argument. “I acted ungratefully,” I said. “I canceled my stay you reserved at the inn partly because I didn’t want to burden you more than I already had, but also because of my selfish desire not to increase my own debt. Regardless, that was why I imposed on Ellie’s kindness.”

“No, no, you have it all wrong,” Ralf said. “We’re not angry at *you*, Miss Yamagishi…”

“H-He’s right, Haruka,” Ellie chimed in. “I was the one who persuaded you to listen to me.”

Despite their heated words with each other, they were now both trying to defend me to myself. I appreciated their efforts, but any way you looked at it, I had caused this problem. I couldn’t allow them to be so gracious toward me.

“No, it wasn’t either of you,” I insisted. “I’m the one who so shamelessly relied on your kindness, both of you. And as the person responsible, I’m embarrassed by my conduct.”

Perhaps I’d used my lack of familiarity with this world as an excuse to let myself be spoiled by the people around me. But just as I was about to say more, I heard someone call out to me from a distance. Curious, I lifted my head to see who it was and discovered yesterday’s rambunctious quartet heading through the Guild’s lobby toward us.

“Boss Lady! Goooood morning! Hey, who the hell’s makin’ ya bow yer head like that? Let me at ’em!”

“Hey, hey, hey,” said another one, “hold on a sec and use those eyes for once in your life, man. Wait. It’s freaking *Ralf*.” Then he addressed Ralf directly: “You son of a bitch, you’re planning to use her up and throw her away, huh? Better be ready to face me like a man!”

“Your luck ran out when we showed up. Ain’t no way we’re letting you get away with squat, asshole!”

“Cut it out, you reckless idiots! Don’t just charge in like that!”

Dennis, Dominic, and Roman had surrounded Ralf, each spouting off aggressively. Totto rushed over to talk them down, despite not quite understanding the circumstances—maybe after everything that had happened the day before, he was trying his best not to start fights indiscriminately.

“Boss Lady, huh? That’s hilarious. Haruka, you know them?” A new voice had joined the commotion.

“Yes, in fact, I do,” I said. “We’re trying to have a serious conversation here, Albert…”

The boy had now joined the fray too. Up until a moment ago, he’d been practically bouncing with excitement in front of the job board. Now he tugged incessantly on my tracksuit jacket, like he

was a little kid annoying his big sister. Things were rapidly spinning out of control, but just as I was about to start clutching my head in despair, I heard a loud *click* coming from behind me.

As one, we all turned around to look and found one of the receptionists glaring at us, her chin raised haughtily, presumably having just clicked her tongue quite loudly. She pushed her glasses firmly up on her nose, then spoke in clear, ringing tones, taking no notice of our stares.

“You’re causing a disturbance in front of the counter. Would you kindly take your *discussion* elsewhere?”

We looked at each other, silently agreeing to change locations, then meekly shuffled off toward a deserted section of the guild lobby. *That lady’s scary, but kinda cool.*

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Part 10: Presents

AFTER moving to the new spot, the first to speak was Dennis, one of Totto’s hangers-on.

“Oh, yeah, Boss Lady, we bought ya some clothes.”

He offered me a bundle, which I accepted. Clearly, they had been listening when I’d mentioned not having any other clothes at dinner the night before.

“Are you sure? I’ll gladly pay you for it.”

Such conscientious young men. Maybe it was naive of me, but now that they were treating me so kindly, I couldn’t help feeling like the previous day’s debacle was basically water under the bridge.

I unwrapped the paper and shook the clothes out. There were two sets of hemp-colored pants, a navy blue tunic, and a black hooded robe. I stood out like a sore thumb in my tracksuit, so this gift was quite the lifesaver. I could walk around wherever in these new clothes without attracting any attention at all.

“Yes, please consider this our apology for yesterday,” Totto said, inclining his head. “It wasn’t all that expensive anyway. We hope you get good use out of it.”

The other three followed Totto’s example, bowing their heads and urging me to accept the clothes.

Maybe Dennis, Dominic, and Roman had also reflected on their actions and decided to walk a better path, despite their continued flippant comments. It didn't feel right to reject their generosity, so I gratefully accepted. For some strange reason, they reminded me of my younger coworkers, which was an oddly pleasing thought.

"Then, um…thank you very much," I said, and the four of them smiled bashfully. Then, just when I thought we had settled things peacefully, Ralf cut in.

"I heard you guys did something to Haruka yesterday, but not the details." He scowled menacingly at them, but Totto didn't even flinch. He only glared back.

"You're a pain in the ass, you know that?" he said. "This is none of your business."

"I happen to agree with him," Ellie cut in. "It's none of your business, Ralf. And don't take advantage of all this commotion just to start using Haruka's first name."

To my surprise, Totto had just received reinforcement from an unexpected source—and I didn't even realize that Ralf had very nonchalantly gone from calling me "Miss Yamagishi" to "Haruka" until after Ellie pointed it out. I didn't mind since everyone called me "Haruka" anyway, but I could clearly see the moves of a man popular with women.

So Totto really despises Ralf, huh? He wasn't even bothering to try hiding his hostility.

Fearing another fight was about to break out, I had no choice but to step in.

"All right, enough," I said. "Ralf, I appreciate your concern. And I'm grateful for everything you've done for me, from bringing me here in the first place, to your consideration for me afterwards." I drew the topic back to myself to take his attention off Totto. After everything that had happened so far, I definitely didn't want to be around conflict.

"But that's not the problem… Argh! Fine, I understand," Ralf relented. "I'll let it go, out of respect for you, Haruka." Then he dragged a hand through his hair with a heavy sigh. Maybe that was his way of compartmentalizing his feelings, because he shook his head a moment later and smiled.

“Let’s let bygones be bygones for now,” he said. “Haruka, I was waiting for you today because I was hoping to join you if you accepted a job. And I’d be more than happy to help find something suitable for you. What do you say?”

I found myself tensing at the sight of his nervous but hopeful expression. I knew I had to turn down his offer, because I’d already agreed to join Albert and Corinne’s party, but I hesitated. Albert was once more absorbed in front of the job board, while Montana sat on the floor chipping away at a stone. Corinne was the only one in our party who was paying any attention.

“Um,” Corinne started, “you see, Haruka, she…”

She tried to give Ralf my answer for me, but her voice came out small and strained. *Why does she keep looking back and forth between me and Ralf?* Maybe she was struggling to turn him down because of his rank. Wait, what was I doing making a young kid intervene on my behalf anyway? I needed to reject him myself.

“Actually, I kinda missed the right moment, but here, this is for you.”

While I was busy worrying about how to answer Ralf, Ellie tapped me on the shoulder and gave me something. She must have changed the subject after seeing Corinne so flustered. The parcel she thrust into my hands was inside a paper bag, and unlike my first gift of the day, it was all wrapped up in paper of violently pretty colors.

“Undergarments. You need those too, right?” Ellie said. “I’m almost positive the size is right. You don’t need to pay me back. Actually, I’m not the one who bought it all anyway.”

Ellie suddenly turned her head, and when I followed the direction of her gaze, I saw a familiar face. It was the young lady with the golden pigtails, the one who had buried her face in my chest and then taken a deep breath. Now she was breathing heavily again, and she gave me a thumbs up.

Huh. Interesting. She’s a really cute girl, so why do I feel so *creeped out?*

“That’s our clan master. Apparently, she’s taken a liking to you, Haruka. She likes anyone pretty…” Ellie seemed to consider for a moment. “Just make sure you’re never alone with her, okay?”

The sense of danger I felt emanating from this woman was much stronger than what I’d felt when Totto and his friends had

accosted me the day before, and I couldn't muster up the courage to ask Ellie why. Gingerly, ever so gingerly, I raised my right hand and gave a small wave in response to the thumbs up. The girl clapped both hands to her cheeks and gave her head an excited shake. I quickly averted my gaze. *I…don't think I should look at her right now.*

"Does that mean she's a Rank 1 adventurer?" I asked Ellie.

"Yup, in the Golden Wings clan. And there's really no harm in interacting with her, for the most part."

A clan was a larger group to which a team of adventurers belonged. Clans often had a base of operations and their members shared common goals. The creation of a clan required the Guild's official approval, maybe to prevent too many ruffians from convening, or to prevent unauthorized rank inflation. But the constraints were worth it, because the Guild would sometimes commission work directly from clans recognized for their abilities.

In fact, the reason I'd been able to guess the girl's rank correctly had to do with one of those pesky restrictions—only first-rank adventurers and above could form their own clans. So, despite looking almost like a child, the fact that this girl was a top adventurer meant I really shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

Incidentally, groups of adventurers had a complicated nomenclature. I inconspicuously opened my notebook to double check.

- Parties - can assemble new ones for each job
- Teams - a fixed party officially registered with the Guild
- Clans - a group of teams officially sanctioned by the Guild (only a few exist in towns and cities)

You had to be incredibly powerful to be a clan master. And now that I knew the girl with the indecent gaze was one, I grew even more terrified.

"So? Any thoughts on my proposal?" Ralf was still gazing expectantly at me.

He was standing closer than I'd realized and I automatically took a step back. Normally, it wouldn't have bothered me, but his *confession* had made me hopelessly self-conscious around him. I

felt somewhat guilty about it, but I wanted to maintain a buffer of personal space between me and him.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I actually already promised to join another party…”

“Yeah, you heard her!” Corinne added, popping her head out from where she was hiding behind me.

I knew Ralf was probably frustrated that things weren’t going as he hoped. Still, he kept a smile on his face and his tone light.

“Well, that’s too bad, huh?” he said. “But if anything happens to change that, I want you to come to me first, okay?”

Then Ralf spun on his heel and strode briskly out of the Adventurers’ Guild. I felt bad for not being able to give him what he wanted, but if we worked together while I was in his debt, I wouldn’t have been able to be myself, which would make things even more awkward.

“Arrogant prick.”

As I was silently apologizing to him, I heard those words coming from next to me, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the sour expression on Ellie’s face. Totto snorted in agreement.

Personally, I doubted Ralf was a bad person, simply because of how kind he’d been to me, but it was clear he had very few allies here.

“He really drives me nuts,” Ellie added.

“Phew! I’m so glad that’s done with!” Corinne exclaimed, sounding relieved. “I honestly thought he’d snatch you from us, Haruka.” Then she wrapped her arms around my waist. I froze at this unexpected behavior and stood there with my arms raised awkwardly out of the way. It was a habit I’d honed over years of commuting to work on a packed train, a way to show people I wasn’t going to molest them.

Obviously, I still wasn’t used to this world—or this body.

Interlude: A Man Named Haruka Yamagishi

HARUKA Yamagishi was a latchkey kid.

He was born to parents who both worked, which was rare at the time. He grew up largely comfortably, if a bit starved for love. A housekeeper took care of the household chores, and he only really saw his parents on their days off.

His mother and father got along well with each other, and would take time off to attend Haruka's school events. He was proud to have parents like them. It made him feel lonely that they had so few opportunities for actual conversation, but he didn't even realize how lonely he was because he'd been used to this lifestyle since such a young age.

Haruka loved to read. He was fascinated by the heroes in stories, the flashy action scenes, and the fantastic magic. He wanted to be like those characters someday.

He believed that doing the right thing was the shortest route to making friends who could trust each other. He believed that everyone was capable of mutual understanding. He believed that the bad guys could be reformed, and that rivals could decide to join forces and work together.

But Haruka was in for a rude awakening when he found himself forced to live as a member of a collectivist society.

His heroic plans quickly fell apart. When Haruka tried to stand up for what was right, people didn't take his side like he hoped. When he thought he was doing the right thing, no one paid any attention—or they twisted around his ideas about justice to bully others.

The more Haruka insisted on staying true to his beliefs, the more the other kids his age disliked him. And it was no wonder. It's hard to stay pure and innocent, and unfair to expect young children to use their limited reason to judge right from wrong.

But Haruka simply could not understand why everyone else didn't do the right thing. All the while, he somehow understood that everyone hated him, and after agonizing over the issue

without finding an answer, he decided to ask for advice from his parents, whom he respected.

After dinner, he sat on a chair in the living room, dangling his feet as he waited for his parents to come home. This chair, which had been designed for adults, was a little too big for Haruka.

Considering his admiration for his parents, he was sure they'd give him an answer that would satisfy him. This would solve everything. If he was wrong, he just had to get the right answer so he could change. Starting the very next day, he was sure he'd make friends and have as much fun as he wanted.

However, the first thing his mother did when she got home was scold him: "What are you doing up? Go to bed, now."

Haruka had always been well-behaved and had never broken any rules, so this was the first time his mother had ever gotten angry at him. His mind went blank. Tears welled in his eyes and everything went blurry, but there was still something he desperately wanted to ask. He opened and closed his mouth helplessly.

Just as Haruka's mother let out an aggrieved sigh that made him flinch, his father came home—also none too pleased to see Haruka still up at this time of night.

But Haruka refused to give up, and he finally managed to spit out his question. Unfortunately, the answer he received was a devastating one:

"Enough with that nonsense and go to bed already."

That was the needle that burst the balloon carrying Haruka's hopes and dreams. Wiping away tears, he returned to his room. He closed off his heart then. *I don't want to make my parents hate me any more than this*, he thought.

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IF you work every day, there are sometimes days when you're extremely tired or when bad things happen one after another. For Haruka's parents, that day just happened to be one of those days, which coincidentally made it an awful night to try having a once-in-a-lifetime conversation. That was all. Still, these sorts of things can leave irrevocable marks on children.

From that day on, Haruka stopped getting angry or crying. He became convinced that his thoughts and emotions had a negative impact on others. He never disobeyed his elders and became an even more well-behaved child who did everything on his own.

No one noticed his troubles. Even he thought them trivial. And before he knew it, he had stopped thinking back to the incident that had changed the trajectory of his life. Haruka unconsciously pushed this experience, which always made his heart ache when he remembered it anyway, out of his memory.

He never went through a rebellious phase, instead continuing on the path of being an honor student even after entering high school. He learned how to excel at reading people's moods, and didn't delve deeply into touchy subjects. His classmates saw him as mature, so he had a decent reputation.

But then Haruka too experienced the flowering of youth. A lively, popular girl in his class confessed her feelings to him, and he had no idea what to do in response to someone's obvious display of affection. All he'd been doing so far had been trying hard not to be disliked, while avoiding feelings of love or hate himself. In other words, he didn't even know if he liked her or not.

I don't dislike her. I don't want to hurt her.

So, Haruka ended up going out with her.

She was cheerful and energetic, and he enjoyed spending time with her. He was happy to be needed, smiled more than usual, and thought that spending every day like this was wonderful. Their time together was the most peaceful and the happiest of Haruka's life.

However, after six months, that joyous life came to an abrupt end.

"It's boring being with you."

"I can never tell what you're thinking."

"You never make any plans, Haruka."

"You don't even really like me, do you?"

That's not true! He treasured her and enjoyed spending time with her. Regardless of how their relationship had started, he genuinely liked her now.

He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

She was crying, and angry, and Haruka had done this. Her pain was his fault. If not for him, her thoughts wouldn't have spiraled to such a bleak place.

And if they stayed together, he was sure he'd hurt her again someday. He didn't know what he had done wrong, but he also knew from experience that no one would give him an answer at a time like this. So he gave up. And he hoped that one day she would forget about him and be happy.

In the end, their happy days fizzled out without Haruka being able to say a single word.

After that, Haruka smiled even less than before. He didn't joke around, and he stayed away from places where he knew other people were having fun. If, by chance, someone liked him again, he didn't want to hurt them. As long as he held back, no one would get hurt.

If he'd been thinking rationally, when he'd seen that girl crying and upset, he would have realized it was just a misunderstanding. He might have been able to raise his voice and actually say the words, "That's not true!" But Haruka was afraid to contradict what someone else said. He didn't want to be the bad guy. And so, he messed up his life yet again.

As a college student, Haruka fell more and more in love with video games and stories. In fantasy, the path was always clear and no one would get hurt, even if he enjoyed himself.

Sometimes he felt lonely, but not so much that it was painful. Eventually, Haruka came to believe that he was someone who had always preferred solitude. Little by little, he forgot what had made him this way—his past hurts and fears. You could say time healed his heart. Or you could say that his wounds closed around where thorns were still lodged.

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IT happened around the time he started working as a full-fledged adult. His parents went on a trip to celebrate their wedding anniversary and never returned. They had been involved in a pileup on the highway. He heard that the bodies were in such a terrible state they were unfit to be shown to the bereaved families.

The funeral ended before he knew what was going on. When everyone had left and he was alone in his room, Haruka cried for the first time in a long while. Had he sufficiently repaid his parents for their kindness? No one could answer that question.

For the next twenty years or so, he spent his days just working, and his time at home consuming games, manga, and novels.

He wanted to do the right thing.

He hated having to compromise himself.

He hated hurting people.

He hated making them sad.

But not knowing how to live up to his own expectations, all he could do was avoid everything as much as possible.

Haruka was just trying to be a good person. Even if he was bad at expressing his emotions with his naturally impassive face, as long as his efforts resulted in something positive, fewer people would have to suffer. He didn't care about his reputation. He had long since given up on dreams of wanting to be anything.

Even if he felt that the world was wrong, he thought all he needed to do was support those around him so that they wouldn't end up hurt. Even if he drew the short straw in life, it was fine as long as other people weren't sad. He had always forced himself to live like this.

***

THAT was the kind of person Haruka Yamagishi was.

But when he crossed through worlds and his body changed, he felt strangely refreshed. No one knew him. The common sense he'd built up in his old life no longer applied here, which made it difficult for him to assume he knew what anyone else was thinking.

And another thing—it was unclear whether he was even really himself. So when everything reset, the wounded heart of the boy sleeping deep inside him slowly began to awaken, and heal.

In this life, Haruka Yamagishi also had an impassive face. And in this life too, Haruka was timid, kind-hearted, and a good person. So far, this Haruka's personality wasn't too different from the other

Haruka’s. But little by little, Haruka’s heart was starting to change. As if *she* was someone else.

Hunting

Part 1: Adventurer Ranks

I walked to the canteen as fast as my feet could carry me. Not because I was in a rush, but because I couldn't wait to tell my friends the good news.

It had already been three months since I'd registered as an adventurer. During that time, I'd spent my days doing what you might call menial work, earning a wage. The jobs that Rank 10 adventurers could accept were hardly fitting of the title "adventurer."

According to Albert, we were more like "errand boys." This applied not just to tenth-ranks but to all lower-rank adventurers in general. The time after registration was considered a period during which the guild and the townsfolk could determine whether new adventurers could be trusted, whether they would be useful, and where their strengths were. So we couldn't even *apply* for jobs that were especially dangerous or required confidentiality.

Lowly adventurers needed to build up their track record by doing transportation and other grunt work. Then, if they proved themselves trustworthy and useful, they would rank up in no time —thanks to the merit-based system typical of adventurers and merchants.

Adventurers rose in the ranks by receiving evaluations from clients, which they could read after completing the requests. Therefore, clients couldn't give bad reviews, because it would be a hassle for clients if adventurers didn't like them. If clients got bad reputations, their requests wouldn't be accepted in the future. But on the other hand, it wasn't good for adventurers to be overly critical of clients, or to threaten them. If they did do anything like that, they could have their adventurer registration terminated. The Adventurers' Guild did a lot of work to balance the interests of clients and adventurers.

Not to toot my own horn, but I had been working incredibly hard. The system of having my work evaluated transparently really suited my personality. In my old world, I'd worked day after day for nothing, never knowing if I was making any kind of difference. In comparison, I really enjoyed working as an adventurer because I could easily see the results of my efforts. The clients often thanked me for what I did, and I found that direct connection especially motivating.

I had also gradually come to realize that my body, despite its slim frame, was quite sturdy and strong. No matter how hard I worked, I rarely felt tired. I was sure the reason I could work all day every day was because of my newfound youth, and I'd been giving silent thanks daily. But it turned out the two things weren't necessarily related.

One day, while talking with Ellie, she said, "Ugh, I'm so jealous of your physical enhancement ability, Haruka. You can use that *and* magic like it's nothing. Not fair."

"What's a physical enhancement ability?"

"Wait, you're doing it unconsciously?" she asked in disbelief. "I'd heard people like that popped up sometimes, but I never thought I'd actually meet one of you…"

Then she asked me if I was joking, and I could only tell her I wasn't, and that I had no recollection of doing anything like what she said. When she realized I was genuinely confused, Ellie explained what a physical enhancement ability was—looking stunned all the while.

Apparently, when you became good at amassing mana in your body, your physical specs would get a significant boost. The umbrella term for this was "physical enhancement." It was normally a technique you'd learn from someone or acquire through physical training, but Ellie said I probably just did it without even realizing it.

After listening to her explanation, I finally understood that *this* was the reason for my strength and stamina, not just my youth.

I'd had an inkling I might be different, but it took courage to ask, "Is something wrong with me?" Most of the adventurers around me were way stronger and more agile than regular people in my old world, so I had no idea what the baseline was. I'd initially

assumed that this new body just happened to have outstanding raw specs. That was why I hadn't asked any questions.

But I still didn't understand *how* I was making myself stronger. It was a little scary not knowing what was happening to my own body, but for now, I decided to accept the situation as it was.

According to Ellie's explanation, most top adventurers (other than mages) had high levels of physical enhancement. But even among high-ranking adventurers, some simply weren't as good at either magic *or* physical enhancement. For example, Ralf.

Apparently, his story was pretty infamous. It was also why people's opinions of him, someone who had risen to such a high rank as he was, were neatly divided. Ellie, too, had originally respected him, but her opinion had tanked after the way he'd treated her friend. *Communities of women sure are scary.* Now that I had a woman's body myself, I needed to keep that in mind.

Setting aside the tragic or terrifying stories I'd heard, I felt somewhat relieved to understand why I was so physically strong. Normally, there was no way I would have been able to lift something bigger than my body, for example. Plus, it was strange that I hadn't suffered a single scratch that time I'd almost sliced my finger off with a knife.

What I found especially curious was that I hardly sustained injuries—but it definitely wasn't because my skin or body had hardened, or something. My skin was soft and elastic, and my breasts still jiggled whenever I moved. So what was the real reason? Ultimately, I still didn't really understand how physical enhancement actually worked.

Mana, magic, physical enhancement... As much as I wanted to study all of these topics properly at some point, right now, I was enjoying my work and building new relationships, so I just couldn't find the time.

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Part 2: The Job Board

HARUKA turned out to be skilled at most jobs. Raised in a country with a compulsory education system, she could do arithmetic, and she'd worked at a big company for so long that she could easily come up with efficient methods of getting work done. The fact

that she'd had subordinates at her old job also made her good at supporting the other people she worked with

Even Dennis, Dominic, and Roman—always rowdy when they were on a job—listened to her, which had a domino effect on the rest of the strong but easily influenced people around them. As a result, Haruka drove people to work much more efficiently than before.

At first, Haruka attracted attention as no more than a sideshow, but her clients soon realized there was more to her than that. She rose through the ranks smoothly until it was finally the day that she became one of Oranz's Rank 5 adventurers, the fastest ever to achieve such a feat.

Haruka was familiar with the merchants in the city by now, and they often tried to recruit her. The various masters of workshops liked her too. In fact, by this point, there were few people who *didn't* know Haruka.

She had already paid back her debt to Ralf and was earning enough to lead a normal life. Everything was going well. She was feeling great.

***

WHEN I arrived in the canteen, I saw my friends sitting at our usual table and walked over to them. Albert lay slumped over it while a laughing Corinne patted him on the back. Montana was chipping away at a gemstone as always, making something.

"Sorry I'm late."

At the sound of my voice, Corinne turned around with a smile. "No worries," she said. "And congrats on ranking up! I already ordered for us, by the way."

"It's fancier than usual. Meat." Montana puffed out his chest with pride at the sight of the huge hunk of meat set before him on the table.

