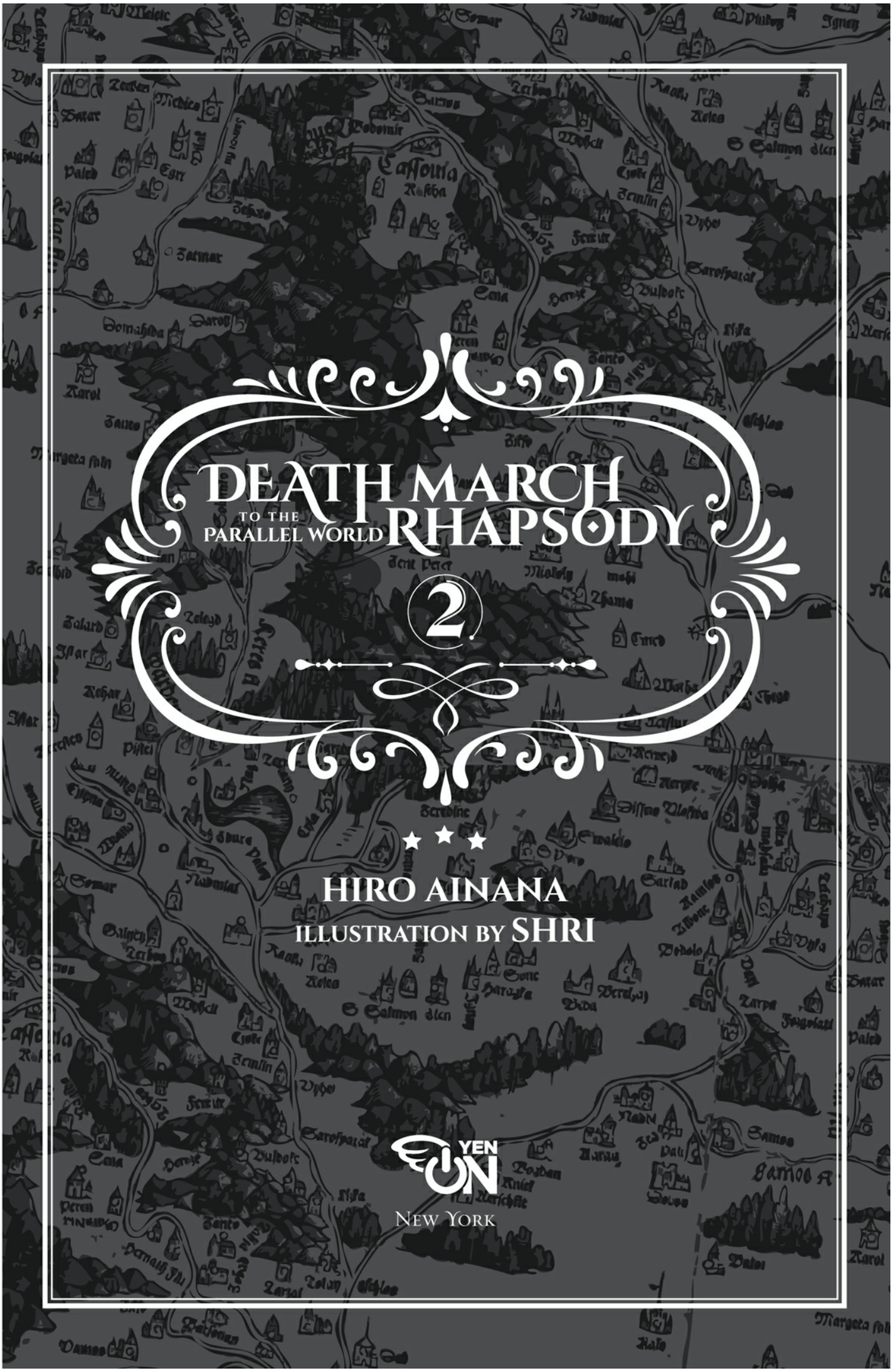

DEATH MARCH
2
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD
RHAPSODY
HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI


DEATH MARCH 2
TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY


LIZA
A scalefolk girl. Satou's slave.
SATOU
A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.
ZENA MARIENTEIL
A magic soldier in the army of Seiryuu County and the daughter of a hereditary knight.
TAMA
A cat-eared girl. Satou's slave.
POCHI
A dog-eared girl. Satou's slave.
LULU
A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.
ARISA
A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She seems to know about Japan...


"GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY MASTERRRR!"
Zen took a direct hit from an invisible attack.



DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

2

★ ★ ★

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN ON

NEW YORK

Copyright

Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 2

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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A Night of Turmoil

Satou here. I've never snuck into someone's bedroom or had someone else sneak into mine, but if I ever get the chance, I'd like to request a sexy woman.

When I awoke from a troubled sleep, a naked young girl was straddling my torso.

……Uh, this is a dream, right?

It reminded me of a long time ago when I would visit my grandfather in the countryside over a long vacation and my younger sister or little cousin would jump on top of me in bed to wake me up.

The only difference was that this girl was completely nude, and she decidedly lacked the innocent air of my young relatives.

The young girl, who'd been inching along slowly, now made one last big move and ended up nestling into my bare chest. Her expression might have been closer to that of a woman than a little girl, though.

"Oh dear, did I wake you?"

Noticing that I wasn't asleep, the lilac-haired girl gave me a light peck on the cheek.

"Hee-hee, I kissed you." Sounding like she'd managed a clever prank, Arisa pushed herself up with her hand on my chest and smiled at me a little shyly.

Charmed by her adorable expression, I couldn't help but pat her on the head.

Wait, *adorable*?

Sure, it was cute, but I definitely wanted to be careful about having any such feelings toward this young girl.

Banishing these slight concerns to the back of my mind, I looked up at Arisa.

The outline of her body glowed with a pale violet light. Very mysterious.

“Don’t stare at me like that. It’s embarrassing, you know.” Apparently, I’d ended up staring her in the face. Looking fairly displeased, Arisa pinched my nose.

Feeling flustered, like I’d turned back into a little boy, I hastily looked away. As if I’d imagined it, the violet glow I had seen earlier had vanished, leaving behind only a few faint traces in her hair.

Following her flowing locks downward, my gaze accidentally ended up on her slim chest behind them.

“Honestly…men are so perverted.” Arisa shyly lowered her head so that more of her hair draped over her chest.

Hurriedly muttering words of apology to Arisa, I thought back on the sequence of events that had brought me into this situation.

As for what had happened after I had acquired the two girls from the slave trader…



◆

“At all times, day or night, I will always serve my master with all my power.”

Arisa, the lilac-haired girl, had said these words during the contract ceremony. Neither the black-haired Lulu nor the beastfolk girls had said anything, so maybe this was just Arisa trying to gain favor?

Once the slavery contract was completed, I paid Nidoren, the slave merchant, with a gold coin.

I had wanted to free the girls from their status as slaves, but Nidoren stopped me.

Given the severity of the northern Shiga Kingdom’s hatred for demi-humans, he told me, any freed demi-humans (aside from fairies) would be treated worse than slaves, if they were allowed entry into the city at all.

Besides, the younger beastfolk girls started clinging to me and crying while begging me not to abandon them, so it seemed like putting this subject to rest was my only option. *Maybe I can look into it again if we go to the old capital in the south of the Shiga Kingdom or something.*

Realizing that I didn’t know much about being a master, Nidoren educated me about slave ownership and training. He said he would be staying around until noon the day after next and asked me to come back if I had any more questions or wanted to make another purchase. I appreciated the advice, but I definitely wasn’t looking to add even more slaves to my party.

During the ceremony, I had acquired the skill “Contract.” I had thought this might mean I’d be able to free the girls myself, but it turned out not to be so simple.

“Contract” required a particular chant. It must have been some special oath-related magic skill. But apparently, it could be used for more than just slavery.

Outside the tent, our little group set about making introductions.

“Well, then, please allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Arisa, born of the now-lost Kuvork Kingdom. Currently I am eleven years old, still four years away from adulthood, but I will do my best to meet your needs nonetheless,

even in services after dark. Please take good care of me."