In contrast to the upbeat atmosphere surrounding Montana and Corinne, Albert alone was emanating gloom. He squirmed where he lay on the table, moaning and groaning. Finally, he sluggishly sat up, raised both fists at the ceiling, and shouted.

"This isn't at all like what I imagined!"

Then, after screaming his little heart out, he let his fists fall lifelessly to the table. He seemed to be under a lot of stress. In fact, this wasn't the first time he'd screamed like this. His cries of despair tended to come up from deep in his soul every ten days or so.

"I wanna go on an adventure," he complained. "Being an errand boy is boring as hell. There's nothing adventurous or adventur*er* about any of it! This is just menial labor, damn it!"

"True, but laborers are also important and valuable members of society." My serious reply only made Albert pull at his hair in agitation.

"I became! An adventurer! To go on adventures!" he shouted. "So why the heck do I have to work like a normal person?!"

He stood up, stomping his feet in frustration as he jabbed an accusing finger at me. Corinne watched him in exasperation. Albert was acting exactly like a child in full tantrum mode—but honestly, I really liked the fact that he always said whatever was on his mind. It reminded me of our age gap in a good way, like he was a little brother I could look out for.

"Don't act like you didn't already know all this from the start," Corinne said.

As the daughter of a merchant, Corinne knew how to go with the flow. She also had lots of contacts and significant pull in the merchant community. Before I knew it, she had already become a Rank 7 adventurer.

"You're such a child," said Montana, then he folded his ears down.

It turned out that Montana was actually a year older than Albert and Corinne, a fact I had only just recently learned. It explained his older-brother attitude, which he'd had the whole time I'd known him. From my perspective, there wasn't much difference between being fourteen and fifteen years old, but I also knew even a small age gap would have mattered to me when I was that age.

Montana focused primarily on jobs at smithies and such places. His clients rated him highly, and in seemingly no time at all, he too was on the verge of becoming a Rank 6 adventurer.

In the midst of all this, only Albert was lagging behind. Though his combat skill was high, his physical strength was really

all he had to brag about. Otherwise, he worked every day like an ordinary person, received ordinary evaluations, and was now an ordinary Rank 8 adventurer. He was strong and worked hard, so he ranked up a *little* faster than normal, but apparently, that wasn't good enough for him. It was no wonder he sometimes exploded with emotion.

This time, however, I had good news for Albert.

"Well," I started, "you're in luck, Al, because you're going to want to hear this."

I was admittedly giddy. In fact, I could barely contain myself. He sat down and looked at me, silently urging me on while continuing to sulk. His honesty even during times like these only made me like him more.

"When in a party with a Rank 5 adventurer, any adventurers lower in rank can also accept commissions slightly above their pay grade."

The way he frowned and cocked his head curiously told me he didn't understand the ramifications of my statement right away. I thought for a moment about how to rephrase it. *I think I should just be direct.*

"In other words, if you're in a party with me, you can accept a Rank 7 hunting job, Albert."

He slammed his hands down on the table in excitement and stood up, his eyes sparkling. I smiled unconsciously because this was exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for.

"Are you serious?!"

"I am. So let's pick a good one, okay?"

"All right, all right, all right! I'll go check out the job board!"

"Hold it right there, mister!"

But he just raced out of the canteen, not even pausing at Corinne's attempt to stop him.

"Ugh, I told him we were celebrating your rank-up today," she complained.

"Seeing him so happy was worth all the effort of ranking up," I said honestly. "That's enough for me."

"He's such a child," Montana said again. Then, fidgeting, he stood up from his chair.

"Hey, Mon, what's wrong?"

“You two, eat. I’m going to make sure the *child* doesn’t get into any trouble.”

With his tail swishing rhythmically, he began following after Albert. At first, his steps were only a bit fast, then he gradually sped up into a half-trot before breaking into an all-out run to chase Albert down the hallway. Montana, who also hadn’t been taking any hunting jobs—out of consideration for Albert—was probably also unable to contain his excitement when he heard that the ban would be lifted starting tomorrow. *I can relate.*

“Darn it! Why are boys such…boys?!”

“…Corinne, you can go look at the job board too if you want.”

“No! I’m just fine celebrating you, Haruka!” she insisted. “I’ll eat everything before they come back. They’ll see.”

She began eating furiously, so I sat down and followed suit, albeit at a much slower pace. Secretly, I had actually already been examining a Rank 7 job before coming to see them. But I thought Corinne would be shocked if I told her the truth, so I decided to keep quiet for now.

***

ALBERT and Montana returned from the job board, and we all ate while discussing the pros and cons of a few of the requests. We were having trouble coming to a unanimous decision, so after finishing our meal, the four of us went over to stand in front of the board again and hash things out some more. Finally, we decided to go with a hunt request to defeat a horned boar.

Before returning to my room to rest, I took a detour to the reference room and opened the creature encyclopedia to do some preliminary research on our prey. According to the thick volume, horned boars were monsters that were similar to regular boars, but with a single sharp horn like a unicorn. They mainly lived in forests, and were specifically found in the Sunset Forest to the east of Oranz.

I wrote down what I needed in my notebook and walked slowly down the corridor. The moon was out, but the path was dark. Still, I’d gone this way many times before, so I didn’t have any trouble walking absentmindedly while I thought.

In addition to Humankind and Destroyers, this world was inhabited by normal creatures like those on Earth as well as monsters, creatures that had absorbed mana and mutated. Monsters that had evolved from animals could also procreate with the non-monster animal version. Such offspring adapted to mana much more easily, making them more likely to transform into monsters. Left unchecked, monsters became smarter, stronger, more unpredictable, and more numerous with each generation. If their populations grew too large, the worry was that they might eventually band together to attack human settlements.

However, monsters didn't only cause harm. Their flesh and skin were also important resources. Monster meat that had absorbed magical energy tasted better and was more nutritious and invigorating than meat from ordinary animals. Their fur could be made into high-quality clothing, and their fangs and horns could be worked into equipment.

Apparently, it was the job of the Adventurers' Guild in this country to control monster numbers and prevent outbreaks. Many of the Guild's standing extermination quests were aimed at thinning out monster populations and securing high-quality meat. If I got to the point where I could hunt monsters without difficulty, I wouldn't have any qualms about calling myself a full-fledged, mid-level adventurer.

Over the past three months, I'd been slowly building up knowledge of this world between jobs. There was still a lot I didn't know, but I had a rough mental map of the area around Oranz, which was the easternmost city in the Independent Commercial City-State of Pleine. To the east of Oranz lay the Sunset Forest, stretching from north to south. Deeper in was a barren wasteland that looked like ground zero of some horrible disaster.

In fact, the wasteland was said to be what was left after a battle that took place during a time when Humankind and the Destroyers had fought much more violently than they did now. It was called the Graveyard of the Forgotten, and it was essentially bare rock. Even now, not a single blade of grass could grow there.

Beyond that was a dangerous forest where the undead lurked. Destroyer territory. But that was only based on the testimony of an adventurer who had supposedly been there at some point, so I didn't know how true it actually was. In short, the

city of Oranz was on the front lines of the war against the Destroyers and the undead. The constant need for adventurers and the abundance of nearby forests and resources allowed the city to thrive.

When I reached my room, I collapsed onto my hard bed, which only had sheets spread out over it. Once I woke up, I would finally be ready for the work of a true adventurer. I had continued training in between jobs, but I'd grown up all my life without ever getting into a fight, so I wondered if I'd be able to handle things well enough. *I can't say I'm not worried.*

But for the moment, the excitement filling my heart drowned out any worries I had.

***

Part 3: First Kill

WE woke up brimming with excitement and gathered near the counter in the Guild lobby. Only a few adventurers were around this early in the morning. Adventurers often drank until late at night, so unsurprisingly, they usually started their days late. A few of similar rank to us were milling about, most of them headed off to do physical labor.

"Okay, guys, let's go hunt us some horned boars!"

The three of us followed Albert, who set off eagerly.

This request was a long-standing one. There was no limit to the number of monsters you could hunt, within reason. The more you hunted, the more money you made and the higher your rating became. It was no wonder Albert was so excited.

We followed him in silence for a while as he walked without hesitation. Eventually though, I called out to him when one of the city's gates came into view.

"Um, that's the west gate."

Albert stopped dead in his tracks, turned around, and started walking back the way we came without making eye contact with anyone. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" he mumbled under his breath when he reached me.

"I thought we were going shopping or something," I said.

I hadn't meant any harm, but I'd completely forgotten that he was directionally challenged. Corinne looked away awkwardly. She

probably hadn’t noticed either that we were walking west. If she had, she would have been teasing Albert by now. But since she wasn’t the one leading the way, she probably figured she could just stay silent.

With the way those two were, I wasn’t really surprised. I expected more from Montana though.

When I turned to look at him, he blinked and inclined his head slightly. There was probably no meaning to his nod. As if he had finally woken up, he blinked repeatedly for a few moments, then surveyed our surroundings, his head tilted curiously. He really wasn’t much of a morning person.

I was starting to get worried, so I called out to Albert, still dead set on leading the way. “Why don’t I hold the map?”

Let’s do it that way from now on. Before taking the lead, I glanced at Montana. He looked serious as usual. “Okay.” That was all he said to me before giving me another slight nod. His nods really didn’t mean anything, but they were adorable, which made him even more adorable, so it was all good.

***

FROM there, we were able to reach the Sunset Forest without getting lost. Referring to the map and information I had gathered beforehand, I slowly led us deeper into the forest. We could have split up if we’d just wanted to look for horned boars, but we didn’t want anyone to get lost, so we decided to stay together.

The Sunset Forest wasn’t too bad to walk through because a modest number of trees had been cut down for lumber. Visibility was good, and sunlight dappled the treetops. It was so peaceful that I started to think it would be nice to have a picnic there. I continued at a leisurely pace, enjoying the forest’s healing ambience.

However, as we proceeded deeper into the forest, the path gradually became overgrown with vegetation until eventually, there was no path at all. We grew more cautious, but didn’t stop walking. Occasionally, we saw traces of grass being pushed aside, which must have been an animal trail. By looking at the size of the trail and the footprints, I could tell what kind of animal had passed through.

While carefully following the animal trail, I suddenly looked up and saw a rabbit hopping in the distance. Its long ears tilted toward the roots of a tree and reflected the sunlight. Montana, noticing my gaze, turned his head in the same direction and murmured, “That’s a killer rabbit. Its ears are like blades.”

“So there are monsters like that, too?”

“Yes. Its meat is delicious.”

“Wow. How fascinating. You’re so knowledgeable, Montana.”

Distracted by our conversation, Albert and Corinne also stopped and looked in the same direction. Seemingly tired from all the time spent looking down, they paused for a moment, did some neck rolls to get rid of the tension.

Apparently, killer rabbits would sometimes attack people, so Albert and Montana drew their weapons just in case—but the sight of them might have frightened the killer rabbit because it turned on its heels and fled away through the grass. I felt myself relax as I watched it leave.

A second later, though, I heard a rustling sound behind me, like grass was being shoved aside. I turned around in a panic—only to meet the eyes of a huge horned boar, which was breathing heavily.

Its sharp, twisted horn was caked in dirt. *I’d definitely get an infection if that thing got me.* But that would only be a concern if I even survived the fight against it. Not only was the boar’s horn impressive, but so were its tusks. I felt like if I evaded the charge from its horn, I’d probably wind up getting caught by its tusks and dragged across the ground anyway.

The monster was as wide as a man with his arms outstretched and taller than my eye level. My brain immediately conjured up the image of a small truck. It wasn’t something a human being would be able to fight head-on.

“Big,” Montana said. He sounded dumbfounded to me.

“Wh-Whoooooaaaaaa!!!” Albert’s voice came shortly after. Then he bravely tried to say something else, but in the end, all he could do was unleash a shout of terror that sounded like it had been ripped straight from his soul and echoed through the forest.

“This isn’t at all like what I imagined!” was what I wanted to scream, but in reality, I could only silently gulp and stare bug-eyed.

It wasn’t that I was holding myself back from screaming. I just didn’t know how else to react.

“For now, let’s retreat.”

Montana, looking calm, took the lead and dashed away into the forest. He was quick thinking and quick on his feet, weaving his way through the trees as he ran. Though he was usually absent-minded, he carried himself with the dignity of someone who acted like an older brother to *all* of us, which made him dependable in times like these. That being said, I was supposed to be the actual oldest and all I could do was follow behind him, unable to make a sound.

As we raced after Montana, a destructive sound the likes of which I’d never heard before came from behind me. Curious, I turned around to see the horned boar chasing after us. The way it mowed down thick trees and snapped thin ones reminded me of heavy machinery.

“Guys! Guuuys!” Albert shouted out to us, having calmed down enough to utter words. “What the hell are we gonna do?!”

The horned boar had us fully in its sights and was relentlessly charging us, hot on our heels.

As monsters evolved, they became omnivorous, which allowed them to absorb even more mana into their bodies. To this monstrous horned boar, we were probably nothing more than a mildly speedy lunch.

“Boars aren’t supposed to be good at turning!” I called back. “We should run in a zigzag pattern!”

“Roger that! Mon, lead the way!” Corinne yelled.

Ahead of us, Montana nodded and changed our escape route.

I’d assumed horned boars were smaller. To be honest, I’d imagined something a little bigger than a piglet. But a monster like this? Not even in my wildest dreams. It could have swallowed a human whole, for God’s sake.



We continued running desperately until Montana suddenly raised his voice and shouted instructions to us. This was the first time I'd ever heard him be so loud.

"We can turn the tide in our favor if we can get it to lodge itself into that tree over there!"

"You sure that'll work?!"

Montana turned his head around briefly to nod in response to Albert's shout. "Yes. There's no such thing as a living being that can't die," he explained logically. "Once it's immobilized, we'll whittle it down."

His expression wasn't much different from usual, and that unshakeable demeanor was incredibly reassuring right now.

"Oh...there it goes."

There was a loud crash from behind me, then Montana's head disappeared from view. I whipped around in a panic to see what had happened and saw that the boy had lowered himself further to the ground as he rolled toward the horned boar, which was now stuck in the tree like Montana had said. By the time Albert started forward a few moments later, Montana had already slashed at the monster's hind legs and was running around to its other side.

"Tough hide."

He'd probably intended to cut the leg in half, but it was only bleeding slightly. Montana sounded a little annoyed, and slashed repeatedly at the leg several times without stopping. The horned boar, its horn still stuck in the tree, flailed around and unleashed a roar that seemed to echo through the whole forest. Clearly, Montana had finally inflicted some damage.

Albert rushed in then, raising his sword and slashing with all his might, aiming for the leg opposite the one Montana was focused on. It was obvious they were both trying to immobilize it. Montana's decisive action revived my flagging spirits, too, and gave me the courage I needed.

"You were right, Mon. Now that it's not moving, it's just a normal, stationary target."

The sight of Corinne nocking her arrow and letting it fly spurred me on to use my magic too. I hurriedly started chanting a spell. The arrow sliced through the air and smacked into the horned boar's forehead before clattering to the ground.

“I was aiming for its eyes, but it just won’t stand still!” Frustrated, Corinne nocked a second arrow.

This is no time to sit back and watch. My target was the neck. If I could damage the carotid artery, that would give us a chance to escape. They had invited me to join their party as a mage, no doubt so I could deliver powerful blows like this. If I didn’t do my part here, then when would I have the chance?

“Blade of wind, arise, sharpen, soar, mow.”

Corinne’s fifth arrow finally pierced the horned boar’s eye, and it shook its head wildly. Simultaneously, the tree where its horn was stuck finally collapsed, with a tremendous creaking sound.

“Pierce where I command you. Shoot, Wind Cutter.”

When I finished the incantation, an invisible blade of wind tore through the air and flew straight at my target. It shook everyone’s clothes as it passed silently through the monster’s neck. And…missed? Nothing happened.

Undaunted, I was about to start reciting my next spell when a gap suddenly appeared between the creature’s body and neck as it tried frantically to remove its horn from the fallen tree. I stopped moving, keeping my arms stretched out in front of me. With only its head still stuck in the tree, the boar’s massive body fell to the ground with a booming thud. Blood gushed out from the wound like a fountain, staining the trees and grass all around it bright red.

Albert and Montana, who’d been getting ready to fall back a safe distance to regroup, stopped in their tracks. Their eyes were wide. Corinne slowly returned her sixth arrow to her quiver while the boys, our vanguards, absentmindedly resheathed their swords.

Then Corinne murmured to herself.

“…Magic is amazing.”

Magic is amazing. I couldn’t agree more, despite being the one who’d cast the spell myself. I just stood there in a daze, my mouth hanging open.

After a while, I came back to myself, looked at the decapitated carcass, and grunted, pressing a hand to my mouth. The sight of blood and gore always made me queasy, even in movies. And the

thought that I might have to get used to this kind of thing didn't exactly make me feel better.

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Part 4: Until We Got Back

NONE of us had imagined the horned boar would be so massive. Standing side by side, we all stared in shock at the monster that had been so huge it had even made a thunderous noise just from falling over. Yes, we had defeated it, but we were clueless about how to dispose of it.

Before we'd set out, Albert had excitedly declared he'd hunt several of the boars today to raise his rank quickly, but from the look of him now, he definitely didn't have the energy to hunt another one.

The whole thing still felt unreal to me, like I was in a strange dream. Corinne was the first to regain her composure and go back to her usual self. She poked Albert on the shoulder with a mischievous smile.

"Hey Al," she teased. "How many horned boars did you say you'd hunt today?"

"Shut. Up."

"Let's see. You need five to rank up, right?" She counted off on her fingers. "Gonna hunt four more, then?"

"I said. Shut. *Up.*"

"Awww, come on. Don't be like that. Tell me what your next move is. Come on. Come oooon."

"Okay, fine," Albert said. "I think we should just tie its legs to the fallen tree and then carry the tree. What do you think, Haruka?"

Albert, who was otherwise ignoring Corinne, scratched his head for a moment before offering that suggestion. He was probably used to dealing with Corinne's antics, since they were childhood friends and all.

As for me, until that moment, I'd been studiously avoiding looking at our prey. But after Albert spoke, I gave the horned boar in its pool of blood a cautious glance. The monster was about seven feet tall, just as wide, and nearly twice as long. Its weight

was probably easily in the tons. And unless that tree was extremely strong, it would break the moment we lifted it.

Thinking back on all the work I'd done over the past few months, I didn't think the weight itself would be impossible to carry. I knew I was strong enough now to do it. But the balance—or imbalance as the case may be—concerned me. Plus, I was horrified by even the mere thought of hefting a bleeding carcass around. I racked my brains for a better idea, but all I could think of was to dismember it on the spot. Not that any of us had the skills or tools to do so.

As we all folded our arms in thought, we heard a voice from afar.

"Hey, that was pretty loud. You all okay over there?!"

It was Andre, the leader of the team called Drawn Swords, thwacking bushes out of his way as he approached us. Other than the fact that you could never get him to stop talking about his obsession with swords, he was generally a calm, good-natured man who was well-liked by new adventurers.

"Wait a sec… Whoa, whoa, whoa." He paused. "Don't tell me you lot actually took that thing down yourselves?"

I remained quiet, expecting someone else to answer. But no one did, so the silence just stretched. Then, when I looked, first to my left and then to my right, I found that the rest of my party were all looking at me.

"Y-Yes, that's right." I sounded suspicious even to my own ears.

Andre rubbed his beard and exclaimed in admiration. "Damn, nice job, ladies and gents. Congratulations, you defeated a tyrant boar on your own."

The rest of the members of Drawn Swords soon appeared and approached the fallen boar, saying things like, "Jeez, will you look at that slice?" and "This is amazing." But my friends and I just stood there, baffled. We had never heard of a "tyrant boar."

"Hey, what do you mean by 'tyrant boar'?" Albert asked. "Isn't it a *horned* boar?"

"Don't tell me you took it down without even knowing what it was?" Andre exclaimed. "Well, laddie, this right here is a tyrant boar, a monster evolved from a horned boar. The guild put up an emergency request to take it down, notifying folks of its

appearance this morning. Adventurers below Rank 4 were told not to go near the forest because it was so dangerous. Guess you didn't know though, eh? Well freaking done, laddie."

And with that, Andre slapped Albert on the back. The boy still looked confused as he looked back and forth between the tyrant boar's corpse and Andre's face. Then his face suddenly split into a wide smile.

"Does this mean I'll rank up?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, I'd say at least to fifth rank. You've got a reputation for being a hard worker and all, too."

Albert pumped his fist in the air, ran over to Montana, hugged him, and shook his shoulders excitedly. "Didja hear that? Didja *hear* that?!" he repeated. "I'm not just dead weight anymore! I can go adventuring with my head held high now!"

"Co-Co-Congratulations," Montana said with some effort, the words rattling out of him thanks to Albert's overenthusiastic shaking. Our de facto party leader let go of him and rushed over to me next.

"Now we're equal! I'm gonna be Rank 5 too!"

Seeing his joy made me feel like I was watching a large dog. I was prepared for him to jump on me like he had with Montana, so I was surprised when instead, he stopped right in front of me. He stood there expectantly, like he was waiting for something. So I reached out and ruffled his hair. I thought he would dislike being treated like a dog or a child, but when he silently accepted the gesture, I realized I'd made the right decision. I kept petting him because I was enjoying it, and then Corinne hugged me from behind.

"Haruka! Pat me too."

"Huh? Oh, sure."

Though I wondered if it was really okay to touch a young woman's head like this, I nevertheless gave in to her demand—after all, she *had* been waiting patiently—and gently patted her on the head. Her hair was glossier and easier to stroke than Albert's.

After a while of this, Montana walked up to stand right next to me, took my free hand, and placed it on *his* head. He didn't say anything, but I took the hint. His hair was soft, especially around his ears, and felt like silk. I stroked his ears for some time, then, hoping I wasn't making him uncomfortable, I glanced down at

him. His eyes were happily narrowed, and he looked utterly relaxed.

Andre's scolding voice broke through the moment I'd been enjoying. "Oy, the job isn't over until you go back," he said. "We'll keep an eye out here, so you lot had best get moving and report to the guild. Don't forget to bring reinforcements back to carry this thing."

I quickly straightened up. He made a good point.

"Bloody hell, can't believe a bunch of pipsqueaks beat us to the punch," Andre said playfully with a dramatic shake of his head. "What rotten luck, eh?" Then he sat down and waved us off with a lazy flick of his wrist.

"Right," I said. "We'll be back before you know it."

"Nah, take your time. We'll handle any monsters that come after this thing and make some money for ourselves in the process," he answered lazily once we started walking away.

Grateful to the veteran adventurer, we hurried off toward town.

As it happened, this incident led to my promotion to Rank 4 while Corinne and Montana ranked up to Rank 5. Albert, however, only made it to sixth rank, perhaps due to his less accomplished track record. The fact that he managed to sulk and be happy at the same time further solidified my impression of him as being a tad more childish than the other two.

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Part 5: Early Morning

SINCE the hunt for the tyrant boar was an emergency request, the guild paid us very well. Urgent jobs were ones that needed to be solved quickly, so they came with high compensation. One of Oranz's industries was wood processing, so it would have been a serious problem for the monster to continue roaming free in the Sunset Forest. The longer it was allowed to do so, the longer the industry would have been at a standstill, and the greater the blow to the economy.

We were lucky to have happened to exterminate the tyrant boar just after the guild posted the emergency quest. If we had defeated it before the official announcement, we would have only

gained fame and the purchase price of whatever materials the boar's body produced. So, having earned a lot of money, we had been enjoying a brief holiday for the past few days.

Apparently, after reaching a certain rank, adventurers no longer had to work themselves to the bone every single day. The higher the danger, the greater the income. Adventurers poured intense effort and concentration into these high-risk requests, and once they finished, they took some time to rest. After all, staying in top condition was also an important part of the job of being an adventurer.

When I had free time, I would usually go out on my own to search out rare ingredients and highly rated restaurants. Technically, I could have eaten at the dorm canteen every day, but there wasn't much variety on the menu. The main combination was bread and soup, which quickly got boring. Still, it was cheap, filling, and tasted decent, so it hit the spot as long as you weren't looking for anything fancy.

But now that I had a little more time and money, it was a different story. I wanted to have delicious meals, even if it meant splurging a bit.

I wasn't much of a picky eater, but I was ashamed to admit that my taste buds hadn't changed much since I was a child, either. So far, I had yet to see any trace of either *omurice* or curry rice since coming to this world. Ketchup didn't exist here as far as I knew and surprisingly, eggs were considered a luxury good. There was no curry, period, and I didn't know what kinds of spices there were. I hadn't even seen any cooked rice on offer, so there probably wasn't much of a rice-eating culture to begin with.

Still, the meat dishes seemed to be well-crafted, and I even managed to find a restaurant serving a delicious hamburger steak—which made me think there must be something even better out there. So, whenever I had a day off, I wandered around the restaurant district looking for the most delicious food I could find. A very Japanese way to spend a holiday, if I said so myself.

***

MY everyday outfit consisted of pants and a tunic, like what Totto and the others had given me during my early days here. Over that,

I also wore an oversized hooded robe to hide my face and body from view.

As a dark elf, I attracted attention just by walking around, so back when I was new to the city, I'd always worn my hood to avoid being noticed. However, now that I'd worked here for so long, I knew lots of people and they noticed me even with the hood up. I'd started greeting people in passing, and as I got used to my surroundings, people stopped staring at me like I was an oddity. It was a lot more comfortable than it had been when I'd first arrived.

Over the past few months, I had just been buying the same pants and tunics over and over, whenever I wore them out. But I'd actually recently received a new robe—when a particular person had suddenly thrust it at me. It looked pretty much the same as my old one, though the texture and quality of the fabric indicated it had been much more expensive. I told the person I couldn't accept it, but they kept pushing it on me, so I gave up and started wearing it, a mix of grateful and somewhat scared.

After all, I hadn't been asked to do anything in exchange for the gift, which made me pretty uneasy. *There's no such thing as a free lunch.*

***

ONE of my favorite things to do was wander the morning markets, looking for unusual fruits so I could try them. It was difficult to find fruits as sweet as those on Earth, but I enjoyed discovering ones I'd never seen before. I always tried to guess how they would taste based on their appearances, and then when I actually tasted them, the flavors would turn out to be completely different.

On this particular day, as usual, I was strolling through the morning market with a paper bag full of different fruits I had bought. I walked around the city for a while before sitting down on a bench under an enormous tree—not because I was tired, but because I wanted to dig into some of those fruits.

The first one I took out was the color of a cherry but the shape of a grape, and I popped it into my mouth. The skin was bitter, and the flesh was half sour, half sweet. *I guess I should have peeled it first. Now I'll know for next time.*

While I was snacking, I suddenly caught a glimpse of swinging golden tresses out of the corner of my eye. A woman wearing a fluffy skirt sat down next to me without asking first, her ladylike demeanor truly the pinnacle of elegance. I had actually once asked her if she was descended from nobility or something, but she'd brushed the question off.

I knew three things about her: First, she was a Rank 1 adventurer and master of the Golden Wings clan. Second, her name was Viche Valeri.

And third, arguably the most important piece of information—she was my stalker.

After sitting down next to me as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she smiled brightly and began to speak.

"So nice to have another day of lovely weather," she said. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"I certainly would."

"Oh, fruits again? You really do love them, don't you?"

"I really do."

"You know, it makes me very happy to see you wearing the bespoke robe I gave you."

"...Thank you again so much for the gift."

"I wonder, does the fact that you wear it every day mean your feelings for me have turned to love?"

"Respectfully...*no*."

For the record, I was terrified of her. It was the first time in my life that someone had ever followed me so relentlessly. In fact, I seriously doubted 99.9 percent of people behaved like her. I mean, whenever I went out on my days off, there was a high probability I'd find her walking next to me within ten minutes or so. I had no idea what kind of information network she had, but apparently she knew basically everything I did.

To be clear, she hadn't *done* anything to me. But her enigmatic aura paired with her status as a first-rank adventurer made my blood run cold.

Also, when we walked together, she would manage to tumble into my chest *at least* once a day, always with an excuse like, "Oops! I tripped!"

It was the worst. I also wished she would stop taking such deep breaths while her face was buried there. On the plus side,

she made me so wary that by contrast, I no longer got even a little nervous when other women hugged me.

"...As a change of pace, I actually came here today to talk about something serious."

"What is it?"

I sat up straight at the sound of Viche's strangely quiet voice. Usually, around this time, she would say something like, "Oh, no, my anemia," and dive straight into my lap.

"Haruka," she said instead, "are you planning on joining my clan or not?"

I suddenly remembered Ellie's attempt to recruit me back when I'd first gotten to this world, and when she'd mentioned she belonged to Viche's clan. Looking back, it was probably a good thing I hadn't agreed so readily.

"That's not something I can decide on my own," I said. "The key point is that I heard only women can join. You *are* aware that I'm in a party with Al and Montana, right?"

"Yes, and I'm inviting you to join us anyway."

Her nonchalant attitude was making me nervous.

"So am I to understand that you're implying I should decide without even consulting my party members, and just accept your offer? Just abandon them like so much garbage?"

At my forceful tone, her eyes widened and she smiled. "Oooh, Haruka, you can speak harshly like that? I quite like that side of you too. The wrinkles between your eyebrows are lovely."

I sighed in agitation when I realized she wasn't taking me seriously at all. It felt like I was banging my head against a brick wall. Our experiences as adventurers were so different that despite my seriousness, she thought of me as nothing more than a puppy playing around or something. Of course, I was only able to argue this firmly because I knew Viche wouldn't hurt me. Yes, she scared me, but I'd never felt any malice or hostility from her.

"Though I appreciate your invitation," I said, leaving no room for interpretation, "I believe I've made my position clear."

Then I stood up to leave her behind—but her next words gave me pause.

"Well, I knew it wouldn't work. But be careful, Haruka," she warned. "Your sudden rise in the ranks has incited jealousy among

quite a few people. I thought that if you joined us, I could take care of you, should worse come to worst."

I turned around to listen to her, but I felt awkward when I saw her unsmiling face, so I averted my gaze. She was a Rank 1 adventurer who had established roots in this city, which meant there was definitely truth to what she said. I doubted she was the type to say something so irresponsible just to upset me.

"Thank you for your advice," I said sincerely.

"You're quite welcome. As you know, I'm quite fond of you, Haruka. I'd be glad to help so long as it's within my power and reach."

Viche really did make a pretty picture sitting on the bench, smiling up at me. *I know she's not a bad person. Just a little creepy.* I could acknowledge that her invitation to join her clan stemmed from genuine concern for me.

I took a few steps away, then stopped and turned back around.

"Um," I started hesitantly, "I'm searching for a good hamburger steak restaurant again today... Would you happen to have any recommendations?"

Viche hopped off the bench right away and skipped over to stand next to me.

"Whoa!" I cried out in surprise when I felt something touch my butt.

"I really like that sweet side of you too, Haruka."

I rubbed my arms, which were now covered in goosebumps, and glared at her. *I shouldn't have invited her, after all.* Of course, I'd had the same thought before, but next time, I *definitely* wouldn't make this mistake again.

(Despite my silent promise to myself, I was secretly looking forward to eating at whatever restaurant she'd take me to.)

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Part 6: Street Stall

AS I was returning to my lodgings after a heavy morning meal, I met Montana plodding down the street. He said he was heading to one of the street markets to sell the accessories he was always crafting. To my untrained eye they looked very well made, but he

said he only worked on them as a hobby and wasn't trying to make a profit.

"Want to come along?" he asked.

"Sure. I don't have anything in particular to do now anyway."

I walked side by side with him as we headed back the way I'd come. The street stalls were located further down the shopping district.

Oranz's shopping district was divided into several areas: one with proper shops, one with mobile stalls, and past that, an area where vendors arranged their wares on large tarps. Commerce wasn't restricted to adventurers and merchants in the city, or in the country as a whole for that matter. In Oranz, anyone was free to conduct business as long as it was within designated areas, whereas in some countries, such places were limited and you needed permission from the local government to do business there.

We got through the shopping district and passed through some back alleys, Montana making a few random stops here and there on the way while I watched him in silence. It wasn't the first time he'd acted strangely like this. Sometimes, he'd just suddenly stop moving and stare at one spot.

Ghosts and the supernatural freaked me out, so I didn't ask Montana what he was doing. I was too afraid of what his answer might be. It didn't matter that I'd been transmigrated to another world or that I could now use magic. Ghosts were still scary. I'd never been good with horror.

When we arrived at the street stall area, Montana walked at a leisurely pace to an empty space on the outskirts and spread out a square cloth about six feet long on each edge. He pulled out some accessories from his loose sleeves and arranged them on the cloth neatly at equal intervals.

"We're open for business."

Then he sighed in satisfaction, plopped down on the ground, and stretched out his legs. At his urging, I sat down next to him.



There were plenty of people in the area, but most of them were simply enjoying wandering around. Few seemed to be doing any serious shopping.

“Do you always do this?” I asked Montana.

“Sometimes, on my days off.”

But despite being open for business, Montana didn’t even try to attract any customers, nor did he seem particularly interested in the passersby. He just lazed around, occasionally twitching his tail and ears, just like a person-sized animal.

“Do your items sell?”

“Sometimes.”

People did glance at him when they walked by, and even if he didn’t sell anything, he seemed happy when someone looked his way. After getting to know him these past few months, I could tell whether he was in a good or bad mood by the movement of his tail and his aura, even though he wasn’t otherwise very expressive.

It’s so nice and warm today. I can see how this could be the perfect way to relax, sometimes. Certainly this, too, was a luxurious way to spend time. Worlds away from my days as a corporate stooge, when I’d always been busy working nonstop.

Montana and I chatted according to the random topics of conversation that popped into my head. After passing some time this way, I noticed a young man stop in his tracks at the sight of Montana’s wares. He stood there gazing intently at a set of two rings set with shining green stones, then checked the pouch in his hand and spoke to me, likely mistaking me for the store owner because I looked older.

“Hi, how much is this?”

It wasn’t until he asked that I realized the items lined up on the sheet didn’t have price tags. In other words, I didn’t know the price any more than this customer did. So instead of answering him, I looked at Montana.

“How much can you afford?” Montana asked.

“Well…” After thinking it over for a moment, with a nervous expression, the young man handed over his whole pouch. “Will this be enough?”

Montana looked inside the bag, turned it upside down, and emptied its contents onto the cloth. He divided the pile of silver coins in half, placing one half in front of him and the other back in

the pouch. The pile looked like ten silver coins to me. The whole thing was a very rough estimate, which was typical of Montana.

"This will do." He presented the pouch and the set of rings to the young man. The relieved customer bowed his head slightly and thanked Montana.

"Thank you so much. I've finally made up my mind to do it."

"Thank you for your purchase."

There was a spring in the young man's step as he disappeared into the crowd. Judging from his bright expression and what he'd said before walking away, I wondered if maybe he was planning to propose to someone. I didn't know the market price for accessories, so I wondered if he'd paid a fair price.

"Did you already have a set price in mind?" I asked.

Montana shook his head. "I decide when I see them," he explained.

He apparently had some pricing standard, but one he didn't seem interested in telling me about. *He really is just doing this as a hobby instead of as a real business.*

In any case, I didn't mind the slightly slow conversation. I wasn't very good at maintaining the flow of a conversation anyway, so this was actually easier for me.

After we'd spent some more time sitting in comfortable silence, a middle-aged man with a fastidious, gentlemanly look appeared. He stroked his mustache while looking at a necklace. It was relatively large, with a string of amber-colored stones. He seemed to be searching for a price tag, and when he couldn't find one, he took out five coins from a wallet made of some kind of leather.

"Is this enough?"

"Yes."

Montana took the coins and handed over the necklace. I stared in mild amazement because the gentleman had been so smooth about the whole exchange. Then I checked the color of the coins Montana had received and did a double take. *If I'm not mistaken, those are* gold *coins.*

The man didn't say anything more. Simply nodded once, straightened, and walked away.

"Do you always sell this much…?" I asked.

“Sometimes,” Montana answered the same as before and took a bite of the bread he had brought with him.

We sat there until the evening, but no more customers came. I wondered if it was unusual to sell accessories so quickly and early in the day. Just as we were about to pack up, a person came walking straight toward us. The man was breathing heavily and wore a monocle along with several other jangling accessories. He called out to Montana without even looking at the items on display.

“You there, beast-man,” he said. “I’ll buy all of this.”

Montana stopped to look at the man, but as soon as he saw him, he started packing up again. When the man saw Montana tossing the accessories back into his sleeves one after another, he started panicking.

“Hey! Stop treating those so roughly!” he yelled. “I said I’ll buy them!”

In response, Montana slapped his tail hard on the ground, just once. He picked up the last remaining earring and looked up at the man expressionlessly. Then he simply threw the earring into his sleeve.

“The shop is closed for the day.”

“You…! Are you sure you want to act like that? If you sell these things to me, I’ll sell them to the right places and tell everyone where I got them!”

“The shop is closed.”

“Just give them to me, I said I’ll pay.”

“Closed means closed.”

Montana was abrupt and didn’t waver. Finally, he folded up the cloth he had laid out, turned his back on the man, and started walking away.

“You little brat!” The man exploded in anger and raised his arm aggressively.

“Montana!”

But Montana moved quickly. Before I could even finish shouting his name, he ducked and pointed a dagger—he’d drawn one with impossible speed—at the man. The tip of the blade stopped just before one of the man’s eyes, cracking his monocle. Then the man’s knees buckled, and he collapsed on the spot.

***

WE left the annoying man on the side of the road and walked back down the same alleyway we'd come. Montana stopped again in one of the same spots as earlier. It was dusk, and a strange atmosphere blanketed the area. I took a stealthy step closer to Montana, trying not to be noticed. I felt like his calm demeanor would be useful in case something spooky appeared. *No matter how old I get, scary things are still scary.*

Suddenly, I heard the pattering of small feet approaching from a short distance away. I stiffened nervously, but Montana seemed to be waiting, his posture relaxed. Eventually, a boy appeared from around the corner and called out.

"Oh, no, are you done for the day already, Mr. Beast-boy? But I brought some money! Here!" he said, handing over two copper coins. Seeing them, Montana rummaged in his sleeves, took out the earrings he'd put away earlier, and handed them to the boy.

"The shop is temporarily open for business."

"Yay! Thanks, Mister! Mom's gonna be so happy!"

After watching the boy run away, Montana tossed the coins into his sleeve. His tail swayed back and forth with satisfaction.

"He looked delighted."

"Yes."

I didn't know exactly what criteria Montana used to sell his things or how he decided on the prices. But somehow, I understood that he sold them with some kind of conviction.

"Montana, can I accompany you again?"

"You're welcome to anytime."

I had a feeling I'd sleep really well that night.

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Part 7: A Boy Named Albert Careggi

WHAT is *it about her?* Albert thought to himself, staring at Haruka's profile as she did her shopping. Her features were well-defined, and she always spoke in a calm, mature manner. She had an inexhaustible supply of magic, and he couldn't beat her in a contest of strength either.

Put it all together and voila, you had one amazing person. But Albert knew something else too: Haruka was a little—no, a *lot* spacier than she looked.

“Haruka, here.”

“Huh? Oh, this is my wallet. Where did I drop it? Thank you so much.”

She hadn’t dropped it. It had been stolen just a moment earlier, and Albert had retrieved it. It was weighed down with probably all of Haruka’s possessions.

Just a moment ago, when he had taken his eyes off her very briefly, she had almost blindly walked off with some smooth-talking scumbag. Albert never thought someone would actually fall for the old “I’m a little lost, can you help me?” act, but when he scolded Haruka for it, her shoulders slumped dejectedly. Her expressionless face made her hard to read, but once you got used to it, you could always tell what she was feeling by the slight movements of her eyes and body.

Albert asked Haruka if stuff like this happened to her often, and she confessed that it sometimes did. Usually, she only gave the person directions, and the interaction ended there. Occasionally, though, someone would suddenly get aggressive and attack her.

Recently, there had been several strange, unexplained incidents of men with bad reputations being found unconscious in back alleys. It was at that moment that Albert realized those were probably Haruka’s doing. She was also probably the reason men sometimes avoided their party as soon as they noticed she was in it.

Now he understood why Corinne had warned him to keep an eye on her if they went out together. Because once you got to know her, you learned she was a pathetic but lovable dummy.

However, he’d also misunderstood her in the beginning. She’d seemed like a superhuman who could do everything perfectly, which had at first made him feel so worthless that he’d taken his frustration out on her. Looking back on it now, Albert didn’t even bother hiding a sigh at his own shameful behavior.

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AS an adventurer, Albert's frustration mounted the more time he spent doing menial labor. Compared to his peers, he felt that his standing wasn't as good. Corinne was a knowledgeable merchant, Montana was good with his hands, and Haruka was good at whatever task she was given.

The other adventurers listened to Haruka and called her "Boss Lady," plus she was quick with numbers and even suggested ways to make work more efficient. When it came to manual labor, she had incredible physical strength, and was able to do several times the work of any other single adventurer by herself. Her strength actually made Albert sort of uneasy—she was even stronger than the people who bragged about how strong they were, or specifically trained to beef up their strength.

Each time Haruka outperformed him, all the while with her default stoic expression and monotone voice, he despised himself more and more, and felt even more worthless. And when she eventually surpassed him in rank, it felt like the end of the world. Albert didn't know how to pick up the pieces of his broken heart as his mind went to ever darker places.

Back then, Albert and the others would gather in the dining hall every day after work to talk about their day and share what they'd learned from other adventurers. It was supposed to be a fulfilling and enjoyable time.

Albert and Corinne talked the most, with Montana chiming in very rarely, and even then, only with a few words. As for Haruka, her expression always made it hard to tell whether she was happy to be there. She usually just nodded or commented in response to what everyone else was saying. Whenever they talked about the past, their families, or the future, Haruka didn't get actively involved in the conversation. Albert had noticed that even when Corinne occasionally asked her direct questions, Haruka skillfully dodged them and changed the subject.

One day, when they ended up working together in the same place, Albert asked Montana, "You ever feel like Haruka doesn't trust us?"

Montana stopped what he was doing with a puzzled frown. He was always quiet, and when he did speak, it was mostly in short sentences. But he was still listening, so Albert continued.

“You know how she never talks about the past even when we do?”

He knew it sounded like he was complaining, and he knew it was childish. But he had to get his feelings out somehow.

“…To me, she seems like she’s enjoying herself when we’re together.” That was all Montana muttered before returning to his work. Albert waited to see if he would say anything else, but he didn’t. *He’s always like this.*

“Yeah, well, I don’t see it.”

When he and Corinne ended up on the same job, he quickly got fed up with her constant yammering about Haruka. Apparently, it made her happy that Haruka understood her when she talked about numbers and business, which were Corinne’s specialties. The topic of Haruka bored Albert, so he stopped replying because he just wasn’t interested. After a while, Corinne stopped talking to him.

“Ugh, why are you being like this?” she complained. “I hate it.”

That was the last thing she said before they both focused solely on their work. Even though Corinne had stopped yapping, Albert’s work went nowhere that day.

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HARUKA ranked up to Rank 7. Corinne and Montana were Rank 8s, and only Albert remained at Rank 9.

“Awww, poor Al, all by his lonesome!”

It was normal for Corinne to say things like that without hesitation, which Albert (of course) found annoying.

“Corinne,” Haruka said, “you really shouldn’t say such things…”

Haruka’s words were the last straw for Albert, and he finally snapped. He stood up and slammed his hands down on the table.

“You piss me off. You’re just making fun of me and treating me like a kid!”

And with that, he left.

He knew she’d probably only been trying to defend him, and he felt guilty for letting his pent-up stress explode like that. The look on Haruka’s face when he walked away was seared into his mind. Her eyes had widened for a moment, then her eyelids had

closed halfway as she'd cast her gaze down. When he remembered that look of sadness, his chest tightened.

The next morning, he met Corinne and Montana at work. Montana told him that Haruka was out shopping today because it was her day off. Despite Corinne's sulky expression, she still talked to him once they started working.

"You need to apologize to Haruka," she said.

"Why?"

A part of Albert had actually been thinking the same thing, but he immediately felt rebellious when someone else told him to do it.

"Her expression never changes, and she doesn't tell us anything about herself. She's probably always making fun of me on the inside because I suck at everything."

The thoughts that had burrowed deep inside his heart came pouring out as nastiness and accusations. Just as he realized he'd been unnecessarily harsh, Corinne kicked him in the shin, and Albert dropped to the floor, curling up in pain.

"You are the *worst*. Haruka doesn't talk much because she doesn't remember anything from her past, you idiot."

"Damn it, that hurt! Why'd you go and do that?!"

"Stop playing dumb!" Corinne yelled, ignoring Albert's complaints. "She said she doesn't remember anything from before Ralf took her in! Not about her family, her hometown, nothing! When I just asked her *why* she never talked about her past, she told me right away! You make stupid assumptions, then you hate her because of them. Seriously, how dumb can you be?! Just apologize, will you?!"

And with that final admonishment, Corinne left.

Montana watched Albert, who was still lying on the floor in the fetal position. Even though he wasn't actually in pain anymore.

"You…you think I should apologize too?"

"…Yes."

"I know, okay? I know. I feel bad."

"I know."

Montana didn't say anything else that day, simply kept working beside Albert the whole time. Albert made a lot of mistakes, but Montana covered for him, so there were no major accidents.

I'll tell her I'm sorry at dinnertime. Mind made up, Albert trudged to the dining hall, but Haruka was nowhere to be found. She usually arrived first, took a seat, and waited for them, so it was unusual for her to be missing.

Usually, she'd stare intently at the entrance and watch for their arrival. When Albert appeared, she would beckon him over. Thinking back, he realized she always looked a little happier than usual at those times. The realization made his heart ache.

Today, there was no sign of her.

Surveying the canteen, he saw a sulky Corinne and a spacey Montana sitting at their usual table for four. As he approached, Corinne glared at him with a stern expression.

"You haven't apologized yet, have you?"

"I was going to, when she got here."

She stood up and shoved him roughly in the shoulder. "Well, she's not coming. Go and apologize! Get a move on! I saw her at the training ground earlier!"

Not having the energy to resist, Albert let himself be turned out of the dining hall. Corinne stood at the entrance with her arms folded, blocking the way so he couldn't even try to go back. With slumped shoulders, Albert dragged himself to the training ground.

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NOW that the sun had set, the training ground was almost deserted.

Albert spotted a small figure sitting on the ground at the edge of the field. Though her hood was pulled down low, long silver hair spilled out, glittering in the faint light from the moon. She seemed terribly lonely, gazing blankly up at the night sky like that.

Haruka heard Albert's footsteps drawing near and lifted her face to look at him. She let out a meaningless, "Um," before mumbling something indistinctly under her breath, then lowered her head and apologized. "I'm sorry," she said. "Please forgive me."

There were so many things Albert wanted to say, like that he should be the one apologizing, or that she should look at him properly when talking. But he felt that no matter what he said, it wouldn't get across, so he just stood there.

“I’ve been an awful person,” Haruka continued. “I was so happy that you three invited me to join you, and I was happy I could do so much and be useful. I never meant to make you feel bad. I just thought that if I tried my best, it would make you happy. But things didn’t work out how I wanted, and I feel like all I really accomplished was upsetting you. I’m sorry.”

Haruka slowly stood up and, without looking at Albert, murmured one more time, “I’m really sorry.” Albert didn’t even know who she was apologizing to anymore. To him, the constant refrain only seemed to be a rejection of herself.