Finishing her introduction with a statement totally at odds with her age, Arisa pinched the ends of her skirt and gave a small curtsy. It was an elegant motion, but the short length of her simple skirt meant that it left her quite exposed underneath, so I swiftly returned my gaze to her face and gave a quick response. "Pleased to meet you. My name is Satou."

I definitely don't want any "services after dark" from a little girl, thank you.

"…My name is Lulu. I'm fourteen. I am also from the Kuvork Kingdom. Being gaunt and homely as I am, I don't think a body like mine is very well suited to… night services, but…I'll work as hard as any horse or cattle, so please don't abandon me."

Lulu's bangs hung over her lowered eyes as she introduced herself. She had a sweet voice, a soft and clear soprano, although it was shaking quite a bit. By *gaunt* she was apparently referring to her B-cup bust, which I thought at her age seemed to indicate a promising future, but maybe the rule of "bigger is better" didn't apply in this world?

I say, as long as they're soft, what's the difference!

Well, it wasn't like I was going to be requesting any "services" from the middle school–age Lulu, either.

I hadn't planned on buying Lulu along with Arisa, but Arisa had pleaded with me to do so. I couldn't bring myself to refuse a little girl begging with tears in her eyes not to be separated from her big sister.

Besides, I was planning to release Arisa from slavery once I found out what she knew about this world and Japan, so it was better to keep her together with her family. Both girls were beautiful, but they were clearly of two different ethnicities; my guess was that they were half sisters who shared a parent, or simply stepsisters.

At any rate, it was ridiculous that this young lady would describe herself as homely, even if she was being modest.

Even with her face partially hidden, I could tell that she had traditional beauty that would win by a mile in any pageant in the country. Frankly, she was kind of

my type. If she had the personality to match, I'd be tempted to propose to her when she got older.

Whoops, can't let my thoughts get away from me like that, or it'll seem like I'm leering at her. I smacked my forehead to clear away any evil thoughts.

After the sisters, I had the beastfolk girls introduce themselves.

"My name…is Pochi."

"Tama."

I guess Pochi and Tama were feeling shy, because they were very brief.

Upon hearing their names, Arisa responded with a faint twitch at the edges of her lips, but she made no comment.

"I am Liza, of the orangescale tribe. The village I was born in was destroyed by weaselmen, and I was sold into slavery in the Shiga Kingdom. Fortunately, our most wonderful master found me—"

Enough already, Liza.

Arisa and Lulu didn't seem prejudiced against demi-humans, since they didn't react badly when the girls took off their hoods and revealed their faces. Maybe demi-humans weren't hated so much in other countries?

Since the two newer girls seemed to accept them so naturally, it didn't take long for Pochi and Tama to get used to them, too. As they allowed her to touch their ears curiously, Arisa looked over at me. "I'm surprised you were able to get animal-eared slaves like this."

"Well, it just sort of happened."

Now that she mentioned it, I had initially misunderstood, since there were a lot of dog-people and cat-people in Seiryuu City, but Pochi and Tama were actually the only dog-eared and cat-eared demi-humans in not only the city but the entire county.

"These two appear to be humanfolk but have the ears and tails of beastfolk, so they were abandoned at birth… Still, they're good girls, so please do not look poorly upon them," Liza said to Arisa and Lulu.

Pochi and Tama had the titles Satou's Slave, Changeling, Labyrinth Conqueror, and a few combat-related Slayer titles. It seemed that the Yamato stone would display only the first of these.

If Changeling, a hidden title, didn't have its usual fantasy meaning, I wondered if it was some kind of hereditary characteristic.

"How could we dislike them? They're so terribly cute!"

"Cuuute?"

"Tama's cute, sir!"

"Pochi's cute, toooo!"

Pochi and Tama wriggled bashfully, apparently pleased by Arisa's compliment.

Looked like they'd get along just fine.

"Well, shall we head back to the inn?" It seemed silly to stand around outside the slave market tent forever, so I spoke up to the five of them, and we decided to head back.

Arisa slipped over to wrap both her arms around my left one. This contact seemed a little excessive, but I did think we should at least hold hands so the kids wouldn't get lost, so I didn't mind terribly.