“The reason I didn’t talk much is because I didn’t have anything important to share,” she said. “I’m not good at dreaming or imagining the future like you all… I was just leaning on you without any purpose of my own, and I’m sure that made you uncomfortable.”

All Albert could think was that Haruka had completely missed the mark. But he remained silent as she looked up at the sky and stepped away from him. Her expression was hard to see.

“I think I’m better off on my own, after all,” she said. “I’m terrible at interacting with people. But I like you all, so if we happen to run into each other, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t avoid me.”

When she turned to leave, though, Albert grabbed a fistful of her robe. He had a bad feeling that if he let her go without saying anything, he’d never see her again.

“Stop it… Don’t just decide something like that on your own.”

He had intended to apologize, but he ended up saying something indignant instead. He bit his lip hard once before continuing.

“I think you’re amazing, Haruka, but you know, I can do a lot too. I’m still a newbie and not as mature as you, so I may not be all that good at anything right now. But I can still do a lot. I’m actually not this much of a jerk. The truth is,” he explained, “I wanted to know more about you, and I wanted you to recognize me for my strengths. Except I screwed up. And that made me so frustrated… But the one I’m actually pissed off at is myself…”

The more Albert spoke, the more his throat closed up. By the end of his speech, he was struggling to get the words out, let alone make eye contact.

Albert had finally realized that he wasn't angry at Haruka; he was angry at his own lack of ability. He wanted her to acknowledge his talents, because she was an amazing person, and he wanted her to be able to rely on him as a friend. It frustrated him that he wasn't good enough for her to do so.

He felt like a child. He felt so embarrassed and pathetic, he couldn't lift his head.

Then he sensed Haruka turning around and lowering her hood. Albert closed his eyes tightly. He was worried about what she would say. She was probably so disillusioned with him now.

Haruka had only joined their party because they'd asked her to. And now it seemed like she was planning to take this opportunity to distance herself from them because they were incompatible. The thought made him feel frustrated and helpless, and tears welled up in his eyes.

When he slowly opened his eyes again, Albert saw Haruka's shadow in the moonlight. She was moving her arm strangely, raising and lowering it. Maybe she was about to give him the beating he rightfully deserved for all the awful, selfish things he'd been saying. *If that's all it takes for us to be even, then I'm fine with it. If that's all it takes for her to give me another chance, then that's fine.*

Then he felt a hand on his head. It moved back and forth awkwardly, stroking his hair.

"...I'm sorry," she said, again. "This misunderstanding is all my fault. I always thought you were amazing, too, Al. It dazzles me, the way you always run straight toward your goal. I always run away from things that scare me, so maybe, I just really, really wanted to be like you."

When he remained silent, she continued softly.

"To be honest, I still want to be adventurers together. I mean, we haven't even really traveled much together yet, have we?"

Albert wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He wanted to see Haruka's expression.



“Can we have dinner together again starting tomorrow? I actually already talked to Corinne about wanting to leave the party. Now I feel embarrassed about coming back and telling you all I still want to be in the party after all, so can you help me explain things to her and Montana?”

Albert nodded vigorously and raised his head. Her hand slipped off with his movement. The moon at her back made it hard to see her face clearly, but he got a glimpse of a calm, gentle smile on her face.

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“A-AH, you have excellent taste. I’ll sell it to you for a gold coin each!”

“That’s expensive… Hmm.”

“He’s joking,” Albert explained to Haruka, who was seriously looking at the money she held in her hand. “That was a joke.”

“…Right, of course, I knew that.”

Since that night, he’d only seen her smile a few times. But lately, he had started being able to understand what she was thinking anyway. There was no need for envy. Because to Albert, Haruka was kind and dependable, and also flawed and hopeless, but above all, a precious friend.

Expedition

Part 1: Mutual Recognition

THE Sunset Forest provided quality timber to the entire country, including Oranz. One typical job for the city's mid-level adventurers was to act as guards to ensure that forestry workers could carry out their work without issue. After all, the vast, lush forest was home not only to carnivorous animals, but also to numerous monsters.

While they guarded the woodcutters, adventurers sometimes encountered groups of monsters—though on other days, there were none at all. Either way, monster extermination was a standing request from the guild, so if adventurers *did* encounter monsters (and managed to get through the ordeal safely) they could earn extra income.

For Haruka and her friends, who had defeated the tyrant boar on their first foray into hunting, the Sunset Forest wasn't so scary. By this point in time, they had become familiar with all the monsters living there and accustomed to dealing with them. Ordinarily, for people of their ranks, even taking on a single monster was a life-threatening endeavor, but Haruka's party survived thanks to their extremely high combat prowess.

Albert's swordsmanship was head and shoulders above the rest of his rank. It was a sight to behold whenever he lopped the head off a monster bigger than himself in just one stroke. And Corinne's skill with the bow was so precise that she almost never missed—and when monsters got too close, she skillfully fended them off with a unique martial arts technique.

Corinne had confided in Haruka that she was the youngest child of a wealthy merchant. Apparently, from the time she'd announced she wanted to become an adventurer, her parents had made sure to provide her with a comprehensive education in the profession, under a great teacher. No wonder her movements were so precise and efficient.

Montana also took down his prey with pinpoint precision. He struck at an adversary's vitals without wasting any motions. Though his sword style was different from Albert's, it was nevertheless still refined, and he was always the first to sense a target's approach.

Every time Haruka watched her friends in combat, she felt pathetic. Yes, she could use magic and she was physically very strong, but she had no capabilities otherwise. She lacked her companions' skills, and felt like she was holding them back.

But despite Haruka's gloomy outlook, her friends had a high opinion of her. From that first time they'd defeated a tyrant boar, they knew her magic was powerful—and her physical strength made up for all the usual disadvantages of having a mage in their party.

By nature, most mages weren't physically strong. In a party, a mage's job was essentially to act as a fixed cannon that had more firepower than a bow and arrow. In other words, to leverage a mage's capabilities, the whole party needed to expend energy to protect them.

In Haruka's case, though, her exceptional physical strength completely eliminated that need, leaving only the benefit of increasing the party's attack power. At first, her friends had also tried to look out for her safety. However, they soon realized that was unnecessary.

Even if Haruka fell or collided head-on with an animal, she only ever apologized for her clumsiness, never actually got hurt. Once, to test her strength, she tried punching a rock. She succeeded in shattering it—and without a single scratch to her fist.

So, after realizing that worrying about Haruka was both foolish and a waste of time, the party's movements improved dramatically. Recently, when monsters charged at Haruka, her whole focus narrowed down to a voice saying, "Catch it." It defied reason to see her stop a charging horned boar with one hand, just by grabbing its horn in her hand. Add in the magic rushing from her other hand and it was no wonder Haruka's fellow party members thought highly of her.

Her ability to pull off amazing stunts like she was some sort of street performer also made her very popular with the woodcutters under her protection.

“You’re amazing, little lady! Hahaha! Never seen anyone do that before.”

Under the barrage of praise, Haruka and her party completed the day’s request without a hitch. Haruka always avoided eye contact to hide her embarrassment, figuring the woodcutters were just flattering her. But that wasn’t the case at all. They were simply telling it like they saw it.

***

AFTER completing our escort duties that day and reporting to the guild, Albert’s adventurer rank finally rose to Rank 5. It was also his birthday, and he was turning fifteen, the age of majority in this country. He was the last of our party to reach adulthood.

At dinner that night, Albert was in high spirits—not to mention incredibly rowdy after downing his first alcoholic drink ever. He seemed really happy about that, too, like he’d been longing for exactly this type of adventurer-typical boisterousness. On the other hand, I was worried about him getting alcohol poisoning, so I tried to control the amount he drank by offering him food and mixing water into his glass whenever he got up from his seat. In the end though, Albert just kept chugging one glass after another until he suddenly passed out on the spot. I rushed over to him, and was relieved to find that he was only sleeping. But it was still the kind of reckless drinking that only a young person engaged in, and I hoped it wouldn’t become a habit. I was already worried.

After I carried his sleeping form over to an empty space on the floor, the dinner table became much quieter. And while his birthday and rank-up were both happy occasions, I also wanted to talk about the future.

“Soooo,” Corinne asked idly, “what’s our next move?”

“An expedition request would be nice,” I said.

“Yes,” Montana agreed.

Once all members of a party reached Rank 5 or above, parties were much more likely to go on expeditions. You *could* make a living by only accepting local requests. But if you really wanted to keep increasing your rank, you needed to prove your strength to the Guild and the wider world.

One option was to stay in town and wait for jobs like tyrant boar hunts to pop up. However, since pretty much all the adventurers based in a town or city had the same goal in mind, they had to compete with each other for those sorts of commissions. In other words, it was difficult to rise in the ranks just by waiting around in one place.

But an expedition was a different matter altogether. It wasn't just going to another town for jobs; it meant acting as an escort for someone who was traveling to other places for an extended period of time.

There were various types of people who needed to travel around long-term. Some were seeking quick fortunes, some were on some kind of mission, and some were driven by curiosity. What they all had in common was they rarely skimped on bodyguards. And having that kind of money usually meant the status that accompanied it.

You could say, then, that expedition missions met all the requirements for ranking up. On top of that, my friends all hoped to travel the world and become great adventurers regardless. If we went on an expedition, we could go here, there, and everywhere while racking up achievements. There was really no reason to choose to do anything else.

I gulped down the rest of the drink that Albert had left behind. It had been a long time since I'd had anything with such a high alcohol content and I could feel my face flushing. I was anxious about trying an expedition, because it was something new, but I refused to let my hesitation interfere with my friends' dreams.

"Yeah, maybe we should start with a joint expedition first," Corinne remarked thoughtfully. "I mean, we don't really know what we're doing or anything."

"We would certainly have less to worry about if a veteran group took us on as extras," I added.

"Yes," Montana agreed.

When there were multiple targets to protect, clients usually hired one primary, high-level team, then that team could invite other parties. This was just one reason adventurers valued their network of connections. Once adventurers grew used to traveling around, they could take on requests from guilds in various

regions. It was a way of life for traveling adventurers, and to my friends, the ideal way of life, period.

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Part 2: Drink and Be Merry

MAYBE because my life had recently become more stable, I also had more time to think. Why had I been transmigrated to this world, and why had I ended up in this form? The more I learned about magic, the more I felt that magic had nothing to do with it. In all the literature I pored over, there was never any mention of magic capable of crossing worlds.

One option to find out more was to try making a really strong wish to return to my original world, but I didn't want to accidentally make it a one-way trip and not be able to get back. And what if my wish was only partially granted and I ended up in my old world looking like this? I'd wind up a guinea pig in some lab. The risk was just too great.

More than anything, I hated the thought of having to part with my new friends.

I just want to know why, without having to go back and return to my old life. It occurred to me that if I traveled around the world, I might actually find the answers to my questions—and in light of my friends' compatible goals, it didn't seem like such a bad idea to make this my life's work.

Elves lived for a long time, so with a long life stretching ahead of me, I thought it would be nice to have some sort of purpose in life. And unraveling mysteries that no one else could solve was very much the name of the game for an adventurer.

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A fresh mug of alcohol was placed in front of me, and I downed it in one long gulp. Then I heard a *clang*, and I looked over to see Montana doing something strange—pouring wine into a large flat plate. He hunched over in front of the dishware, resting his chin on the table, pulled the plate closer to him, brought it to his mouth, and sipped from it. *Such bad manners.* I could tell he was plastered from how red his face was.

Still watching him, I grabbed the bottle he'd put down and poured some more of it into my own glass. Montana seemed quite comfortable where he was, looking up at us.

"Keep…talking."

"Montana, you… Fine, whatever." Corinne seemed both exasperated and concerned, but she gave up trying to manage Montana's drunkenness almost immediately. "Anyway," she continued, "Al and I have tagged along to other towns with our dads, so we have experience traveling."

"Oh, right, Corinne, your father's a merchant. Does that mean Montana and I are the only ones who've never traveled?"

"I have." Montana shook the last few drops from his plate with both hands as he answered. Even though it had been full to the brim just seconds earlier. I hadn't paid much attention to him, but apparently, he'd been absolutely sucking that wine down.

"I traveled alone from the Principality of Dothart all the way here."

"Alone! Without an escort?!" Corinne sounded shocked.

The Principality of Dothart was a country located south of the mountains, so it would have been quite a long journey, especially to travel by oneself. *That's Montana for you. Amazing.* In a bit of a daze myself, I praised him and clapped my hands. Corinne gave me a baffled look. Had I done something strange? I honestly didn't know.

Montana continued pouring more alcohol onto his plate, still hunched over the table. The large bottle was now empty, and he rolled it around on the table, his expression bored. Luckily, the bottle stopped when the handle caught on something, so I didn't have to worry about it falling on the floor and breaking.

"Alone," he said again. "Bandits chased me when I crossed over the mountains."

"Oh my gosh, I can't believe you made it out alive!"

"If you run fast enough, they can't catch you."

Montana flapped his arms and legs in an imitation of running. In his drunken state, he looked a lot more childish than usual, which only made him even more adorable.

"Haruka, that means you're the only one who's never traveled outside the city," Corinne said. "You know, I think we might actually be able to manage an escort request on our own."

I felt a little sad when I heard that. Apparently, I really *was* the one holding them back the most, despite being the oldest. At this rate, I was afraid they would abandon me. My heart grew heavy as I tried to determine the reason I was so unreliable. *I'm not trying hard enough.* I decided I had to work harder to avoid being abandoned.

***

"UM, I'll do my very best, so I'd really appreciate it if you don't abandon me…"

"Same, same, same."

Corinne was shocked to see a forlorn Haruka reach out to her unsteadily. As for Montana, he kept nodding, seemingly for no reason at all. That was when she finally realized that everyone except for her was completely drunk. But the realization came too late. She had never imagined that the two calmest members of their party would get so wasted.

"Okay, okay, I won't abandon you! I won't! Neither of you! All right you two, that's enough booze for today! You too, Montana. Darn it, Haruka, pull yourself together!"

Corinne quickly realized that any further attempts at conversation would be pointless considering their inebriation, so she stood up quickly and started cleaning up. While Haruka followed her unsteadily, like the undead, Corinne nudged Albert to wake up where he was lying comfortably on the floor.

"Hey, go back to your room if you're gonna sleep."

"Huuuh… You're so…loud… Ugggh, I think I'm gonna hurl…"

Albert woke up, his face pale, and immediately dashed off, disappearing somewhere. *Well, no help from him, I guess.* Corinne finished clearing the table and looked up again, this time to find Montana sleeping soundly, practically melted into the table.

"Oh, come on! Haruka, can you carry Mon, please?"

"Undershtood," Haruka slurred. "I shall do my best."

Haruka picked Montana up and followed Corinne like a duckling. She was still completely sloshed, but a little better than the other two at not collapsing or falling asleep.

"Corinne, do you think I'm useful?" Haruka asked. "I'm not getting in the way, am I?"

“Yes, you are, and no, you aren’t. Thank you, thank you!”

Haruka trailed after Corinne, drinking in her flippant reply.

Corinne decided right then and there that starting tomorrow, her party members weren’t allowed to drink. But to be honest, she did find Haruka’s childlike behavior even more endearing than usual, so she would miss seeing this side of her again.

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Part 3: Preparations

THE next morning, when I woke up refreshed and with full memory of what had happened the previous night, I clutched my head in despair. I wished I could erase my drunken memories, but I could recall every detail with painful clarity. In that moment, I resented my brain for having such good memory. The image of Corinne’s exasperated expression as she took care of me flashed vividly through my mind, and I rolled around on my bed, hugging my pillow.

I’m so sorry. Here I was, some old guy causing trouble for a girl young enough to be my daughter. I wanted to die of embarrassment. No more drinking starting today. I definitely didn’t want to disgrace myself like that ever again.

After rolling around for a while, I finally got up, and then I paid more attention to my appearance than usual before joining up with the others, in an attempt to look as sober as possible. I crossed my fingers that they wouldn’t mention what had happened the night before. This was how adults got through life. I was very sorry for what I’d done, and I prayed Corinne would let me off the hook this one time.

***

WHILE I was having breakfast in the dining hall, Albert trudged in like he had weights tied to his legs. He held his head in his hands. Poor thing must have had one hell of a hangover.

“Al, drink less from now on,” Corinne warned, standing up. “Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied with a bitter expression. “Keep it down, will you?”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?!”

“For the love of! Stop it, I’m sorry, please stop, my head is killing me.”

Albert did look weaker than usual as he miserably tossed himself into a chair mid-apology. At the sad sight, Corinne lost her will to criticize him further. She sighed and sat down again. *Can magic cure hangovers?* I wondered.

“At this rate, our discussion about the future might have to wait until tonight.”

“Hm, yes, I think we should let him rest a bit.”

“Then why don’t we go shopping today? I’d love to find the equipment we’ll need for camping.”

“Good idea. I don’t know much about any of that, so I’ll follow your lead.”

I stood up, ready to leave an exhausted Albert behind in the canteen. *Rest up, kiddo.*

Meanwhile, Montana, who had been quietly chipping away at another stone, glanced over at us before resuming his work. He seemed to have decided our little chat had nothing to do with him.

“Come on, Montana,” Corinne said. “You know the most about traveling, so you’re coming too.”

“Oh. I am?”

I was usually the only one Corinne dragged around like this, so Montana must have assumed he’d be holding down the proverbial fort. He hurriedly tossed his tools and the stone into his sleeves and stood up.

“I’m going back to bed,” Albert groaned.

“Enjoy your rest.”

He didn’t have the energy to respond to me, he just plodded away out of the dining hall. Clearly, his first hangover was taking a toll on him.

***

I surveyed the compact collection of kitchen tools. Corinne was the best cook among us, which made me and Montana mere accessories for this particular excursion.

I walked around the store and picked up a deep-bottomed frying pan that looked especially sturdy. It didn’t look like it would

wear out even after using it for a while, and it could probably handle a vigorous scrubbing too, meaning it shouldn't be difficult to maintain. If I tied it to a backpack, it would be easy to carry. This body of mine was extraordinarily strong, so the frying pan's weight wouldn't put me at any disadvantage. The handle was solid too.

"Whoa, Haruka, are you really planning to buy something that looks like a bludgeon?"

"It *does* look pretty sturdy, doesn't it?" I agreed. "Would certainly come in handy as a weapon in an emergency."

I jokingly waved it around in response to Corinne's surprised voice, and a *whoosh* reverberated through the store. When a clerk rushed over to see what was going on, I bowed my head and apologized.

"You could have killed someone just now," Corinne commented.

"No, there's no way..." I couldn't help protesting, but I had a feeling she was right, so it was a weak denial at best.

I turned around to see Montana looking at the knives, poking them with his fingertips and holding them up to the light as he examined them. It was rare to see him inspecting items so carefully on a shopping trip. He usually just stood outside the shops, daydreaming. That said, his care and skill in handling the knives was obvious.

"Do you like edged tools, Montana?" It sounded like I was accusing him of being a dangerous person, and I regretted the words the second they left my mouth, but he didn't seem to mind.

"My father is a blacksmith," he said simply. He put the knife back in its place and turned to face us. "So I like looking at knives made by other people."

"Oooh, so you can smith too, Montana?" Corinne asked.

Now that I thought about it, he *had* said he'd been raised by dwarves. Dwarves were well known for being blacksmiths. Plus, they were dexterous, strong, and resistant to fire.

Montana was the son of a dwarf, but his therianthrope features marked him as a foundling. He hadn't seemed bothered by his adoption when he'd told us about it before, but I still had to wonder if that was really the case. I observed him quietly. Surprisingly, judging by the wag of his tail, he seemed happy.

"Yes."

At sixteen years old, he was a blacksmith, a jeweler, a warrior, and could even act as a scout. *What a talented young man.* All three of my friends possessed talents far beyond what I'd expect from children. But perhaps that was normal in this world where they reached adulthood much earlier than the countries on Earth.

"Does that mean you'll take over your family's smithy someday?"

"Hm… No."

He hesitated when he gave that answer, a stark contrast to his earlier enthusiastic response. Then he elaborated: "I'm good at making accessories, and I'm currently an adventurer. Even though one of my goals is to find the person who gave birth to me, I think it would be fun to continue being an adventurer after that, so I'll get to fight things I've never seen before and meet interesting people."

"Ohmigosh, Mon, you're talking so much…!" Sounding moved, Corinne patted him on the head like he was a good little puppy.

He pushed her hand away with a slight grimace. He often let me stroke him on the head, but maybe he was uncomfortable being pet by someone younger than him.

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Part 4: A Boy Named Montana Marteau

MONTANA Marteau was a therianthrope boy. From a young age, he'd grown up wondering why he had fluffy ears and a bushy tail. After all, his parents didn't have either of those things. He didn't understand why he was the only one with those features, and vaguely thought that they would go away when he grew up.

His father was one of the most skilled blacksmiths in the Principality of Dothart, with a workshop situated near the border with Pleine. There, he processed high-quality iron from the mountains on the border. The workshop also housed an armory and a weapons shop, so warriors and nobles came from all over the country in search of full sets of top-tier equipment.

The Principality of Dothart had an adversarial relationship with the Empire of Gross to the south, which meant there was a constant need to expand the country's military. In addition, each of Dothart's successive princes was skilled in martial arts, with a

tendency to favor warriors. They believed that good weapons made good warriors, which supported the development of the blacksmithing industry.

Montana's father, one of Dothart's recognized first-class craftsmen, had many apprentices. Like most dwarves, he loved to drink, and when he and his friends gathered together for drunken merrymaking, they told Montana all sorts of stories.

One day, they were drinking heavily with an adventurer visiting the workshop. The inebriated young man asked Montana how they could be of different races despite being father and son. One of the veteran apprentices (even as he was socking the man in the face) inadvertently blurted out the truth in front of young Montana.

Through this unexpected turn of events, the boy learned he'd been found and rescued as a child and was, in fact, a therianthrope. As it happened, another apprentice pointed out the first's mistake and the veteran apprentice panicked, kicking the young adventurer out of the workshop for his mishap. The remaining dwarves looked at Montana in concern, but he seemed as calm as ever. He finally understood why he had a bushy tail and fluffy ears.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean he wasn't sad when he found out he wasn't related to his parents by blood. Montana loved his father and mother. His father was stubborn, dignified, and always looked stern. Montana often tried to imitate him, but could never make himself look quite that intimidating. With practice, though, he was able to maintain a cool and unperturbed expression, even when caught by surprise.

He loved to listen to the stories adventurers and warriors who visited the workshop told. When Montana asked, they would happily regale him with their tales of adventure and heroism, while waiting for their weapons or armor to be completed. After all, everyone wanted to brag about their proudest moments. Montana's eyes lit up as he listened.

Some of the visiting adventurers even taught him how to use a sword, how to train himself, and other useful techniques. He practiced them every night on his own, acquiring the necessary skills for an adventurer. It was around that time when he first had

a vague idea that someday, he would look for his biological parents.

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INCIDENTALLY, it was well known that dwarves were skilled with their hands. Montana had grown up hearing the sounds of iron being hammered from an early age, and he used to think that he too might become a blacksmith when he grew up. His father taught him how to smith after his apprentices left for the day, during the brief stretch of time before a new day started.

His father was surprised when he started teaching Montana the art of blacksmithing. The boy already seemed to understand the secret techniques before he was taught. And he swung the hammer with the same, precise movements too.

His physical strength was still lacking, but the works Montana produced were already good enough to be sold. Thrilled with his son's talent, his father showed him the techniques over and over again, correcting even the slightest differences or timing errors. Montana absorbed the knowledge instantly, like water sprinkled in a desert. His father realized that his son was a genius, so he devoted himself every day to helping develop that talent.

One day, one of the apprentices saw his master working at the forge with little Montana, having neglected his own work to focus on his child. The sight made the apprentice explode with pent-up anger and unleash the bile that had been festering inside him.

According to the apprentice, his master showed Montana too much favoritism just because he was his son. They had been working together since long before the boy's arrival, but the master had never taught the apprentices so closely. And no matter how much you taught a beast-man, they would never be able to craft something as amazing as a dwarf could.

Troubled, the master scratched his head. He had to admit that he'd been focusing too much on his son lately, to the exclusion of his apprentices. He'd also bungled things by not putting Montana's work up for sale yet. He'd felt it would be a waste to sell his son's work, so he had lined it all up neatly in the warehouse instead. Because of this, some of the apprentices, who

had never seen Montana's work, assumed that even with all the instruction he'd received, he'd never be able to make anything worthwhile.

As the discussion got more and more heated, one of Montana's father's apprentices asked to challenge him. If he was better than Montana at forging swords of the same material and style, then his master should give up on training his son.

The whole thing depressed Montana, from seeing his father struggle with the suggestion to the disarray in the forge more generally. He didn't want any of that. Montana *was* a prodigy, but he was more of a jack-of-all-trades type than an expert in one thing. He understood what the apprentices were saying, and he knew that he would probably win the challenge.

But he saw the inevitable result too—that the relationship between master and apprentice would be strained, and that the apprentice who lost the challenge would end up leaving. Above all, he was saddened by the knowledge that the people he'd looked up to like older brothers seemed to fear and hate him. He'd believed they were good people. They had cared for Montana since he was little, and never treated him badly.

He realized he'd gotten carried away with learning new things and messed up the order of things. But winning the challenge would lead to nothing good and losing purposely would only disappoint his father. Montana muttered to himself, not knowing what to do.

"I'm not very good at smithing, so I quit as of today. I'm sorry." His voice was small, but clear. Then he bowed deeply and retreated into the house.

His father looked deeply unhappy, and even the apprentice who had challenged him rushed to stop him, but Montana never returned. After that day, he stopped going to the forge.

Whenever his father's concerned apprentices approached him, Montana made sure to vanish before even making eye contact. He was afraid if he looked at them, he would see their negative emotions, so he tried to harden himself, to become less sensitive. He started looking down instead of at people's faces.

Sometimes, when he was especially bored, he still snuck peeks into the forge—but of course, he was careful not to be seen.

One day, while trying to decide what to do with all his free time, he found some shiny objects in a pile of rocks. Once he noticed them, he could see that they were scattered here and there among the more ordinary stones. It occurred to him that if he carved them, he could make them into something beautiful.

On a whim, he decided to do just that, so he got permission from his father and started secretly collecting especially beautiful stones whenever nobody else was around. Then, every day, he would return to his room and get to work carving the stones by himself.

A year passed, then two, then three, and Montana became quite good at working with gemstones. When he finally made a pair of rings that satisfied his inner artisan, he was so happy that he gave them to his mother and father as presents.

His father snorted, put it on, and then turned away. If he really didn't like something, though, he wouldn't wear it, and he'd be vocal about his dislike too. So Montana knew that he was just trying to hide how touched he was.

In contrast, his mother was openly overjoyed and gave him a big hug. She'd been worried about Montana, because he'd completely withdrawn in recent years. The sight of him mastering new techniques moved her to tears.

***

MONTANA, now fourteen years old, was crafting accessories alone in his room as usual. As he worked, he imagined the faces and personalities of each of the apprentices in the workshop. He had caused the apprentices trouble, so this would be his way of thanking them for taking care of him when he was younger. He hoped that one day, when he found the courage and no longer had any lingering attachment to blacksmithing, he would be able to talk to them happily like he had in the past.

Then he told his father and mother, "I want to become an adventurer and travel the world."

Montana's parents knew that he'd been secretly training with a sword for years, so they were prepared for him to say something like this someday. Despite her smile and tears of joy, his mother

had a sad look on her face when she said goodbye. His father was still as unreadable as ever.

On the morning of his departure, Montana's father handed him a hammer. "This is the hammer I inherited from my father," he said. "It's nothing special, but I was going to give it to you when I recognized you as a full-fledged craftsman. Don't lose heart, don't be shy, and don't hold back. Accomplish what you've set out to do."

His brow furrowed as he scowled fiercely before continuing.

"But still...if things get too tough, come back to the workshop. It's not good to run away or give up so easily. Even if you're not here, though...I'd rather you live. Make sure you don't have any regrets."

With that, his father turned around and went back to the forge. But Montana knew that his father's ferocious expression had just been his way of trying to hold back tears.

Montana started walking. He was on the verge of tears too, so he walked with his gaze on the sky.

Then, as he was leaving town, someone stopped him. He heard a familiar voice. It was the apprentice who had tried to challenge Montana, all those years ago.

"Kinda heartless to leave without saying anything, ya know."

Montana stiffened and lowered his eyes, shrinking into himself. He couldn't look up. He was scared. He had no idea what this man would say. And Montana still didn't hate him, even after everything.

"...I knew you were more talented than me," the apprentice said. "I wanted to give you the final push you needed. I thought that if I lost there, then the others wouldn't be able to say anything, that they'd finally acknowledge your talent. Instead, you completely disappeared... And now you were planning to leave just like that?"

He came closer and roughly mussed Montana's hair.

"Thanks to you, though, I had to keep trying. I couldn't give up after that, could I...? I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm so sorry. I wanted to apologize all this time, but you kept running away." The apprentice thought for a moment. "But considering how good you got at hiding from us grownups, I'm sure you'll make a good adventurer. So give it your best shot."

With tears spilling down his cheeks, Montana smacked the man roughly in the chest before stepping away. He took a deep breath and got ready to resume his journey out of town.

“I was going to,” he said. “You don’t need to tell me. I’d rather be a famous adventurer than a blacksmith anyway. And I’ll eventually come back to commission weapons, so you better be good enough for me by then.”

As he was sent off by the sounds of laughter and tears, Montana cried out loud for the first time in over a decade. And that was how he took his first steps as an adventurer.

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Part 6: An Expedition

THE sun was already starting to set by the time Haruka and the others finished shopping. When they returned to the guild to eat dinner in the canteen, a woman at the counter named Dorothy called out to them.

“Oh, you’re finally back,” she said. “Can you wait there for a second?”

She paid the adventurer she’d been serving and placed a wooden sign with the word “Closed” on the counter. Then she beckoned Haruka, Corinne, and Montana over to a private room separated from the lobby by a thin wall. Dorothy was the same receptionist who had once scolded Haruka for causing trouble in the lobby, the day after she’d registered as an adventurer. Naturally, Haruka was nervous around her, wondering if she’d done something wrong this time, too.

Dorothy told them to sit down before taking a seat across from them and handing them the piece of paper in her hand. “This contains the details for a commission,” she explained. “I’m going to tell you about it first, and if you turn it down, then I’ll put it up on the job board.”

When all three of them leaned forward to look, Dorothy smiled and turned the sheet around so they could see it. She seemed charmed by the eagerness of these young adventurers.

The request was for adventurers to escort a delegation. The destination was the Holy Nation of Lejion, a neighboring country that could be reached by heading west from Oranz. Haruka

remembered seeing a similar group matching the description on the sheet a while ago.

In terms of military might, Lejion was the weakest of the four nations on the Northern Continent, but because it was home to the headquarters of the Oracle Church religion, it garnered the world's support as a neutral country. The city of Vista, known for being where the gods had first descended, was also home to a school that attracted scholars and researchers from all over. It was said to be the cultural center of the world.

Haruka wondered if they should really accept such a prestigious request on such short notice.

"We've never been on an expedition before," she said. "Are you certain about this?"

"Well, that's a difficult question," Dorothy replied, pursing her lips. She looked away thoughtfully before continuing. "You were able to defeat a tyrant boar with just the four of you, and we haven't heard of any notable failures on your part, either. Plus, your party has positive evaluations from all the clients you've escorted so far. But the main point is that this time you were specifically recommended by one of the city's leading trading firms upon the client's request for suitable adventurers to escort them on their journey home. They were told of your interesting talents and how capable you all are."

Dorothy liked this party. She sincerely hoped that they'd continue to receive solid work so they could spread their wings accordingly.

Almost ten years had passed since she'd started working as a Guild receptionist. By now, the mundane work had become so routine for her that it was easy to think and do her job at the same time. So she just stood at the counter, mentally evaluating the many adventurers who appeared each day.

Albert was energetic and skilled for his age, an adventurer with a promising future. Though he had a short temper, he listened to his friends' warnings and advice. Corinne was level-headed for her age, knew how to handle money, and had real guts. Dorothy would have hired her as a receptionist if given the opportunity. She was sure the girl would have made an excellent employee.

Haruka had a polite demeanor despite her striking appearance, and was a powerful enough mage to have generated loads of rumors. Supposedly, her magic had been responsible for that tyrant boar's defeat. Dorothy had never seen a cleaner finishing blow.

And above all, Montana was adorable. Small, with cute fluffy ears and a bushy tail. Dorothy was unaware of it, but she loved therianthrope boys with bushy ears and tails because she was totally obsessed with anything small, cute, and fluffy.

Even now, Montana's excited expression and his cute appearance combined to make her heart race. Still, she continued speaking without showing any hint of her emotions. Incidentally, she also finally noticed that Albert wasn't there, but she was too focused on Montana to care.

"You can think of this as the culmination of all your hard work so far," she continued. "While I agree that you're light on experience, the client has already hired their own guards. What they're looking for from you is connections. As they travel around the country, they're hoping to get to know promising adventurers."

The three of them shared a look and nodded. Corinne brought the request closer to herself and answered for the group with a huge smile.

"We accept. Please give us all the details!"

***

"...I know I screwed up cuz I passed out drunk, but... But!"

Haruka, Corinne, and Montana all looked awkwardly away from Albert. They knew why he was blaming them, and they definitely felt bad.

"If you were gonna decide something so important, you could at least have come and gotten me!"

"You're right. You're so right," Corinne admitted. "I'm sorry?"

Albert stood up as Corinne apologized, her gaze still averted. "Wait, did you guys really not think about me? Like, at all?"

After a very long, very uncomfortable silence, Montana spoke just one word: "No."

Haruka said nothing. Dorothy's announcement had made her so happy and excited that she'd completely forgotten about Albert.

She had no excuse for her actions.

After they had accepted the job, the three of them had convened in the guild cafeteria. When Albert had finally shown up, yawning, the rest of the group had looked at each other like a family of deer caught in headlights. The three of them exchanged surreptitious glances to try and come up with a solution silently, but to no avail. Which brought them to now.

“Not to mention you guys have been prepping for the expedition already… Damn it to hell, I’m never drinking again!”

“…Uh, what do you say we go together tomorrow to buy your equipment, Al?” Haruka suggested, trying her best to pacify him.

Luckily, his excitement over the upcoming expedition eventually won out over his frustration and he started chattering about what he should buy, and asking the others what they had already bought. By the time they went their separate ways after dinner, he was back to his usual cheery self.

“Okay, guys, make sure you don’t oversleep tomorrow!”

It’s a good thing he’s so straightforward, Haruka thought. She felt both relieved and charmed by his endearing honesty.

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Part 6: A Medium-Sized Dragon and the Client

THE weather on the first day of our expedition wasn’t particularly sunny or rainy, but was rather cloudy with occasional glimpses of the sun. If the weather was supposed to be an omen for the rest of our journey, you could probably interpret it as something like “watch out for trouble.”

I put on the robe Viche gave me and pulled the hood over my head. Strangely enough, it always kept my body at the right temperature regardless of how hot or cold it was outside. I was still too scared to try finding out exactly how much it had cost.

When we arrived at the city’s western gate, our rendezvous point, several others were already there, ready to set off. The delegation was sending personnel in shifts to churches in various locations, where they would also be buying local specialties before heading back. They had apparently purchased a large amount of wood and other products processed in Oranz, and were now loading it all into the wagon.

We had nothing to do until the key people from Lejion arrived, but we didn't just want to watch the others work in silence either, so after making brief introductions, we decided to help them load up the goods. Whenever I lifted heavy cargo with ease, Albert would lift something equally heavy, his face bright red from exertion. *Is he trying to compete with me?* If I brought it up the wrong way, I knew he'd get irritable again, so I continued working while watching him out of the corner of my eye.

After all the supplies were loaded, the man shouting out instructions, a kind-looking man in his forties, called over to Albert. "I sure am glad to have so many young folks here, but since you guys are bodyguards, you know you didn't need to help out this much, right?"

"Don't even worry about it," Albert replied, trying to act tough as sweat poured down his forehead. "All this exercise is the perfect start to the day." He was actually quite strong, so he'd be fine again after a small break. I was a bit concerned to see him already out of breath before our first expedition was even underway, but he hadn't injured himself or anything. *I suppose that's good enough.*

The man continued, squinting his already-narrow eyes even more. "At any rate, you really helped us out," he said. "My name is Cody, by the way, and I'm in charge of the luggage and the earth dragon. Looking forward to working with you." Cody tilted his head toward the four-legged dragon at the front of the wagon, then held out his hand to Albert.

"You got it. If there's anything we can help you with, feel free to give us a shout." Albert took his hand and squeezed it tightly.

While this heartwarming exchange was taking place, I found myself captivated by the creature Cody mentioned, the earth dragon. It looked like a giant lizard, had the spiky legs of a dinosaur, and was about a head shorter than me. Its wide body and low center of gravity likely kept it from falling over easily. *I wonder how strong it is. Very strong, probably.*

Its face looked rough and rugged, but it had calm, slightly sleepy eyes, and the way it flicked and retracted its long tongue was just like any reptile. I'd seen dragons before, in the form of tiny dots as they flew over the city, but this was my first time seeing one up close.

When you think of fantasy worlds, you imagine swords, magic, and dragons. Seeing this one had the same impact on me that seeing a dinosaur would have had. It was a creature I never would have encountered back in Japan.

I wanted to reach out and touch it, but I was worried it might get angry and start rampaging or something. Also, if I touched it without permission, there was the possibility I could even get in trouble with the delegation. So I pulled my hand back and continued to observe the earth dragon, circling it from a respectable distance.

After a while, the man who had introduced himself as Cody headed in my direction. “Is this your first time seeing a dragon, young lady?” he asked while stroking the creature’s head. I nodded silently in response. “We call this one Ozian,” he said. “He’s docile, so you can pet him. Used to people since birth, you know. By the way, I figured you were older because of how quietly you were working, but maybe I was wrong. You seem pretty young.”

Excited to have permission, I slowly reached out toward Ozian’s head. I vaguely heard Cody asking me a question, but the meaning didn’t really register. When I stroked the dragon’s rough head, I found it to be cooler than I expected, just like the wall lizard I’d caught as a kid. *I’m glad he’s so big and domesticated*, I thought. Otherwise, he would have run away in fright the second I touched him.

“Whoa!”

His long tongue stretched out and brushed the back of my hand, and I couldn’t help yelping. I was embarrassed to have overreacted; he hadn’t even bit me. Ozian didn’t move a muscle, just followed the movement of my hand with his eyes.

“I think he wants us to shake hands.” Cody tapped Ozian lightly on the head and held out his hand. “I’m Cody. Nice to meet you, Miss Hood.”

It was only when he called me “Miss Hood” that I snapped out of it. I quickly pulled said hood down and shook his hand. It would be rude to greet someone while hiding my face. After all, the expedition was scheduled to last for about a month, and I couldn’t keep my hood on forever, so I really should have taken it off sooner.

“My name is Haruka Yamagishi. Pleased to meet you.” I clasped his hand in both of mine and bowed my head politely.

“You really are a dark elf, huh? I’d heard as much, but I have to say, it’s still a bit of a surprise. I’ve only ever seen your kind once before, in the south. I appreciate your polite greeting, Haruka.”

His barely disguised curiosity made me feel a bit uneasy. I didn’t want my looks to cause trouble for my friends or the people I was guarding.

“Will my being from a rare race pose a problem for the journey?”

“It shouldn’t.” He paused. “Hm, well, I don’t think you need to worry.” He waved his hands dramatically to reassure me, but I could tell he had hesitated to answer me honestly. That made it hard not to worry.

“If there’s something I should know, please do tell me, so I can be careful.”

“It’s not anything you need to worry about, Haruka. I don’t want you to be offended, but recently, some kids have started saying that dark elves are born from the god of destruction. They don’t see dark elves much around these parts, so I guess you could call it prejudice. I sure hope the kids we’re bringing with us aren’t like that.”

“Then…perhaps I should keep hiding my face.”

“No, no, you’re just as much a part of this expedition as anyone else,” he insisted. “You can’t be the only one carrying the burden. I’ll do my best to warn them, but if anyone bothers you, don’t hesitate to tell me.”

Hiding my face wasn’t a complicated issue for me, but it would definitely be a hassle if people asked me why I was doing it. In any case, it seemed like it wasn’t something I needed to obsess over, because I felt like I could trust Cody to handle things like an adult. Ever since I’d received my new robe, my habit had been to keep the hood up. So far though, no one had discriminated against me because of my appearance either way. *I’m sure it’ll be fine this time too.*

“I’ll leave it to you, then,” I said. “Please let me know if you need anything.” I cut the conversation short because honestly, I really wanted to return to my observation of Ozian.

A sudden cold wind brushed my long ears as it swept through the area. Come to think of it, reptiles on Earth hibernated in winter. Did that apply to dragons too since they were so reptilian? The weather was only going to get colder from now on. It would be terrible if they abruptly had to go to sleep for months.

“Cody, do dragons hibernate?”

“Ah, there are similar creatures that hibernate, but they aren’t called dragons. We call them lizards, no matter how big they are. Dragons have flame sacs in their bodies, so they can regulate their own body temperature. That means they move a little slower, but it also means they can still work in winter.”

“I see. Then, can they breathe fire using the flame sacs…?”

“Yeah, some species like that exist. Are you interested in dragons, Haruka?”

“I am,” I admitted. “I think they’re so cool.”

“It’s funny, my son says the same thing. Oh ho, what’s this I see… Adventurers really are an inquisitive lot, eh?”

Cody laughed as he watched Montana try to climb onto Ozian’s back. I was relieved the man wasn’t angry, and I also felt a bit envious. *I wish I could be that daring.* Ozian followed Montana with his eyes and simply let the boy do as he pleased.

“Montana! My turn! My turn!”

“Okay.”

Montana jumped down, and Albert hoisted himself up. I was also envious of how much fun they were having. The thought of joining them made me cringe, but I didn’t *want* it to make me cringe. *The older you get, the more strangely self-conscious you become.* It was a real problem.

I’m forty-three years old, I mentally admonished myself in an attempt to suppress my childish side. I repeated it silently like some sort of chant, then I remembered it had been almost six months since I came to this world. My birthday had definitely already passed, so that would make me forty-four years old. I was just a couple steps away from my fifties.

As I got lost in my somewhat maudlin thoughts, a group of people dressed in blue and white came walking toward us without slowing down. Cody straightened up when someone wearing heavy armor rushed over to him.

“Cody, you’re early, as usual. Or were we late? The escorts are here already too, hm?”

“Well, maybe a little early,” Cody said. “But the timing was good. Gave us a chance to get to know the guards a little.”

Seeing that the new members had joined us, Albert hurriedly jumped off Ozian. He must have thought it would be bad form to greet newcomers from astride a dragon. Montana was clever, getting off the dragon first.

“So these are our escorts?” the armored man asked. “Wow, you really are young, just like they told us.” He stroked his chin, and though his expression didn’t change, I noticed that his gaze fixed on me for a moment. *Maybe because I’m unusual?*

His powerful build combined with his armor made me suspect he was a temple knight of Lejion. I’d heard that each and every one of them had the skills of a high-ranking adventurer, and that their main duties were to travel around the territory, guarding the roads and escorting important national figures. This particular knight had a very impressive cleft chin. Combined with his blue eyes, he looked exactly like a prototypical gallant knight you’d imagine in a fantasy story. Except probably three times stronger.

Three people wearing similar armor caught up with him from behind, likely his subordinates. A few minutes later, two young boys wearing robes walked up to them. To me, they all looked quite intimidating in their matching attire.

“I see everything is loaded onto the wagons. We can depart at any time, then,” the knight said. “If the guards are ready as well, we can leave immediately. By the way, I’m Dekt, leader of the Temple Knights. Feel free to ask the others their names during the journey. You’ll enjoy yourselves more that way. Wouldn’t you agree, Cody?”

“I would, in fact,” Cody said. “Once again, let me thank you for accepting the request submitted by the Lejion delegation. Allow me to formally introduce myself. Cody Hednart, acting representative, at your service. Please keep us safe during our journey. Now, then, are we all ready?”

Cody laughed mischievously at the shock on Albert’s face. Apparently, Al really had thought he was just a mere porter or Ozian’s caretaker.

I thought as much. That was my reaction to Cody's announcement, and I was sure the same went for Corinne. The two of us had read the document carefully so we already knew Cody was the representative. It was just too unlikely for there to be two different people with the same first name on this expedition.

Montana, who hadn't even glanced at the document, looked as unfazed as ever. But maybe he just didn't care.

"We're ready and look forward to working with you as well, Cody," I said.

"Huh. You're not as surprised as I thought you'd be. Too bad."

"Well, I *did* read the document thoroughly."

"Shoot, and after I deliberately wrote everything in tiny letters to make it indecipherable," Cody muttered in frustration.

Is he always up to some kind of mischief? Maybe having a playful travel companion would keep things interesting.

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Part 7: Communication Skills

THE delegation consisted of diverse groups of people of all ages and backgrounds, and once the reason was explained, it made sense why. The first group was made up of members of the Oracle Church's public relations department, led by Cody. They were the four who had been loading the luggage with him, and as Cody himself said, he was in charge of them.

The second group had been at the loading area, but they were just running around in a panic. I felt like I'd seen them somewhere before, too. Apparently, they had been working at the Oracle Church in Oranz for the past three years, which made them more experienced when it came to the city itself than me. *That must be where I saw them.*

In large cities that had a strong relationship with the Church, a church administrator was dispatched from the religious organization's headquarters. In small villages, however, the locals assigned the administrator. So those three in the second group were excited they were finally returning to their hometowns to see their families after such a long time.

The third group was the last to arrive, the Temple Knights. Delegations always had guards in addition to adventurers. And considering that they hadn't hired any adventurers on their outward journey, hiring a guard on the return trip must really have been just a bonus to make some connections.

The berobed twins showed up a short time after the Knights. They were students at the Lejion Seminary, and only thirteen years old. So far they hadn't spoken a single word to us. They did occasionally glare at us though, which was confusing.

The Lejion Seminary was a school where students learned the Oracle teachings along with basic academic subjects. It was common for devout Oracle believers around the country to send their children there. As part of their graduation project, students at the Seminary were required to accompany Oracle believers on pilgrimages and envoy expeditions. Only after satisfying this requirement could they graduate.

Students traveled as guards or to assist in missionary activities, but were generally treated as the former on account of being mages. Normally, students graduated at fifteen. These particular twins had skipped a grade and were set to graduate this year, which meant they must have been very talented.

"They're always in a bad mood. I really don't understand the youth these days," mumbled one knight, who seemed to be in his twenties, as he explained the various groups to us.

It's often difficult to find common ground to converse across the generations. I could understand how the twins felt. I myself had mixed feelings, as someone in a party with kids who could have been my own children. The young knight in question clearly wanted me to agree with him, but going off his theory, I was probably actually too *old* to find common ground with him.

As we got on our way, I turned around and looked at the twins, who were walking at the back of the group. They seemed bored and uninterested in everything. Their golden-brown hair was slightly shaved at the back, with the rest cut evenly. Maybe it would be easier to understand if I described it as a short, stylish haircut.



After a while of conversing with the adults in the delegation, I heard a voice from behind me. It was Albert, talking to the twins. As expected of our party's leader, he could do things I couldn't without a second thought.