Pochi and Tama both scrambled for my remaining arm, but they couldn't decide who would get it, so in the end Liza picked up the pair of them and carried them like luggage.

Apparently giving up, the girls went limp in her arms, allowing their limbs to dangle freely… *They really like that pose.*

It seemed like Liza was having trouble carrying both of them along with her spear, so I took the weapon for her for the time being. Lulu offered to carry it for me, but it seemed too heavy for a delicate girl like her, so I carried it myself.

The sun was beginning to set, which must have signaled dinnertime; delicious smells were wafting over from the street stalls in the plaza.

Eating out seemed to be the standard in the west quarter, because even people in less-affluent-looking clothes were going about ordering from the

carts.

On closer inspection, I saw that there were even collared slaves among the commoners getting food. However, instead of finding seats with the other people, they were sitting on the bare ground to eat.

Grrgrrrgwr…

Hearing a cute little noise, I turned to see that Lulu had turned bright red.

Her bashful expression was adorable. She definitely couldn't be a romantic interest right now, but I looked forward to the distant future.

"Smells good, right? Let's get some dinner here before we go back. What do you want to eat?"

Not that I really needed to ask.

"Meeeat?"

"Meat would be good, sir!"

"Master, anything you choose to provide us with is always appreciated, but if I dare to make a suggestion, I believe chicken meat would be truly divine."

Yep, that was what I'd thought they'd say.

"I should think a slave must be happy just to receive any food at all."

Arisa tilted her head with a curious expression, so I asked her what she was used to eating.

"On our way to Seiryuu City, rye bread and hot salted soup were the greatest feast we could hope for."

I guess that was pretty standard.

But I was taken aback by their answers when I asked the beastfolk girls the same question.

"Acooorns?"

"Weeds, sir."

"Demi-human slaves like us are usually given a meal a day at best, so we learned to stave off hunger by eating what nuts, berries, and plants we could

find in the public parks—anything edible, really. When we were able to catch small animals, we shared the meat with our fellow slaves."

They shared their food even in such a desperate situation? I wondered whether beastfolk had naturally kind personalities or perhaps grew up in environments where such cooperation was the norm.

Well, as long as they're with me, I'd at least like to let them eat to their hearts' content, whatever they want.

"Young master!"

A loud voice echoed through the plaza.

Whoever this person was calling must have terrible hearing or something, because the loud cry repeated a few times to no avail.

"Master!" Liza called, and I turned to her.

"What is it?"

"It would appear that the gentleman at the stall is calling *you*, master…"

At Liza's polite suggestion, I turned toward the source of the voice to see an unfamiliar man waving at me.

"You finally noticed! Young master!"

Uh, who are you?

"Master, that's one of the men we rescued from the slime attack."

"Oh, right."

Ever since I'd come to this world, I'd thought I was able to remember faces perfectly, but apparently, that only worked if I made a conscious effort to remember someone in the first place.

Anyway, I would've felt bad ignoring him, so I headed over.

"Young master, please have some food if you'd like! The young ladies can eat, too, of course!"

With a huge smile on his face, the middle-aged man led us to a little dining area behind the stall.

Well, I guess we couldn’t say no to that.

I could smell some kind of meat-based dish, so the beastfolk girls were sure to like it here.

“What’re you yellin’ about n— Oh, we’ve got customers?”

“I told you before, didn’t I? Those are the demi-human slaves who saved my life in the labyrinth and the young master who arranged for better conditions in the dungeon!”

“Oh? Y’mean that nonsense about gettin’ meat in there, eh?”

“It wasn’t nonsense!”

A well-built woman carrying a bucket of water in each hand appeared behind the stall. Judging by the conversation, she seemed to be the proprietress of the place.

“Well, then. We’re mighty grateful to you fer saving my husband’s life. It’s on the house today, so eat till you can’t move another inch, y’hear?”

“Yaaay!”

“Wow, ma’am!”

“We’re truly grateful for your kindness.”

At the first hint of free food, Pochi and Tama flung their hands into the air with joy.

“Oh my, aren’t you polite fer a slave. You one o’ them tutor slaves?”