"Hey, what are your names? I'm Albert."

"Leo."

"Theo."

"Huh? What was that? I can't hear you if you speak at the same time."

Albert tilted his head in confusion. In response, they both clicked their tongues in unison. Albert gritted his teeth and clenched his fists at the younger boys' attitudes. I thought I'd have to intervene if he blew his top, but somehow reason prevailed, and he stomped toward me instead of losing his temper.

"...You controlled yourself," I observed. "Well done, Al."

"Stupid little shits!"

He stomped his foot again, huffing angrily. I was impressed he'd managed to hold himself back. Albert was impulsive. To me, that was definitely one of his strong points, but compatibility—or lack thereof—with someone else's personality also mattered.

"Oooh, what's happening? Fill me in." Corinne, who'd been chatting with Cody a short distance away, returned when she sensed drama unfolding.

"They looked bored, so I tried to break the ice with them, but they just clicked their tongues at me."

"Hmmm," Corinne considered. "And you're sure you aren't the one who acted weird?"

"All I did was ask them to say their names again because the first time they said them at the same time, and I didn't hear them. So how the heck does that warrant getting tongue-clicked at?"

"Oh, then, yeah, that is kinda rude. I'd probably react the same as you." Even as Corinne agreed with Albert, her eyes remained on the twins in question. "Well, if a cute girl like me went over there, they'd probably start chatting away. Right, Haruka?"

"Oh, um, perhaps."

That's not how they seem to me though. I didn't think being cute or girly mattered in this instance. But while Corinne was both of those things, I also knew arguing with her would make her mad, so I just nodded vaguely.

“Fine,” Albert said. “You go and try, then. I guarantee you it won’t work. And then I’ll laugh when you come back defeated.”

“Ha! Just you watch. What are you gonna give me if I *do* succeed?”

“No way, not happening. But on the suuuper off chance there *is* someone who can get them to open up like normal people, I’ll do whatever they want.”

“Remember, *you* said it.”

Should I tell them that the twins behind us are listening to this whole conversation? Or should I stay out of it? While I weighed my options, Corinne walked toward the boys with her usual winning smile.

And before I could say a word, they’d already clicked their tongues in irritation at her and sent her slinking back. *No surprise there.* This time, Corinne was the one at fault.

“So. How’d it turn out?” Albert taunted her, getting in her face. “Hey, Corinne. Didja ‘chat’ a lot with them? Hey, tell me. Hey.”

She just clenched her fists just as he had been doing a few minutes earlier.

“Um, Al,” I started. “I think you should stop…”

But the moment I reached out to intervene, Al took a powerful blow to his stomach with a muffled thud. He bent over silently, shaking all over. He endured the pain for a while, before eventually dropping to his knees and looking up with tears in his eyes.

“…You *really* shouldn’t provoke someone who’s angry,” I finished

“B-But *she* always…does it…to me…” Albert mumbled almost incoherently, like he was almost afraid she would hear. Corinne herself snorted derisively.

I flexed the hand I’d stretched out to stop him, then squatted down and gave him a pat on the back. *I suppose that’s just how childhood friends are.*

By the time Albert recovered, Corinne had calmed down. She spoke in a normal tone now. “The second tongue click came just a beat later and it totally broke me.”

“Yeah, definitely the killing blow. It hit me real bad too.”

They nodded to each other in agreement. Considering that they’d grown up together, it no longer surprised me when they

were perfectly in sync like this. Maybe the same things made them both angry.

“What are you doing?”

Suddenly, Montana popped out from behind some bushes, munching on something, and walked over to me. Poking out from both his sleeves were branches with berries growing on them, so that was probably what he was eating. He handed me one of the small fruits, which I tossed into my mouth. The sweet and sour taste was delicious for a wild berry. It was almost winter, and I was surprised that such things still grew in the mountains at this time of year.

“Nothing, really,” Albert said. “Those twins over there just keep clicking their tongues at us whenever we try to talk to them.” He pointed behind him, munching on the berries Montana shared with him and not even trying to hide his displeasure.

“Really?”

Montana plucked some more fruit from one of his branches, walking backwards while eating it. The twins waited, looking annoyed. Their expressions seemed to say, “Ugh, not another one.”

“Here.” Montana held out the branch to them, waiting patiently for a reaction, and even as they stared at him without accepting his peace offering, he continued walking backwards and holding out the branch. The path was uneven, but he skillfully maneuvered over all the stones and little holes in the ground.

“Stop it, that’s dangerous.”

“Stop it before you fall.”

In unison, the twins warned Montana about his dangerous manner of walking. To them, he must have looked younger than he was. Montana still didn’t stop, though, instead holding out the branch again and waving it in front of them.

“These berries are pretty tasty, you know.”

The twin on the right-hand side, Theo, reluctantly accepted Montana’s offering, and then Montana started walking next to him.

“I’m Montana.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m Montana.”

“Tsk, I heard you the first time.”

Montana repeated himself again, gazing intently at Theo's face.

"I'm Montana."

"All right, already, I get it, you weirdo! I'm Theo!"

"Nice to meet you, Theo." Montana nodded, satisfied.

Albert, his arms folded, cocked his head so far in one direction that his whole upper body tilted sideways. "Jeez, he's amazing," he said. "How the heck did he get them to talk?"

"You better listen to everything Montana says from now on, Al," Corinne quipped.

"Why?"

"You said you'd do anything for whoever got those twins to talk. Well, there's your guy."

"Nope, doesn't count," Albert insisted. "I made that promise with *you*."

I smiled at their lighthearted bickering while I watched Montana and the twins. I wasn't confident in my ability to talk to the twins either. In the first place, I'd never been particularly good at communication, and I may not have been as bad as that young knight, but I still didn't know what to talk about with kids less than half my age. I genuinely admired Montana for being able to get them to introduce themselves.

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen. How about you?"

"I'm sixteen. I'm basically everyone's older brother."

"What? I don't believe you."

"It's true. I'm older than those two, too."

Montana was about two inches shorter than the twins. Leo, who seemed to be getting progressively more and more annoyed, interrupted Montana and Theo's rambling conversation.

"Why are you only talking to Theo?" Leo asked.

"Do you want to talk with us too?"

Leo frowned as Montana looked inquiringly at him. "I don't want to," he said, "but it's sort of weird that you're only talking to him and not me."

"I'm Montana."

"A-And what do you want *me* to do about it?"

"I'm Montana."

"F-Fine. I'm Leo."

As Leo finally followed his twin's example, Montana pulled another branch out from his sleeve and held it out to him. *This is starting to get ridiculous. What in the world is going on with his sleeves?!*

Leo finally accepted, but seemed to have trouble with such a long branch.

"You can break it," Montana suggested.

"Are you sure?"

Montana beckoned Leo to give him the branch back, then snapped part of it off and handed it back to the twin.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Theo plucked a fruit from the branch and put it in his mouth, then glanced over at the branch Leo was holding.

"How come your branch looks nicer than mine?"

Leo switched the branch to his left hand as if to hide it, and stared back at Theo. "I'm not giving it to you," he said. "It's mine."

"I never said I wanted it anyway."

"You get along well," said Montana.

"No, we don't," the twins said in unison.

"Yes, you do. See?"

The twins looked sideways at each other and smiled wryly.

"We've been together literally our whole lives, so I guess we're closer than other siblings, right?" Leo said.

"I guess," Theo replied. "Hey Montana, it's hard to talk to you like this, so move between us."

Now, the smiles on their faces were making them look like the children they were. *How adorable.* The group from Lejion gathered near us too, and the young knight from before—his name was Flad—stood there with his mouth hanging open.

"Um, what exactly did that boy do?" he whispered to me. "We've tried talking to the twins about all sorts of things, but they've always ignored us. Did he use magic or something?"

"It really does seem like magic, hm?" I turned around to look at them, but Montana and the twins were so engrossed in conversation they didn't even notice me.

"Hm, maybe they let their guard down because he's younger than them?"

"Montana is sixteen."

His birthday had been the month after we met, so he was definitely older than Albert and the others. He did look really young, but the way he acted definitely made it obvious that he was older.

“But he’s so tiny.”

“Flad… Did you say something like that to those two? You know, remarks like that tend to annoy young people.”

“Ahhh, you know, I think I might have.”

That pretty much clued me in to why he didn’t get along with kids. As you get older, you forget about the things that bothered you when you were younger, so you have to be extra careful not to say something that might make your younger friends hate you.

***

Part 8: Joint Operations

WHILE they were talking to Montana, the twins seemed to be checking the rest of us out from time to time. We were closer in age to them than the rest of the delegation, so perhaps they *had* actually been curious about us this whole time. Opening up to Montana might have allowed them to admit that to themselves.

It was the fourth night of the journey. The watch changed at midnight, and we gathered around the campfire, rubbing our eyes sleepily. I managed to wake up right away, but my friends were still half asleep.

I floated a Water Ball in the air, wet a cloth, and wiped each of the faces in turn of the three people sitting limply on the ground. Corinne and Albert finally woke up, but Montana was still in a daze. He started walking with his eyes half closed, then stuck his head in the Water Ball, and blew air out loudly before pulling his head back out and shaking it like a dog to dry himself off.

“Gah, you’re soaked!”

Corinne ran over to pat me dry, and I haphazardly tossed the Water Ball into the bushes. Then I sat down on a log next to the campfire to take up watch, and the other three came and sat next to me. As the night slowly passed by, we spent the time chatting here and there about aimless things. I quite enjoyed whiling away hours like this talking with my friends as we watched the fire crackle.

***

ABOUT an hour later, the distant howl of a wolf echoed through the quiet forest. We all stopped talking and listened as the first howl set off a chain reaction of howls. A beat after my three companions stood up, I joined them on my feet. Evidently, quite a few wolves had gathered.

"I'll wake everyone up before we're surrounded," Montana said.

"I'll go wake the knights. Montana, you handle Cody!"

"Haruka, go get the torches!" Corinne called. "I'll help you after I grab some rope!"

"Got it. We'll use the torches to widen our field of vision."

On the battlefield, the dark of night was a huge disadvantage. We needed to light up the area as much as possible, even minimally, and create a place where we could fight to our advantage.

As we ran to the wagons where the equipment was kept, Corinne suddenly stumbled to a stop with a shout. "Haruka, I almost forgot about the twins! Wake them up first, then grab the torches! I'll get the rope!"

With that, she ran off briskly. From the way she was refusing to meet my eyes, I knew she'd dumped the task on me because she didn't want to do it herself. I wasn't surprised though, considering her earlier interactions with the twins.

"Right," I said to myself. "It is what it is…"

The twins slept by themselves in a small tent. When I lifted the flap, I saw that they were sleeping peacefully. Usually they looked kind of rude, but asleep like this, they just looked like ordinary kids.

"I'm sorry to disturb you while you're sleeping," I said, "but we might be in the midst of a wolf attack, so please wake up!"

Their eyes flew open and they both stared at me for a moment. Then they hurriedly scrambled to their feet, clutching their staves. I was surprised they weren't angry considering how abruptly I'd woken them up. In other words, their attitudes usually sucked, but they seemed to be fully aware of the urgency of the situation.

“Okay, what should we do?” Leo asked, holding his staff tightly with both hands.

“Should we fight too?” Theo, meanwhile, looked ready for war.

Just because twins were perfectly in tune with each other didn’t mean they had the same personality.

“When the battle starts, stand as far back as you can,” I cautioned them. “For now, I’d appreciate it if you could help me carry the torches.”

“Okay.”

“Got it.”

“Follow me, please.”

They responded more meekly than I’d expected. They’d skipped a year in school, so even though they were obviously honor students, if I’d been the same age they were, I was sure I’d be too flustered to hold a proper conversation.

On my way to the wagon, I saw Corinne return to the campfire with a long coil of rope hanging from her arm. *We have to hurry too.* When we reached our destination, I found a bag filled with torches, and quickly crouched down to pick it up before moving to return to the others. The twins were struggling to carry the other bags, which were too heavy for them.

“Here, let me have them,” I said. I took the bags they were trying to carry and started running. Their hushed whispers reached my ears just before I got too far away to hear them.

“She’s ridiculously strong. *Has* to be a martial artist.”

“Then why is she wearing a mage’s robe…?”

“Because I’m a mage,” I called back to them, and they immediately fell silent. I felt their doubtful stares following me, but I didn’t have time to assuage every single one of their concerns. First on my agenda was to survive this wolf attack, *then* I would explain things to the twins.

By the time we reached the bonfire, everyone else was already there. Dekt raised his voice and gave orders to the knights, who installed torches all over the place. Soon, most of the clearing was lit enough for us to see clearly. Then they shepherded the non-combatants of the delegation to the area furthest away from the wolf howls. Those of us who could fight glared around in all directions, on high alert.

Because the twins and I were mages, we took positions slightly further back and waited for the wolves to approach. Corinne also lined up next to me, readying her bow.

In the brief moments before the enemy struck, one of the twins spoke.

"Dark elf," he said, "why aren't you on the front lines?"

"I told you already. I'm a mage."

"I don't believe you. Mages aren't that strong."

"It's true. And you shouldn't sound so sure of yourself when you say that."

While Theo glared around at his surroundings, breathing heavily, Leo kept talking to me, seemingly to distract himself. It made me realize that he was probably the calmer of the two. From time to time, he looked over at Theo, concern in his eyes.

I noticed Corinne's shoulders shaking as she desperately tried to hold back her laughter and keep a straight face. *Still sassy, despite the danger we're in.*

"Would you like to tell us what's so funny, Corinne?"

"Sorry, sorry."

Honestly, if it helped ease the tension, I didn't mind being the butt of her private joke. I was a little worried about the twins because I'd never seen them in combat before, but I knew I couldn't waste valuable energy on that. I needed to concentrate on myself and make sure I didn't make any mistakes.

Up ahead, I saw Albert and Montana gazing straight into the forest. Our job was to support them.

"This is so weird though," Corinne remarked. "I've never heard of wolves attacking a group of people before."

"I'd have to agree with you, which is why I think the leader of the wolves must be a monster," Cody replied.

"You're very knowledgeable, Cody," I added.

When animals mutated into monsters, they became bigger and smarter, and their animal characteristics intensified. Wolves were creatures that acted according to a strong leader's direction. If this particular pack's leader was strong and intelligent, that could explain why the pack was actively attacking people. Humans had poor night vision and were weaker than animals, which made them perfect prey for monsters.

“But you guys defeated a tyrant boar, right?” Cody asked with a confident smile. “Don’t disappoint me.” He didn’t seem particularly scared. He was probably used to situations like this because he traveled so regularly.

A moment later, Dekt’s deep voice rang out: “They’re coming from the front! Ranged teams, prepare to attack! Avoid any magic that can cause explosions!”

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CORINNE nocked an arrow and focused her gaze on the bushes, and Haruka and the twins simultaneously began reciting incantations:

“Blade of wind, arise, multiply, sharpen, soar, mow, pierce…”

“Blade of wind, arise, sharpen, soar, mow…”

The mages readied spells in the direction of the wolves’ approach and waited. Leo felt that something had been off about Haruka’s incantation and looked over at her. He was surprised to see that while he and his brother each had a single Wind Cutter hovering in the air in front of them, five floated in front of Haruka.

“Pierce where I command you. Shoot, Wind Cutter.”

The moment the thicket rustled, Theo sent his spell flying, and Leo hurriedly followed suit. It was a little early, but Leo was so shaken by the sight of Haruka’s magic that he had jumped the gun.

The spells hit the wolf as soon as it appeared, cutting it right in half. Relieved that his misfire worked out after all, Leo turned his eyes back to Haruka. Theo, too, looked over at her, his chest puffed out proudly, and was shocked when he noticed for the first time how many spells she had activated. Next to him, Leo stared strangely at her.

Haruka waited patiently for the wolves to appear, and one by one, launched her magic. Each neatly cut the sprinting beast it targeted in half from crown to tail. The wolves’ aerial momentum meant that each time they were hit, their two halves fell to the ground with audible thuds. The speed, power, and accuracy of Haruka’s spells far exceeded the ones cast by the twins.

Haruka, concentrating hard to make sure she didn’t miss or accidentally hit an ally, fired spell after spell—not even bothering

to chant the necessary incantation. The twins, who had sensed from their limited interactions that Haruka's personality was somewhat reserved, were taken aback by her stern profile and her determined composure as she relentlessly unleashed such power. She looked so different now from how she usually was that they found themselves feeling overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, the wolves charged forward one after another, closing in on the group until they were finally forced to fight at close quarters—and it was no longer possible to fire magic or arrows. Haruka sighed and kept an eye on things. Between her and Corinne, they'd managed to kill ten wolves before they got too close to shoot, so they'd done pretty well, all things considered.

"I'll back them up," Corinne said. "Haruka, you take down the ones we missed!"

"Got it!"

Corinne put on her gauntlets and raced toward Albert and the others. Haruka watched the battle quietly, praising herself mentally. In her first group battle, she'd been calm and collected while defeating multiple enemies. All she had to do now was trust in her comrades and wait.

And she was still completely unaware of the stares boring into her from nearby.

***

FROM a distance, it looked like Albert was pushing the front line forward, slaughtering wolf after wolf, with Montana providing support from the sidelines. They didn't seem to be in any real danger, and with Corinne catching up, they would likely be in an even more solid position.

With a deep breath, I remembered the twins beside me. *I should probably say something to them, just in case they're scared.* And if they weren't scared, praise for defeating the wolves was in order. Children that they were, I knew I needed to be especially considerate of them. With that in mind, I turned to face them, only to find two pairs of eyes already staring at me. Had I done something strange?

Just as Leo was hesitating to say something, his attention was drawn elsewhere. The bushes in front of him shook. He caught

sight of a gray snout and yelled instinctively, “Something’s coming!”

Frantically, I pushed the twins aside and took a step forward. At almost the same time, a huge shadow kicked off from the ground and leaped at me. It was twice the size of the other wolves, its steps so quick it looked like it was flying through the air.

How had this creature made it this far? Had it decided it would be too difficult to break through the front line, so it would be better off attacking from the rear? *Way too clever.*

Before I could come up with any good solutions, the wolf closed in on me. I stretched my arm out as far as I could and summoned a flaming arrow. I saw the wolf’s massive jaws open wide, its fangs gleaming in the flicker of the flames. I had to protect the children, so I’d jumped right in front of it, but I knew this wouldn’t be easy. Fear suddenly struck me and I started shaking uncontrollably, but I couldn’t run away after coming this far.

I felt like I was watching in slow motion as the wolf swallowed my arm whole.

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Part 9: Getting Things Under Control

THE monster was a fierce warrior who had led the wolves for a long time. After a certain point, its already-huge body had become even larger, its thoughts clearer, and its movements faster. The monster led the pack, devouring food and enemies alike until there was nothing left. By that time, the monster’s pack had grown even larger—and at this rate, it wouldn’t be able to feed its subordinates.

Then, just as it was wondering what to do, bipedal creatures entered the forest.

The monster had hunted their kind several times before. Their eyesight was poor at night, and they lacked the sharp fangs and impressive claws of wolves. But despite that, they were fools and wandered freely around the forest like they owned the place.

They were easy to hunt. They didn’t even have much hair to get in the way of their meat. It was as if they were born to be eaten.

The pack would fill their stomachs before they moved on. The monster issued orders to its underlings with a howl that echoed around the forest. It didn't matter if they were discovered, because their prey wasn't going to escape.

The comrade the monster had sent ahead was torn apart by a mysterious attack. That was troublesome. It looked like the monster would have to kill the enemy itself, so it hid in the bushes and circled around behind them.

They sensed it before it could catch them by surprise. No matter though. It was already plenty close.

The monster jumped out and sank its teeth into the thin, outstretched arm, focusing all its strength into its jaws. There should have been a snap and the taste of blood filling its mouth. And yet.

The creature's thin arm with its strange elasticity repelled the fangs in which the monster had so much pride. Not understanding what was going on, it didn't react right away. Then the monster heard a voice mutter something, and was snapped back to reality.

By the time it tried to put some distance between them, it was already too late. As the heat swelled in its mouth, its last sensation was to hear the sound of an explosion echoing from inside itself. Then the monster's consciousness scattered into the dark forest along with a spray of blood, and it disappeared without a trace.

***

A shock ran through my arm. I slowly opened my eyes, and met the monster's gaze. It was clenching its jaws as hard as it could, and staring at me in wide-eyed shock.

My right arm, halfway down its throat, might have appeared from the outside to have been completely torn off. But I still had feeling in my hand. I was so grateful for how tough my body was.

"Arrow of flame, arise… Ummm, in any case, *Fire Arrow.*"

I was so impatient that I couldn't recite the incantation properly, so I gave up, went with something that was good enough, and unleashed the spell from my engulfed right arm.



The magic caused a tremendous explosion. The massive body, now headless, went limp and slowly collapsed to the ground. I felt the warmth of its blood and brains where they'd splattered all over my body. My decision had been spur of the moment, but I still had to wonder if I could have chosen a more elegant spell. I was glad I'd survived, but the smell of so much blood was making me nauseous.

In any case, I still couldn't relax. Not wanting to cause any trouble for the others, I wiped my face and turned my attention back to the front line, where Albert and the others were continuing their successful battle.

Maybe the wolves could sense that their boss had been defeated, because their movements had grown sluggish. Some fled, some stopped fighting, and some attacked desperately. It was safe to say they no longer posed a threat to my comrades.

***

AS the knights began to clean up the area in the aftermath, their leader, Dekt, rushed over to me. Had something gone wrong?

"Many apologies for my error in judgment," he said, sounding panicked. "How are your injuries?! What about your arm?!"

He was just worried about me. Of course, no one in their right mind would think I had come away unscathed after being bitten by such a huge wolf. *I'm sorry for making you come all the way over here.*

"I'm sorry for worrying you," I said. "It's nothing, I'm just a little sticky. Look."

I created a large Water Ball in the air and plunged my right arm into it to wash away all the drool and blood. Once it was clean, he'd be able to see that my arm was fine—but then I realized my bare skin wasn't visible with the robe on. I took it off and tossed it into the Water Ball. Swirling the water around made it into a simple washing machine. I noticed my tunic had torn where I'd been bitten, and my shoulders slumped. That had to mean there was a hole in the robe too.

I rolled up my sleeves to reveal bare, unmarked skin. Dekt just stared, rubbing his eyes a few times.

"See? I'm fine."

“I-I’m glad you weren’t hurt,” he said. “Er, well, then… We’ll cremate the wolves so they don’t turn into undead. If you feel any sort of pain at all, um…I suggest you rest, Haruka.”

I could tell he was upset from the way he spoke, and I genuinely felt bad since I was totally fine. Then Albert came running over to me, a grin on his face.

“You almost gave me a heart attack there, Haruka. But I knew you’d be all right.”

“Are you *sure* you’re okay?” Corinne pressed.

“No…injuries,” Montana commented.

My friends kept touching my arm all over, checking to see if I was hurt. It actually tickled, and I was trying to hold back my laughter when I heard someone speak from behind me.

“Um, thank you very much.”

The good manners probably meant it was Leo. I shoved my friends’ hands away and turned around to find one of the twins with his head bowed. *Is he always this conscientious?*

“Oh, no, not at all,” I said. “If anything, I might have gone overboard… I’m just glad you two weren’t hurt.”

“If you hadn’t protected us, we might be dead now,” he said solemnly. “You should thank her too, Theo, instead of staying quiet.”

Leo pinched his brother’s cheek and gave it a tug. The other twin was sulking. I would have thought for sure that Theo would have taken the lead between them, considering his aggressive personality. But it turned out I was wrong.

“Argh, damn it,” Theo grumbled. “I get it! Enough already!” He wrenched himself from his brother’s grip and slowly relented, glaring at me. If he really hated the idea so much, I didn’t mind if he didn’t thank me.

“Thanks for saving me,” he said. “But just so you know, you use magic like…a freak!”