“Not at all; I specialize only in physical labor. The slave who tutored me in the Shigan language was even more polite than I.” Liza responded in a quiet, almost nostalgic tone.

After watching her thoughtful profile for a moment, I looked around the dining area. They must not have been open yet, because there was nobody else there but us.

I asked the husband and wife who owned the place if the girls could sit on some stools. The wife frowned a little at first but quickly remembered that we’d saved her husband’s life and very amiably granted me permission.

However, she said it might cause trouble if other customers saw them, so she set up a partitioning screen to separate our dining area from the rest before we ordered our food.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. This is made with innards of a red deer, cut for us by our good friend the butcher,” the shopkeeper said proudly, putting a deep dish of stew in front of each person at the table. Shortly after, a large basket full of steamed potatoes clunked down in the middle of the table as well.

In addition to the deer offal, the stew contained sinewy meat, green beans called *Shiga soybeans* that were about the size of fava beans, and some nuts that looked like gingko, shell and all. *Is this dark, skinny thing edible burdock?*

Pochi and Tama had sparkles in their eyes as they looked at the meaty stew. Liza’s face remained prim and proper, but her tail betrayed her true feelings, slapping the ground with excitement.

“Well, let’s eat before it gets cold.”

Before eating, Arisa put her hands together and said a quick thanks for the food, and Lulu followed her example.

Since I had worked for a corporation, I’d gotten into the habit of going out to eat, so I hadn’t taught the beastfolk girls the Japanese custom of giving thanks before and after a meal.

I had taught them to wash their hands before eating and to use utensils and stuff, though.

“It’s hot, sir!”

“Hooot, hooot!”

Digging into their food in a hurry, the beastfolk girls were alarmed to find that the stew was piping hot.

“You have to blow on it first, okay? Like this.”

“’kaaay!”

“Yes, sir!”

Watching me teach Pochi and Tama how to blow on their food to cool it

down, Arisa covered her mouth with her hand and bowed her head. With my “Keen Hearing” skill, I heard her mutter, “Are you trying to kill me with cuteness or what?” but I did my best to ignore her.

“Yummy, yummyyy!”

“It’s delicious, sir!”

Pochi and Tama were making a bit of a mess, clutching their forks rather clumsily in their small fists. Both of them looked like they might dunk their hair into the stew at any moment, so I pulled out some string and tied it back. The others looked jealous, so I gave them string, too.

Of course, they were eating without a problem.

Liza stabbed her fork into each piece of meat and chewed on it with a serious expression. Even eating dinner, she gave off the impression that she was training somehow.

Arisa and Lulu were silent, but it wasn’t out of displeasure so much as desperation in their eating. Arisa conducted herself with relative grace, but she still managed to stuff so much stew into her mouth that her cheeks bulged a little. *She looks like a cute little squirrel.*

Lulu, too, was reserved but thoroughly focused on eating.

“This is truly delicious.”

“So soft and tendeeer!”

“This part’s crunchy, sir!”

As soon as Liza praised the stew, Pochi and Tama did their best to match her. Arisa and Lulu, too, nodded their agreement while covering their mouths with their hands.

Okay, I really should stop watching everyone else and start eating dinner myself.

It certainly smelled good, so I scooped some stew onto my spoon and brought it to my lips.

Mm. A little bit on the salty side but still pretty tasty. Apparently, there were a

lot of laborers around this area, so it was probably seasoned to suit their tastes.

Entrails made some delicious dishes because you could enjoy a lot of different textures and flavors, but some people didn't like the smell. In this case, though, our hosts must have used some kind of special preparation or particular herbs, because it didn't smell bad at all.

"How's the soup treatin' you, young master?"

"It's delicious—every bit as good as the food at the castle."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far." The shopkeeper scratched his upper lip and laughed heartily, hiding his embarrassment.

My compliment must have pleased him, because soon he returned with even more food. "Young master, how'd you like to have some of this, too?"

The plate he offered me was loaded with what looked to be thick fried intestines, cooked with an herb similar to garlic chives. In his other hand was another, smaller plate, this one with thin fried slices of heart and liver.

"This is quite extravagant."

"Yeah, so eat it up while it's nice 'n' hot!"

"The hunters've been bringin' in all kinds of game lately. We've been able t' stock up fer cheaper than usual, so go ahead! Stuff yourselves!"

Phew, I was glad my Meteor Shower hadn't killed off all the wildlife or anything. I just hoped this wasn't a flag for some villainous monster to show up from deep in the mountains or something.

Putting aside these worries, I figured I might as well take the couple up on their offer and eat as much as I wanted.

Lulu seemed especially timid, so I dished out some of the meat to her on a small plate.

Then, somehow, this led to my doling out portions for everyone else.

> Skill Acquired: "Service"

I got a weird skill out of all this, but I had no desire to put any skill points into it.

All the food on the large dish was delicious, but I found the liver especially tasty. I bet it would have tasted great raw, although food poisoning would have been a concern.

Riding the excitement of trying a brand-new meat dish, Tama and Pochi wolfed down their food from the small plate in no time fast, then started in on the fried intestines.

“Spaishy…”

“T-too spicy, shir…”

Both of them had shoveled a big bite into their mouths, but apparently, they were not fans of spicy food. Their expressions were impossible to put into words; if this were a manga, I’d say they had Xs for eyes.

They weren’t wrong, but for someone like me who was used to superhot foods, it tasted perfectly normal. In fact, I could hardly sense spiciness at all unless it was physically painful, which was probably not a good sign.

“I believe these have been cooked with chili powder. Pochi, Tama, if it’s too much for you, you needn’t force yourselves to eat it. I’ll take up that responsibility in your place.”

Out of consideration for Pochi and Tama, Liza volunteered with gusto to eat their portion of the intestines.

Having wolfed down their stew, Pochi and Tama sat with their forks in their mouths, watching Liza enviously.

Perhaps feeling sorry for them, Arisa slid her portion of the liver onto their plates. It’s possible that she just didn’t like it, but Pochi and Tama were so thrilled that they looked like they were about to jump out of their seats.

Arisa and Lulu aside, the beastfolk girls definitely seemed to still be hungry, so I stood up to order more food.

“Master, if you need anything, allow me to take care of it in your stead. What is your command?”

“Oh, it’s all right. I was just going to ask for more food, and maybe stop at the next stall over to buy coats and shoes for Arisa and Lulu while I’m up.”

“I-if you need to buy something, I can…!”

Liza and Lulu both leaped to their feet. Pochi and Tama froze in the middle of chewing on the liver, looking up at me without moving their heads.

“All of you, stay here and keep eating. That’s an order, all right?”

I could probably have just left the shopping for later, but I kept catching glimpses of Lulu’s chest across the table, and it was bothering me. Next to her, Arisa’s flat chest was pretty much out in the open, too, but that was less of a problem.

“Do you need somethin’, young master?”

“Yes, I’d like more stew, please.”

“Comin’ right up!”

I felt bad ordering more food when they were treating us, so while the husband was preparing the food, I gave the wife a few large copper coins for the extra helpings. While I was at it, I asked her if it was all right to bring in goods from other stalls, and she readily allowed it.

The proprietress was called away to help a customer with a takeout order, so I asked her husband while he was cooking if he could recommend a stall with good grilled chicken skewers.

“Grilled chicken? The stall with the red flag out front is a good one. All the others do terrible prep work.” According to the shopkeeper, some of them even just cut the meat into chunks at random and cooked them without any further preparation.

I thanked the man and headed for the stall with the red flag. They offered only salted chicken, not sweet-and-sour, but I caved to the smell of roasting fat and bought one to eat on the spot.

It was just what I’d hoped for, freshly cooked over a charcoal fire. Just one bite sent a river of juice dribbling down my chin. It had the perfect amount of salt—not table salt, but something with a more complex flavor, like rock salt.

Aah, now I want a nice cold beer.

After praising the shopkeeper’s delicious cooking, I ordered thirty more of

them for everyone else.

On my way back, I saw a flash of light in a nearby alleyway, so I took a closer look. Countless pairs of lights, suspended in the darkness, stared back at me.