With those rough words of gratitude, he turned around and ran off to his tent.

Did he *have* to insult me? “A freak,” he had said. So, this old guy is a freak, huh? I honestly felt like crying. *If the boy says I’m a freak, then maybe I* am *a freak.*

“Hey, didja know Haruka’s strong ’cause of physical enhancement magic?” Albert, hands locked behind his head, said

to Leo. “You should be able to use it too, right, since you’re a mage?” He might have been trying to smooth over the awkward moment, but Leo only laughed contemptuously.

“Are you stupid?” he retorted. “Mages and physical enhancement magic don’t go together at all. Don’t you even know that much? It’s called magic because it uses mana to work, but the actual mechanism is completely different.”

Albert seemed taken aback by the unexpected vehemence of the younger boy’s rebuttal. *Aha, I knew it. This is his true personality.* The boy’s admirable aura from earlier was nowhere to be found.

“Ugh, that’s why I hate warriors like you,” he complained. “You’re all just a bunch of brainless meatheads. You’re helpless when attacked from a distance, but you think you’re stronger than the rest of us just because you can swing a sword around. Do you really not understand how amazing Haruka actually is for being able to use both regular magic *and* physical enhancement? And you call yourself her friend. Not to mention the fact that I’ve never seen anyone who can use physical enhancement at such a high level. Even Dekt over there would have been seriously injured if that monster had bit him.”

“Grrr... Shut up!” Albert shouted suddenly, unable to endure any more of Leo’s biting remarks. “Just shut up, you idiot pipsqueak!” He might have instinctively realized he would eventually end up the loser in this argument, though not until after it had already happened.

His loud voice shocked Leo into silence. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Albert turned around and ran off toward our tent. My friend, who’d been out-argued by a thirteen-year-old. As I watched his back disappear, I felt a sense of sadness.

Dissidence

Part 1: An Explanation for Why It's Freakish

EVER since the monster attack, the twins had been walking with us and talking. To be precise, Leo did the talking and dragged Theo along.

Incidentally, Montana kept squirreling in and out of the bushes as usual. He'd caught a rabbit earlier, and was now walking with raw meat hanging from a tree branch. I knew he'd probably wrap it in leaves after draining the blood.

"Haruka, do you have a magic teacher?" Leo asked.

"I don't. I'd say I took inspiration from everyone at the training center."

"So, the level of adventurers there is really that high?"

Montana answered with a shake of his head. "I don't think anyone practices better than Haruka," he said.

"Hmmm…" Leo said, thinking. "So you're *using* magic without *understanding* it?"

"I've read books and studied, but I have to admit I'm not very knowledgeable on the subject."

"Then…um…can I teach you the fundamentals?"

Leo stared expectantly at me. *Does he want to be friends? If so, I'd be more than happy to get to know him.* I found it a bit pathetic that I was letting a child make the overture of friendship, but I was grateful in any case.

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"ARE you sure? I'd really appreciate it."

Leo breathed a sigh of relief at Haruka's response. He wanted to give something back to her since she had helped him and his brother—plus he was interested in the unknown skills she used. He felt like he could gain something from her that he wouldn't have been able to at the Seminary, so he really wanted to get to know her better.

The twins were outstanding wherever they went, even at school, but every day there was boring. There was no one else in their year who could talk to them at their level. For that reason, they'd had high hopes for this expedition. But when they'd joined, there wasn't a single mage among the knights for them to talk to. Haruka was the first one they'd met outside of the city who was better than they were, which made quite the impression on Leo.

He thought she'd mock him for even offering to teach her, since she was so much better than him, but her response had been kind. The moment convinced him that Haruka was a very gentle person, contrary to her appearance. In hindsight, he realized he'd never seen her get angry.

While Leo's estimation of her was rising rapidly, Haruka was just happy to be able to learn about magic in an informal setting. Her friends always took care of her anyway, so she had no objections to learning from someone younger. Besides, she was grateful for the opportunity to share in the latest research being conducted by the nation of Lejion.

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NOW that both parties were in agreement, the study group was about to commence. Albert, who had been arguing with Leo just the other day, now spoke to him in a more reserved tone than was usual for him.

"Can I listen in too?" he asked. "I wanna know more about magic myself."

The good thing about Albert was that even after being verbally trounced, he didn't stay angry at Leo or ignore him. Leo, for his part, responded with a wicked cackle.

"Sure. But only if you call me Professor Leo."

Albert was quiet for a moment, then said, "Yes, Professor Leo." His eye twitched, but he managed to contain his anger. He was probably holding back for the sake of his friends. Haruka gently rubbed his back.

Leo hadn't expected Albert's reaction, and even though he thought of Albert as a simple-minded blockhead, he now found it hard to keep teasing him. "I was joking," he said. "You can just call me 'Leo.'"

“Hey! What the hell!” Theo cried out suddenly. Apparently, Leo’s sudden change of heart had surprised his brother. He was probably thinking something along the lines of, “Are you kidding?! How could you betray me?!”

“Theo, enough already,” Leo said. “Let’s teach them together. Don’t be so stubborn, there’s no point.”

After an extremely long pause, his twin finally answered. “Fine. Whatever.”

He must have felt lonely, being the only one left out, so he accepted the olive branch, albeit arrogantly. Albert was about to chime in when Corinne tugged on his sleeve, silently telling him no —a grown-up response in an attempt not to make things any more complicated than they already were.

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“ALL right, let’s start with mana,” Theo said, holding up a finger as he began lecturing.

“Mana is everywhere,” Leo followed shortly after, picking up the thread. “When you try to use magic, mana passes through your mind and is converted into magic. That’s why if you use it too much, you get a headache called mana sickness. The training of a mage starts with the awareness of mana. Hey, Haruka, try creating a Water Ball.”

The twins had apparently decided to take turns speaking. As instructed, I chanted to create a ball of water, which floated in the air.

“Did you feel the flow of mana while doing that?”

“I… Maybe?”

“Then it must come to you naturally,” Leo explained. “You’re the type who can use magic without really understanding it. There aren’t many people like that, you know. That’s one reason why, to those of us who have studied magic formally, you’re kind of a freak.”

“The magic you use, Haruka, seems to gather more mana than necessary,” added Theo. “When you use magic, the mana passes through your mind while you imagine the form you want it to take. The more difficult the spell, the more mana you need and

the more likely you are to get mana sickness. That's why skilled magicians only gather the minimum amount of mana necessary."

"In short, your magic is incredibly inefficient." Leo paused, then: "That's another reason you use magic like a freak."

Theo poked my Water Ball, making its surface vibrate. *They're saying I'm a freak again.* Personally, I didn't think I'd done anything especially unusual. Then again, I hadn't formally studied the basics, so I wasn't exactly in a position to argue. *They're probably right. I guess I should start by becoming aware of mana.*

Leo had implied there were even more reasons they'd called me a freak, besides what they'd already mentioned. I was already feeling a little down. I didn't know how much more abuse I could handle.

"Haruka, you didn't instruct the Water Ball to maintain a certain distance from you. Normally, magic stays in place until it's released. It doesn't move with you when you walk."

Ah, so having a spell follow you around is freakish. I decided to drop it to the ground for now. For some reason, Corinne patted my shoulder comfortingly. *Why though?*

"Third, you're using magic while physically enhanced. Physical enhancement is a technique that coats the inside and outside of the body with mana to increase the body's abilities. It's difficult to use both magic and physical enhancement at the same time." Leo paused for a moment and considered. "Actually, I don't really understand physical enhancement in the first place. A lot of people *say* they can use it because they've done lots of strength training, but they aren't very cooperative when it comes to research, and it's not like we can just take their word for it."

"Apparently there are *some* people who can actually use both and are willing to assist with research," Leo said. "The only problem is, they can't use both simultaneously *and* they're mediocre at both."

Even though I didn't think about it consciously, my body was always in a state of enhancement, and I could unleash magic freely just by wishing for it. What in the world was going on with me? What could my body do, and to what extent? Listening to the twins talk made me a little scared of myself. I felt like I'd suddenly been handed the launch code for a missile.

The more I understood why they called me a “freak,” the more uneasy I became. I started to worry that my friends would grow to fear and even hate me. *What an awful feeling.* Since coming to this world, I sometimes felt unstable. I knew my worries were unfounded, but it was surprisingly hard to control my emotions when it came to this.

Suddenly, something brushed against my stiff right hand. I looked down to see Montana’s tail stroking the back of it. When our eyes met, he murmured softly, “It’s okay.”

I was surprised he knew what I was thinking even though I never intended to let it show on my face. Either way, though, a sense of calm and relief washed over me at his words. I quietly thanked him, and his ears twitched in silent acknowledgment. He didn’t need to say anything else.

“So all this means Haruka is strong, right?” Corinne asked, breaking the tension.

“Better enjoy it while it lasts,” Albert quipped, “‘cause I’m gonna be stronger eventually, Haruka.”

Their usual banter lifted my spirits even more. On the other hand, Leo seemed annoyed by their conversation. “Were you two even listening to anything we said?”

“I sure was,” Albert said. “I wonder if someday I’ll be able to use magic and physical enhancement too…”

“I knew it. You weren’t listening at all.”

After that, they kept talking and arguing for a while longer.

Grateful to have such good friends, I watched them with peace in my heart.

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Part 2: Living in This World

THREE days had passed since we’d left the most recent large town on our way. Before crossing the mountain that marked the border, we planned to stop at a village to stock up on supplies. But when we reached the top of a small hill, Cody suddenly gave instructions to the whole group, stopped moving forward, and said something to Dekt. We were walking near the front, so we could hear their conversation.

“Dekt, this doesn’t look like a good idea,” Cody was saying.

“I agree, this might not work,” Dekt replied, without saying anything specific. “What should we do?” He narrowed his eyes and stared into the distance.

“Good question.” Then Cody turned and addressed us directly—he must have noticed we were listening. “This is the first expedition for you and yours, right, Haruka? Take a look over there.”

I squinted my eyes and looked as instructed. I could vaguely see houses and fences in the direction he was pointing. Considering the location, it was probably the village we were supposed to stop at today.

Judging by the number of houses, the population was pretty small. The settlement was a little way off the road, close to the forests and mountains, presumably so that people who came to gather resources like wood and ore could use it as a base. And with travelers like us visiting specifically to procure supplies, it didn’t seem like a bad location.

“That village was founded by a man who lived in that town we passed through recently. He was hoping to make a name for himself that way, because it’s so difficult to establish a new village. Usually, monsters and bandits foil those sorts of plans.”

Makes sense. Certainly doesn’t sound like an easy task. No one would think of founding a village without serious consideration.

“Well, not only that, but there are also various other interests involved. Anyway, I digress. Getting back on topic, does that village seem a bit strange?”

“Hm…” Corinne was the first to answer. “There’s no smoke even though people should be cooking right about now. I don’t see any guards around the entrance either. Has it been attacked by something?”

As the daughter of a merchant, she knew a lot about how people lived, which was why she was able to answer so quickly. It was a bit trickier for me, given that I had little idea what constituted “normal” in this world.

“Let’s get a bit closer, then. It’s too far away to see clearly from here. But be prepared to flee at any time. Now, my next question. What do you think attacked?”

“I don’t think it was a monster.”

“Oho. Why not?” Cody narrowed his eyes at Montana’s immediate reply. His keen observational skills were normal to us, but might have been surprising to Cody.

“No signs of fighting. No human or monster corpses lying around.”

“I just so happen to agree with you,” Cody said after a pause. “Now let me tell you what I know. First, the population of that village is around a hundred and fifty people, and about forty of them can fight well. Second, I haven’t heard any reports of large-scale bandit groups around here. And third, when we left the last town, the Adventurers’ Guild hadn’t received a request for help from the village, and there were no rumors of anything like that, either.”

“We’ll stop here.”

As Cody was explaining, counting off the bits of information on his fingers, Dekt stretched out his arm to block the way. We turned in toward the shade of the forest, out of sight from the village, and let everyone rest, their loads still on their backs.

“Knowing all that, what do you think is happening in that village right now?”

“Well, based on what you said, Cody…” I wasn’t sure, but I had an idea. What I was about to say might have just been my imagination. The thought gave me no joy, so I continued, hoping Cody would deny it. “Someone planned to, um, kill all the villagers without letting them escape?”

“Who?”

“I don’t know who…but I can only assume it was someone fairly organized…”

“You’re right,” Cody said. “That’s exactly it. But no matter how much we speculate, we won’t get any answers.”

It was unfortunate that my guess didn’t seem to be wrong.

“Here’s my last question then,” Cody said, looking at each of us in turn with a fearless smile. “Do you want to know the answer? Or are you scared, ready to tuck tail and run?”

He said it in a way that made me feel uncomfortable. As if running away was a bad thing. There was nothing wrong with valuing safety.

If my assumptions were correct, the people waiting for us up ahead were either a group of professional killers or some other

highly skilled group. We had accepted this job as escorts. Putting the people we were guarding in danger was out of the question. And my allies would be in danger too. If we were facing a professional group, I couldn't imagine there would be any survivors.

Above all though, I was scared. Scared to kill. Scared to die.

But one thing bothered me about running away. If there *were* survivors, if there were people waiting for help, they wouldn't be saved. Maybe there were no enemies left, and out of fear of a non-existent enemy, I'd end up abandoning lives that could be saved.

Risk our lives for the lives of others who might not even exist? No, we couldn't do that. I took a breath to refuse, but felt my throat tighten.

"We're going, aren't we?" Albert asked. "Cody, you look like you wanna go."

"Yeah, there might be survivors," Corinne added. "You decide, Cody."

Albert and Corinne showed no signs of nerves when they answered. I took a deep breath, but missed my chance to exhale properly. Instead, the air leaked slowly out of my mouth alongside words I should have said.

What are they saying? It's dangerous up ahead. As an adult, I have to stop them. No matter how adventurous or curious they might have been, or how worried they were about any survivors, this was *not* the place to risk their lives.

"I'll go. Please wait here, Cody." Dekt took a step forward as if it was the most natural thing to do, but Cody stopped him, sending me a meaningful look.

"Well, if they're against it, I think we can slip by the village instead."

"What are you talking about? 'Help your neighbors.' We're going." Dekt unsheathed his sword, and the knights followed behind.

Cody stroked his beard and carefully chose his next words. "Well, that's true," he said. "The people of that village welcomed us on our way to Oranz before and asked us to stop by on our way back. I think they had their own reasons. But they were also brave warriors who founded the village to expand the world in which people are able to live. Without people like them, our journey

would be much more difficult. For us travelers, merchants, founders, and adventurers, life is cheap. But that doesn't mean it isn't important. I respect those people, and I want to be like them. So, at the very least, we should see how it ended for them."

His words gradually took on more weight and passion as he talked, but they weren't the words of someone who would just expose themselves to danger for no reason. I heard conviction in them. They weighed heavily on me.

Albert and Corinne, Dekt and the Temple Knights, and everyone else who had made their decision without a second thought shone like beacons to me.

I had lived for over forty years, but I had never been able to create anything important. I had just wasted each day of my life. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of this world chose their paths in life at such a young age.

They were radiant. Dazzling. Just like the protagonist of a story, the hero I had hoped to become someday.

"What do you say, Haruka? It's fine if you'd rather stay here and keep watch. We don't all have to go."

The way he said it was unfair. Because underneath his kindness, I sensed a desire to push me into a corner. I wanted to assert my righteousness too, to protect something and be recognized by others. I admired heroes. I wanted to be one. The rebellious spirit in my heart, the childish spirit I had been hiding, reared its ferocious head and began to scream. *"Gonna run away again?"* it said accusingly.

But I *was* scared. Scared of losing my life. Scared of this happy time ending. And the thing that scared me the most was losing the friends who accepted me. I definitely didn't want that.

I clasped my hands together tightly and looked down. Only to find Montana staring up at me. Our eyes met, and we blinked at each other several times. I still hadn't heard his reply.

"Haruka, when you're in danger, we'll protect you. And when we're in danger, you'll protect us. So, it will be fine. Because we're friends."

Then Montana lightly tapped my clenched fist with the palm of his hand. I slowly unclenched my stiff fingers and reached over to pet him on the head. I wanted him to share some of his courage with me.

First of all, my resolve wasn't the same as that of the people living in this world. But I had to fit in somehow. I had to become like someone from this world. I had to become a person with resolve worthy of my friends.

Corinne and Albert walked over to me, looking worried. I patted each of them on the head once, too. That way, I gained a little bit of courage from all three of them. *Even though I'm a coward, I can't run away from this.* Instead of losing my friends by running away, without knowing or doing anything, I wanted to face the danger together with them.

"Cody, please don't underestimate me," I said. "Let's go. I'll fulfill my client's wish."

I tried to say all that with a composed expression, but I wondered if I'd succeeded. When Cody grinned, I felt like he could see right through me.

"You've made up your mind, eh? Haruka, you seemed timid despite your high-level abilities, but you look just fine now."

I had been right. He *did* see right through me. How embarrassing.

Decision made, I started walking toward the village, though I noticed my legs shaking a bit. Talking the talk was one thing, but convincing my body to walk the walk required a little more determination. So let's just say I was shaking from excitement and leave it at that. I tried to walk with my head held high, and hoped Montana didn't notice me trembling as he walked next to me.

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Part 3: What I Hate

EVEN if we were prepared for the worst, it would have been terrifying if violence suddenly broke out. I just didn't want anyone to die. We left the twins waiting in the woods—Cody refused to let them go that far for their Seminary thesis—and entered the village.

There was no sign of anyone even when we got close to the settlement. I would have been happy to hear even the breathy sounds of someone sleeping, but all I could hear was the wind whistling through cracks.

“We’ll avoid exposing ourselves by remaining out in the open. Please follow me.”

With Dekt at the front, we climbed over the fence behind the shade of a house. Montana sniffed the air and muttered.

“It smells like blood and…decay.”

His words made me stiffen, but I didn’t stop walking. We followed the Temple Knights carefully, trying not to make any noise or draw attention to ourselves. Corinne and Albert, their serious expressions a complete reversal of how they usually looked, did the same while keeping a wary eye on our surroundings.

Dekt, who was leading the way, quietly approached the nearest house. When he lifted the wooden boards blocking a window, a powerfully putrid stench flooded out and I instinctively covered my nose with my sleeve. Dekt shook his head and held up three fingers. His signal meant there were three bodies inside. Considering the size of the house, I wondered if all its inhabitants had been killed.

Dekt, perhaps having decided the attackers were gone, instructed his knights to spread throughout the village. Surveying in smaller groups would save us a lot of time. We followed Dekt and Cody into a particularly impressive building, a house so large it couldn’t be seen in its entirety just by peering through the door. Although it was a single story high, the inside was divided into several rooms. We needed to head in and investigate.

The bodies of a couple and their child were lying in what appeared to be a bedroom. They had probably been attacked in their sleep because it looked like they had died without ever leaving the bed. The attackers must have been quite skilled.

I closed my eyes, unable to bear the tragic sight. Thoughts churned in my mind. No one was alive. Was there any point in coming here? The strong smell of death made me want to throw up.

“We’ll split up and search the house. Haruka, you and your team to the left. We’ll go right.”

Despite his pained expression, Dekt handed out precise instructions. We did as he said and headed left out of the master bedroom. He and Cody went to the spacious living room, while our route took us to a hallway lined with guest rooms.

“Haruka, are you okay?” Corinne asked

“…I’m fine, thank you.”

“If you say so…”

I thought I’d answered in a way that wouldn’t worry her, but it was possible I’d actually made her worry even more.

I had seen dead bodies before at funerals, including my parents’. They had been beautifully made up, and though pale, looked almost the same as when they had been alive.

In contrast, the corpses of the people lying here all had expressions of pain or surprise. They were completely different from what you’d normally see at a funeral. The sight didn’t scare or disgust me. Instead, an overwhelming sadness welled up inside me when I thought about their futures being robbed by whomever had done this. My heart felt heavy, even though I didn’t know these people, had no connections to them.

I also felt angry, wondering what kind of monsters, whether beast or human, could do something like this. Did the villagers do something to deserve it? Could all of these people have committed such evil that they had been murdered for it? *No, that can’t be right. I can’t forgive this injustice.*

I hated injustice that befell others more than any injustice done to me. It frustrated me that I couldn’t do anything more here. When I was growing up, I had lived my life trying to deflect my anger by thinking that others must have had their own reasons for doing something to me personally, or that *I* must have done something wrong. Rather than blaming others, I’d lived my life hoping to be able to reach out to those in pain.

But now, I heard my heart screaming. That this injustice could not be forgiven. That no matter what I or anyone else did now, their deaths wouldn’t be avenged. I couldn’t help them. I couldn’t comfort them. There was nothing I could do anymore for them.

A storm of emotions surged inside me. My chest felt tight, like it would burst. And all I could do was grit my teeth helplessly.

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WE searched through each bedroom and found traces of someone having used one of them. Only the bedsheets in that room were disheveled, as if someone had left in a hurry. Perhaps someone

had been alerted to the attack and fled. I hoped that was the case. As I stared out the open window, Montana spoke.

“Something’s here.”

“I don’t hear anything though…?”

Albert cocked his head thoughtfully while Montana stared at the closet. The therianthrope boy then silently approached the closet and gently put his hand on the door. He stepped back immediately after opening it, likely wary of an attack from whatever was inside. But nothing jumped out. He approached the closet again and looked inside. The rest of us followed suit, only to discover something unexpected.

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Part 4: Rest in Peace

IN this dusk-darkened room, a child wrapped in cloth lay in the closet, eyes closed, not even crying.

“A baby…?” Corinne murmured, puzzled.

It was so unnatural that this baby had survived in the closet after everyone else in the village had been killed. I didn’t know how old the child was, but it certainly wasn’t old enough to think for itself or follow instructions from others. The baby should have cried if someone really had separated it from its parents and locked it up in this dark place.

But these thoughts were accompanied by the joy of finding a survivor. It gradually welled up inside me. Rather than wondering why this child had survived without being found, I felt the strong need to protect it, so I crouched down and picked up the baby.

I didn’t have any siblings, so I’d never taken care of a baby before. Still, I picked it up as carefully as possible, so as not to hurt it. The baby was so quiet that I was worried it might be dead. Then I felt the child’s warmth and soft breathing.

When I looked at its face within the cradle of my arms, the baby slowly opened its eyes. They were a familiar dark brown that looked just like a Japanese person’s. Seeing it in the light, I noticed that the baby’s soft hair was also black. I had grown used to the colorful hair and eyes of this world, so the child’s coloring felt a bit nostalgic.

“Is it alive?”

“Please say yes.”

“Is it?”

Albert, Corinne, and Montana all asked the same question while peering into the baby’s face. Despite all the sudden attention, the baby didn’t cry, instead looking back at each of them in turn. The child’s eyes seemed to harbor an impossible sense of reason. *I’m imagining things.*

“Yes. Yes, the baby’s alive…” I said. “Let’s reconvene with Cody and Dekt. We’ll tell them about this child and how whoever was in this room might have escaped.”

The baby, who had been staring at me, closed its eyes again after hearing my words. We left the room. I walked carefully and without rushing, not wanting to jostle the baby.

By the time we made it back near the foyer, Cody and Dekt had finished searching the other rooms.

“Well, well, what have we here? A baby? A baby survived?”

“Montana found them in a bedroom closet. The bedsheets in the room showed signs of use, but there was no body. It’s possible the individual there realized the village was under attack and fled.”

“I see, I see… This baby wasn’t here when I came to this village before,” Cody said, peering into the child’s face. He would have remembered seeing the baby because of its rare black hair. Perhaps the child belonged to a traveler.

“But the closet? Really? Lucky baby, not to be discovered by the killers. Well, I guess not so lucky, considering.”

When Cody gently poked one of the baby’s cheeks, it opened its eyes. He snatched his fingers back quickly at the sight of the child furrowing its brow, preparing to cry.