…Dogs?

Before my eyes could finish adjusting to the light, an AR pop-up revealed their true identity.

Apparently, they were dog-people slave children. There were some cat-people kids, too.

When I took a single step closer, the floating pairs of eyes seemed to tremble.

One more step, and I was finally able to see them in the darkness.

They looked like nothing if not a group of little dogs sitting up straight. They were cute as could be, like stuffed animals or something from a kids' TV show. *How could anybody hate them…?*

Their gazes were focused on the half-eaten chicken skewer in my hand. A few of them closed their eyes and sniffed the air, raptly enjoying the scent.

"Would you like some?"

"…Rrr, rrreal-ly, sirrr?"

One of the kids responded in a voice that was difficult to understand. Most likely the structure of their mouths made it difficult to speak the Shigan language.

Nodding at him gently, I gave them all the chicken I'd just bought, still wrapped in enormous leaves.

"Share them with everyone, okay?"

"Y-yes, sirrr!"

"Thank 'oo!"

I waved to the children as they thanked me in unison, then headed back to the red-flagged stall. *This time I really have to bring them straight back.*

While I was waiting for the new set of skewers to be cooked, I secured the

coats and boots for Arisa and Lulu that I'd almost forgotten to buy.

The grilled chicken skewers proved to be very popular, earning a smile not only from Arisa but even from Lulu. And Liza seemed to be uncharacteristically choked up with tearful gratitude.

"I'm fuuuull!"

"So happy, sir!"

Having devoured their stew down to the last drop, both Pochi and Tama let out sighs of contentment. The other three, of course, had eaten their fill as well. Liza, in particular, was wordlessly basking in the meal's afterglow.

I thanked both shopkeepers for the delicious food, gathered everyone together, and headed back to the inn.

◆

"Welcome to our… Mr. Satou?!"

When we finally arrived at the Gatefront Inn, Martha's lively voice was there to greet us. Without even picking up the tray she had dropped, she rushed over and gave me a light embrace.

The landlady came out next, shoving her way through the crowd that was watching us curiously from the entrance. "We heard all about it from that young lady Ms. Marienteil. Must've been awful! We kept your room just the way you left it, so you can rest right away, but… My, it seems there's quite a few more of you now."

"Yes, I wouldn't have made it out of the labyrinth alive without the help of these kids."

Well, Arisa and Lulu had joined up after the fact, but I didn't feel like explaining the whole thing, so I left it at that.

"Labyrinth?" a small voice murmured behind me. *I'll have to explain that later.*

"So, I'd like to get a room for all of them as well… Do you have any openings?"

"Unfortunately, we're full…" The landlady's response was short and biting. I glanced into the hotel and saw the landlady's husband scowling in our direction,

his arms crossed.

Around him, the curious guests who had gathered in the foyer glared at the beastfolk girls as well, grumbling to nobody in particular.

Their animosity was so oppressive that I felt sick to my stomach.

I hid Pochi and Tama behind my back, trying to shield them from the angry stares.

Should we go find another inn…?

It was already so late… Arisa and Lulu could take my room inside, and the beastfolk girls and I would just find somewhere to sleep outside in the park nearby. It'd still be more comfortable than sleeping on the stone floor in the labyrinth.

"Martha, please show these two girls to my room. How much is the charge for an extra person, ma'am? I'll go with these three and sleep outside or something." It took no small amount of effort to stop myself from spitting the words at her.

My hand was trembling with anger when I felt a smaller hand wrap around it. It was Arisa.

"Master, please calm down. All of us are frightened, being glared at that way."

Arisa stepped out in front of me and addressed the landlady, as well as the drunken rabble behind her. Although she'd said she was afraid, her voice was as calm as if she were an adult addressing her peers.

"If you please, might there be a corner of some shed or stable that you could spare for us? These girls saved many a human life in the labyrinth. I know rewards for such deeds are normally reserved for soldiers, but could you not perhaps show them some small compassion?"

"A-all right. The shed won't do, but since we don't have too many guests with horses or carts right now, there'll be some room in the stable. Martha, show them the way. We'll bring another bed up to Mr. Satou's room, so you two can wait at the end of the bar for now."