“Shh, shh, I’m not bullying you. You’re all right, you’re all right,” he cooed, then his voice got serious. “So an outsider brought this baby here… What if it’s actually the cause of the attack?”

I realized that saying his theory out loud was probably just his way of organizing his thoughts, but it still sounded pretty ominous.

“Let’s try to find this child’s companion. What do you say, Dekt?”

“We’ll do what we can.”

“Appreciate it. Oh, what’s this? There’s embroidery on the hem of these clothes and…the name ‘Yuri,’” Cody said, then addressed me. “Will you take this child with you and join the others waiting for us? We’ll rendezvous with you again in about two hours, whether we find something or not.”

We did as Cody asked and walked out of the house. Outside were the knights who had been searching the rest of the village. Based on their reports, there were no other survivors.

Before Dekt, a few of his knights, and Cody left the village, Albert called out to them. “Cody, are you sure we shouldn’t tag along? I mean, we *are* your escorts.”

“You noticed, eh? Well done. But don’t worry about me. I want you to get the baby out of here as fast as possible. Even if I don’t know what’s going on, I don’t want to leave a baby in this place full of dead bodies. If something happens to me, I won’t blame you.”

His expression serious, Cody stroked the baby’s head once, then followed the Temple Knights. Despite his love of mischief and playful mean streak, he was actually a kind man. When he was out of sight, Corinne murmured, “He’s so cool.”

“He’s got a wife,” Albert said. “And kids.”

“Shut up, that’s not what I meant, you idiot.”

I felt the tension drain from my shoulders when I heard Albert and Corinne bickering as usual.

“All right, let’s go. I’m counting on you all to keep watch.”

After hearing their cheerful responses, I started walking with them toward the forest where the rest of our entourage was hiding.

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Part 5: Identity

THE emperor, already over fifty years old, had a young concubine who was pregnant with her first child. He had seen her in the city and forcefully kidnapped her to make her his concubine.

The emperor’s obsession with a woman younger than his own existing children was disturbing to those around him. But no one dared speak out against the long-reigning tyrant. Some sympathized with the woman’s situation, while others despised

her because they believed she'd used her youth and beauty to seduce their ruler.

However, when she became pregnant with his child, the situation went beyond mere suspicion. A rumor spread throughout the country that the emperor had told his aides, "If this child is born a boy, I shall make him the next emperor."

The emperor had originally been a powerful warlord and an authoritarian. His greatest achievement was expanding the empire's territory to the south. He had the power to do as he pleased.

Even so, this was going too far. And while many of his subjects and nobles hoped that the baby would be a girl, the child was born a boy.

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THE emperor's eldest son and first in line for the throne would be turning thirty soon. His mother was his father's legal wife and official consort. The imperial prince had yet to lose a battle, and continued to expand the nation's domain further south.

When he was young, out of a desire to broaden his horizons, he enrolled in the Oracle Comprehensive Academy, overriding the current emperor's objections. He then proceeded to graduate in just three years as an outstanding student. He possessed a decisive personality reminiscent of the former emperor and was knowledgeable about both politics and military affairs. Furthermore, thanks to the connections he built during his student days, he was well known among important figures in various countries.

If he became the emperor, the country would surely flourish even more. Everyone thought as much and looked forward to such a future. Then the rumors started to spread.

The prince, making his triumphant return to the imperial capital for the first time in two years, visited the emperor as soon as he heard the rumors. He wanted to get a feel for the situation without mentioning the matter of succession. But his father seemed strange. Although he was still young, he looked like a senile old man. He kept repeating the same things over and over, and only spoke of things that sounded like dreams.

My father is broken. Convinced that this was the truth, the prince made up his mind and left calmly. He then gathered his trusted subordinates who had fought alongside him on the front lines, told them of the break in his father's mind, and launched a coup d'état right away.

He had prepared for this eventuality by keeping the soldiers returning from active duty on reserve. His foresight proved successful. After only a few days of resistance, he emerged victorious. A significant factor could be attributed to the emperor losing the favor of vast swaths of his citizenry due to his failing mind.

Although the crown prince sympathized with the concubine, to avoid further chaos, he had her executed alongside his father. All that was left was their child, but for whatever reason, he couldn't find the boy. When he saw the concubine laughing just before her death, he wondered if she too had gone mad. Then he realized almost immediately that she was happy because her son had escaped safely.

Now that she was dead, he would never know what she'd been planning. Had she loved the son she'd been forced to conceive? Or had she intended to make him the next emperor and wield power through him? Perhaps she truly had lost her mind. Whatever the truth was, there was no way to know it.

Realizing he'd been outwitted, the prince immediately issued orders to his troops. If the woman's son lived, the boy would pose an obstacle to the crown prince's rule in the future. He could not allow that.

***

THE unfortunate woman chosen by the mad emperor found herself forsaken by all who knew her in less than a day. No one could defy the terrifying man—save for her younger sister, whom she had always loved. The young lady accompanied the woman to the castle and looked after her there.

Her younger sister had always been strong-willed, and her temper was so explosive she even said dangerous things like that they should secretly kill the emperor. The woman's face paled even

as she denied the words, and her heart was saved by her sister's presence.

The day she was forcibly taken away. The day after she shared a bed with the sick old man. The day she learned she was pregnant. And the day she gave birth. On all these days, her sister was the only one who supported her.

At times, she even hated the child she gave birth to. However, her younger sister doted on her son, saying he looked just like his mother. So, thanks to her, the woman was able to love him. Thanks to her, the woman gained another source of emotional support.

***

ONE day, her younger sister rushed into the room and urged the woman to flee. The news of the crown prince's coup had already reached the concubine's ears, but she didn't plan to run away. Instead, she pushed her child into her sister's arms and asked her to escape with him. Her sister refused, telling her not to be foolish, but the woman was adamant.

"If I die here, perhaps they'll let the child go."

The woman was stubborn in the strangest ways. Her sister cursed her for not giving in and cried angrily before finally giving in to her request. She hid a few valuables and the quiet baby boy with his eerily clever gaze in a basket. Then, feigning a breeziness she didn't feel, she slipped out of the castle like she was going shopping. She pulled her hat down over her face to hide her puffy eyes and snuck out of the city where she'd been born.

She would never go back. Even if she could, she had no intention of ever returning to the country that had sacrificed her beloved older sister.

***

THE sister knew that their pursuers were steadily getting closer. She had intended to seek protection in the Holy Nation of Lejion, but the route was blocked, and she ended up taking a long detour. Looking in the mirror, she saw the face of a woman with sunken cheeks and dark circles under her eyes. The lack of sleep due to fear of their pursuers had aged her terribly.

It was another sleepless night, as always, when she heard a distant scream loosed by someone in their death throes.

They're here. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for dragging you all into this.

Even as the thoughts rushed through her head, she hurriedly got ready and peeked out the window. The pursuers were now within sight. Escape was no longer an option.

She swaddled the baby in his clothes and hid him in the closet. He was a clever child. He never cried at night, and for some reason, he seemed to understand what she said. She thought he would have a better chance of survival if she left him here instead of taking him with her.

"Don't cry. Just wait here quietly until someone comes. They'll never find you. No one knows how sweet and clever you are."

The baby seemed to stare at her in understanding.

She jumped out the window and ran toward the forest, running as fast as she could, carrying the baby's basket under her arm. She knew this would be the last sprint of her life. She didn't care if her lungs collapsed or her legs were torn off. Soon, she wouldn't be using this body anyway.

The pursuers were getting closer and closer.

A little further, just a little more.

She ran through the thicket, uncaring as the branches shred her clothes and skin. When she saw the valley, she tripped on a tree root and crashed to the ground. She hastily threw the empty basket down into the chasm. They would think the child was dead. All that was left was for her to chase after it and fall herself.

***

SHE swayed on the ground on her hands and knees, staring at the valley where she'd flung the basket. But just when she tried to leap into it herself, someone grabbed her feet and stopped her.

She wished she could have died right then and there. But it now seemed that a peaceful death was out of reach.

So she screamed hysterically, railing at an unreasonable world.

"*Ahhh!* Let me go, let me go! I threw him! I threw him into the valley!"

The pursuers' expressions didn't change at all. Still, she knew she needed to continue her once-in-a-lifetime performance.

I hope he'll be happy.

They tortured her savagely. In between, they asked her where the baby was. The torment never ended. Even when she told them he'd fallen into the valley below. Even when she called them murderers. Even when she wailed in agony.

I hope he'll be happy.

That was her only thought. She didn't reveal the baby's true location.

I hope he'll be happy. For my poor sister's sake too.

As her consciousness faded, she continued to pray for him over and over again.

***

"HEAVENS above, I'm glad we didn't bring them with us..." Cody muttered to himself, looking at the naked, battered body of the woman.

A short walk from the village into the bushes, they came across a cliff. There, at the base of a tree, a woman's body had been left sitting up. When they found her, she'd been surrounded by carnivorous animals, so they couldn't tell if her fingers and toes had been lost while she was alive, or if they had been eaten after she died. If they had been even half a day later, she might have been reduced to nothing but bones.

She had no possessions that could identify her, but when they looked below the cliff, they found her clothes caught on the rock face.

"She looks like she's from the Southern Continent."

"How can you look at a corpse in such a state so calmly?" Dekt said to Cody, his eyes averted from the body.

"No matter how gruesome her remains, they're proof she lived. So don't we owe it to her to glean what we can, even if it's just for the sake of the child she left behind?"

"You're right, but I can't bear to look at her anymore. I'll leave it to you, Cody."

"Well, that's not fair," Cody said. "I'm not fine with this either."

There was no lie in what he said. Cody closed his eyes and prayed. He prayed for this good woman, this woman deserving of respect, to rest in peace.

Side Story 1: Montana’s Short Journey

THE town where Montana used to live faced the mountains on the northeastern border of the Principality of Dothart. After saying goodbye to his father’s apprentice, he decided to try to cross the mountains directly into the Independent Commercial City-State of Pleine, where he dreamed of becoming an adventurer. However, these mountains were crawling with gangs of outcasts who could no longer live in mainstream society. They wouldn’t attack an adventurer who looked strong, but they had no such qualms about children like Montana who happened to pass through.

Montana thought that if he used the skills and knowledge he’d acquired from the many adventurers he had met so far in his life, crossing the mountains alone wasn’t really such a reckless choice. A dagger hung on his left hip, and a hammer on his right. His bag was packed with the bare minimum supply of food. He knew how to catch small animals, and he knew which plants were edible. And though his small size was inconvenient in a contest of strength, it would likely work in his favor when it came to blending in with the forest.

Most of all, he had excellent eyesight. So Montana walked along the poor excuse for a path, eyes trained on both sides.

***

AFTER half a day of walking, the barely-there road became absolutely overgrown with vegetation. Plants grew vigorously from spring to summer, so even mountain paths that people frequently traveled could sometimes disappear altogether. Wanting to cover as much distance as possible before dusk, Montana walked quickly, wagging his tail.

However, when he reached a certain point, he stopped dead in his tracks, scrutinizing what lay ahead of him. The exposed ground, the unnatural roughness of the bushes on both sides… It was a change you wouldn’t normally notice without paying

attention—evidence that something had recently trampled down this path.

Montana's ears twitched. He could sense that something was waiting to make its move. He glanced from side to side. Into the thicket, into the shade of a tree, on top of a tree…

Montana quickly dove into the shrubbery next to him. Barely a second later, an arrow pierced the ground where he'd been standing. He crouched down and blended into the low bushes. He knew he had to keep moving. If he stopped and waited, he might find himself surrounded.

The plants scraped against his exposed skin, leaving scratches, but it was better than being forced into a battle where he'd have been easily outnumbered. Since he didn't know how strong his opponents were, he had to avoid getting into pointless fights. He heard angry voices in the distance. It sounded like they were searching for him, but the voices quickly faded away.

When he could no longer hear them at all, Montana turned ninety degrees and continued through the forest. Walking through the bushes wasn't that difficult, as long as you weren't in a hurry. He found some herbs along the way and picked them to chew on while he walked. The bitter taste made his nose wrinkle, but as the saying went, good medicine always tastes bitter. *It is what it is.*

Once the herbs softened enough, Montana spit them out and rubbed the resulting paste onto his scratches. Normally, he would have added water to soften the herbs, but he had no time, so this was a makeshift measure. As an added bonus, the herbs also served to mask the scent of blood, which attracted hungry wild animals.

The medicinal paste soaking into his wounds stung a bit, but again, that just meant it was working, so he endured the slight discomfort. His tail had been drooping the whole time, which was unsurprising considering his situation. However, adventurers were always ready for anything, so he refused to let himself be discouraged by his circumstances.

As he walked, he picked nuts, berries, and flowers that could be eaten raw. At this time of year, most berries were sour and unpleasant to eat, but they still tasted better than the herbs, so he popped them steadily into his mouth.

After walking ten minutes into the mountains, Montana looked up at the sky. The setting sun signaled he couldn't go any further. Despite encountering the bandits sooner than he'd expected, the journey was generally going as planned.

He climbed smoothly up a big tree, sat on a thick branch, stretched his legs out, and leaned against the trunk. Just to be on the safe side, he secured himself with a rope tied around the trunk before nibbling on some dried meat from his small bag.

Montana was confident he could hold his own against a carnivorous animal, but he didn't want to be attacked by a pack of them—or monsters. He didn't think he should push himself too hard when traveling solo. He spent the evening dozing on his branch, though he knew it would be deadly to fall completely asleep. His eyes snapped awake to check his surroundings every time he heard a bird or the slightest rustle.

It was a full moon that night, bright enough for him to see his feet clearly. He thought about walking to cover more distance, but rejected the idea almost immediately when he remembered how active some carnivores were at night. Looking up at the huge round orb in the night sky, Montana thought about his destination.

A country built by adventurers. A country of freedom, where talent mattered. He was sure he would make friends once he got there. He wanted to be able to interact with people who didn't know him at all. He wanted to be able to trust them. Though he wasn't very good at talking, he would try his best to overcome that when he reached Oranz.

He dozed off thinking about these things as the night wore on and the sky gradually lightened.

When he woke up in the morning, he felt like he hadn't slept at all, and he didn't feel well. Still, he had rested enough to move around without any issue. He removed the rope from around himself and slowly climbed down the tree trunk.

After taking a sip of water from his canteen, Montana made his way back through the bushes, heading straight for the mountain path.

***

ON his way to the border, Montana was attacked by bandits three more times. He scratched himself each time by running into the undergrowth, but by the time he finally crossed through the mountains and emerged on the main road, all his scratches had almost completely healed.

Finally, the city of Oranz came into view. It was much larger than his walled hometown. He reached the gate and started going through the formalities to enter the city. Then he suddenly felt a chill on the back of his neck. He turned around, looking toward the forest. All the hair on his body stood on end and his tail flicked with alertness.

The sky above the far reaches of the forest brightened for the briefest moment before the flash vanished.

“What’s wrong, boy?” the guardsman asked.

Montana remained motionless for a moment, then eventually shook his head and answered.

“Nothing.”

He had just sensed Haruka’s first use of magic since coming to this world. But of course, he had no way of knowing that at the time. He would meet the wielder of said magic the next day in the seminar for new adventurers—as well as the rest of his cohort, three people with whom he would be great friends for a long time to come. But he had no way of knowing that at the time, either.

Side Story 2: How I Spend My Days Off

NOW that I was used to living in the city of Oranz, I sometimes wandered around by myself. It was a bit less safe than Japan, and rough-looking folks occasionally harassed me. After experiencing that a few times, I started to feel like it was my fault for wandering off the main road, lured by the delicious smell of food. But thanks to those little side trips, I found some great shops. So I kept looking for good ones in the back alleys—while being cautious, of course.

Most of the time, when someone harassed me, I managed to run away. Once in a while though, I'd end up surrounded, leaving me no choice but to use my Water Ball spell like I had on Totto and the others. It was actually less damaging than hitting them, on account of my physical strength.

***

THERE I was, wandering around the city again on one particular day, when someone a bit different from usual approached me. He was a fashionable man who didn't seem like the type to threaten violence. According to Viche, the more unsavory clans had targeted me and my friends because we were climbing the ranks quickly. I doubted he was one of them though.

He said he was lost, so he asked me to show him the way. I wasn't completely familiar with the streets myself, but since I knew where he was going, I decided to help him out. The good you do for others is the good you do yourself, and all that jazz.

***

ON the way, the young man chatted to me about a lot of things that admittedly went in one ear and out the other. How much money he had, what his social status was, how many friends he had, and so on. This was common among people in their twenties.

I walked along, commenting here and there with set phrases like, “That’s amazing” and, “I see.”

“So, Haruka, angel,” the man said. “You’re gorgeous, you know that? Do you have a boyfriend, by any chance?”

I did *not* like hearing a younger man call me a pet name like “angel.” *You learn something new every day.* Romance hadn’t been on my radar in a *very* long time, but even so, I knew that I’d never once in my life wanted to date a man.

“No, I don’t. But forget about me—let’s talk about you. I bet you’re very popular with the ladies.”

“Am I that easy to read? You’re right, I am. I’m not keen on any woman in particular right now though. So how about you give me a try, angel?”

“Ah… Well, um, I’m flattered, but…”

“I have a lot of pull with the clans in this city. If you go out with me, I can introduce you to them.”

“I never told you I was an adventurer, so why would you mention ‘clans’?”

“Uhhh…I could tell? Haruka, angel, you have that adventurer vibe around you. I knew the minute we met that you’re destined to become a big shot.”

Do I really have that kind of “vibe”? I didn’t even carry a sword with me, and I’d never been on an expedition. If I was as lively as Albert, I could see why people would assume I was an adventurer. But *me*? Really? Maybe I had started giving off the same “vibe” too without realizing it. I certainly didn’t mind the praise.

“Thank you,” I said. “But I’m already in a party and I’m not interested in being in a relationship with anyone. I’m sure there are many women out there clamoring for your attention, so it doesn’t have to be me.”

“No, you’re the one. Just think of being with me as doing a good deed.”

The young man’s speech became a little rougher, and he looked more irritated than before. I wonder if this was his first time being rejected. It was possible, considering how good-looking he was. But saying no was the best thing for the both of us. If he suddenly found out that I was a man in my forties, he’d probably be pretty upset.

“I’m sorry.”

When my answer remained the same, the man stomped his foot angrily on the ground and then kicked a nearby wooden box. The unexpected display of temper reminded me he was at that hot-blooded age typical for men. Frankly, I was becoming a bit scared.

"Just shut up and say yes! If I screw this up, I'm done for, so just come with me!"

He grabbed my arm and tried to pull me, but I refused to budge. I wasn't going through the same ordeal I'd been through with Totto. Absolutely not. You must always communicate your intentions clearly from the start.

"Please calm down. Don't you have other, more important matters to attend to?"

"No, damn it, I don't! That was just an excuse to take you with me. What the hell? You're not moving a single inch."

So he lied to me. In other words, I'd been played for a fool. He had seemed like a nice person when we first met, so the change in his attitude made me a bit sad. But I suppose that just meant I wasn't a good judge of character.

I decided to go back the way I'd come and find somewhere to eat something delicious so I could forget about anything unpleasant.

"Release me, please," I said. "I'm leaving now."

"...Like hell you are. Don't push me. I said you're coming with me."

He took a gleaming knife out of his pocket. I'd grown used to seeing blades thanks to my frequent visits to the training ground, but having one pointed at me was a different story. Just as I stiffened in reaction, a group of people appeared from behind me. At the sight of them, the young man's face paled rapidly.

"N-No, please, I-I was just bringing her with me now...!"

Before he could finish what he was trying to say, one of the men punched the young man in the stomach. When he doubled over in pain, a few of them started kicking him. But even if they were a vigilante group, waving a knife at him seemed like a bit much.

"The only thing you're good at is running your mouth, you useless little shit! Give me my money back!"

I couldn’t help but cry out at the sight of them using that guy as a punching bag.

“S-Stop it, please.”

“Tsk. This ain’t any of your business. Scram.”

One of the men clicked his tongue in irritation and waved me away dismissively.

These aren’t vigilantes. They were probably part of one of those ill-behaved clans Viche had warned me about.

I didn’t owe the young man anything, but I also couldn’t bring myself to just abandon someone suffering in front of me. I muttered a spell in my head and made Water Balls for each man, then shot them at their heads. They tumbled to the ground one by one, struggling desperately. While the scene was one I’d become accustomed to, it was still unpleasant to watch.

By the time the crouching young man raised his head fearfully, his assailants were all unconscious.

“Are you okay? Can you stand up?”

“U-Urk! No! Don’t come any closer!”

He scooted backwards in terror when I spoke to him, then scrambled to his feet and fled. He had looked at me like I was a monster. It hurt a little, since my intention had been to settle things peacefully.

Just to be sure, I checked to see if the fallen men were still breathing. Thankfully, they were. Feeling a bit down, I started walking back the way I’d come, when I heard light footsteps and a boy rounded the corner. It was Montana.

“...What are you doing?”

“Um... Oh, I didn’t start the fight, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

From an outsider’s perspective, it probably looked like I’d given them an unprovoked beating. I didn’t want my friends to suspect me, so I rushed to explain. *I hope it doesn’t sound like a lie.*

“I don’t care about that. You don’t look hurt, so let’s go back to the main avenue.”

“Right, of course.”

“Does this happen often?”

“I...suppose. Once in a while.”

“Haruka, you shouldn’t go out alone so much.”

“...I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“As long as you understand.”

I had just been scolded by a boy much younger than me. I was, in fact, harassed more often than I liked, when I was on my own. I felt bad for being a burden to my friends, but I decided to give them a heads-up whenever I went out from then on. It was better than things escalating and causing even bigger headaches for everyone.

“Haruka.”

I looked at Montana next to me and found him looking up at me.

“You’re not a bother, so just tell us.”

“All right… Thank you.”

He had seen right through me, but his kindness lifted my spirits. I felt kind of pathetic for being so easy to please at my age.

Afterword

I think the proper way to start an afterword is by thanking the reader. With this in mind, I leafed through some of the books I had on hand, and to my surprise, I noticed many recent ones don't even have real afterwords. Some were just thanking people in their lives, or updating readers on their recent activities, or mentioning stories that were completely unrelated to the work itself.

So I spent a few days thinking about how I could entertain everyone somehow. In the end, I decided to write a simple afterword.

Now that the stage is set, I'd like to begin by simply expressing my gratitude to everyone. The online readers who helped me nurture this story. The editor who approached me about publishing it and worked diligently on creating it. The illustrator who added such color to my work with beautiful illustrations. My partner who watched warmly over me through all my ups and downs. My senpais who gave me lots of advice when I didn't know what to do. My gaming friends, the cram school teacher who told me I'd definitely be a novelist, my parents who instilled in me the habit of reading books, and my understanding boss at work. To all the people who have helped me since my school days. Etc, etc, etc…

And to you who are reading this afterword now. Thank you very much.

This Alluring Dark Elf Has the Heart of a Middle-aged Man! is the first work I posted online in January of last year. My debut novel. The thing I lost my, ahem, publishing virginity with.

Many of the scenes written in third person in the web version have been changed to first person in this book version. I think you enjoyed being able to re-read the story from Haruka's point of view. A-At least, I hope so.

At the time of writing this afterword, it still hasn't fully sunk in that what I wrote is going to be out there for everyone to see. It

feels so very surreal.

All the characters in my story are cute to me. Even though I wanted to make some of them villains, I'd end up feeling sad and going in the opposite direction instead. Their world is a bleak one. Nevertheless, it's a heartwarming adventure story about the main character and his (her?) friends living peacefully.

I hope those of you who pick up this book will also enjoy discovering your favorite character and feeling like you're on an adventure together.

Yuhi Shimano, June 2023



Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato　Illust Meij

When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue　Illust Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken　Illust Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.



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