Arisa's eloquent plea seemed to have awed the landlady into quickly granting permission for the beastfolk to stay in the stable. The antipathy drained from the drunkards' faces as well, and they shuffled sullenly back to their tables.

"Was I of some small use to you?"

"Yeah, you were a big help."

Arisa looked up at me proudly, and I patted her head, thanking her.

Martha brought us to the stable and gave us a fresh stack of hay to cover the floor with. She was a bit hesitant at first, but once I gave her a silver coin, she was quick to tell us to use as much hay as we needed, and I was glad to take her up on the offer.

I spread a waterproof blanket over the hay and covered that with a comfortable bedsheet. Hopefully this would be enough to prevent the makeshift mattress from scratching at us while we slept.

For some reason, making this straw bed somehow earned me the "Sewing" skill. This didn't make any sense to me, but it seemed like a useful skill to have, so I decided to consider it a stroke of luck.

In place of blankets, I put out some furs from my spoils of war and a few soft-looking bundles of cloth.

I could buy some warmer blankets and quilts tomorrow— No, I guess I should look for a different inn or a house for rent first.

"Fluffyyy!"

"It's just like the bed at the castle, sir!"

Pochi and Tama happily leaped into the straw bed. As Liza looked down at them fondly, I handed her a bag filled with supplies like food and weapons.

It was against the law for slaves to be armed inside the city, but the slave trader Nidoren had explained to me that it was possible to get away with it if the slaves were "just carrying their master's belongings."

"If any creeps try to come in here, be sure to stave them off without killing them. And if you call for me, I'll come right away."

“Yes, master. I’ll protect your belongings at all costs.”

Liza’s fists were clenched and her eyes burned with a sense of duty, so I gave her a quick warning. “You three are much more important than my belongings, so I want you to prioritize your own safety more, all right? If push comes to shove, you have my permission to get rid of that stuff.”

Objects could always be replaced, but the girls’ lives and safety were another matter.

I gave them permission to eat the food inside the bag in case they got hungry. I wouldn’t want them to go hungry if I overslept, after all.

I brought Arisa and Lulu up to the room, where the addition of an extra bed had made things quite cramped.

Making the beastfolk girls’ bed took longer than I’d expected, so the pair looked a bit sleepy. In fact, Lulu looked exhausted, her face paler than usual.

I wanted to ask Arisa about how she knew Japanese and all that before we went to bed, but I guess it could wait until tomorrow. It wasn’t like there was any particular need to hurry.

“Should we just go to bed now?”

A lit candle in a candlestick provided the only source of light, so the room was quite dark.

When I started to take off my coat, Lulu hurriedly rushed over to receive it, hanging it up on a wooden hook on the wall. She tried to help me take off my robe, too, but I gently stopped her. “It’s all right; I don’t need help. You two take care of yourselves.”

“…Y-yes, sir.”

Lulu went silent right away. Confused, I glanced over to check on her, but as soon as we made eye contact she hastily stepped back, tripped on the wooden frame of the bed behind her, and fell flat over backward.

“Are you all right?”

“Y-yes, I’m fine! I’m perfectly fine!”

I reached down to help her up, but she refused in a panic.

I think Lulu might be a little uncomfortable with men.

…Actually, I guess this was a pretty normal reaction, since I was still a stranger.

“Oh? Please get ready, then.” I was trying to instruct them to get themselves ready for bed, but apparently they misunderstood.

Trying to give them some privacy to change, I turned my back to them while I took off my robe and folded it. After a few moments, the sound of rustling clothing stopped, and Arisa announced, “We’re ready,” so I turned around.

Uh, why are they both naked?

It was only thanks to my “Poker Face” skill that I managed to conceal my astonishment.

What the hell is this? Are they nudists?!

“Girls, these blankets are pretty thin, so you’ll catch a cold if you don’t wear anything to bed.” As calmly as possible, I urged them to put on some clothes.

Little Arisa didn’t really faze me, but I was somewhat disgusted with myself to admit that I caught my breath a bit to see Lulu’s innocent form, the likes of which I’d only ever seen on TV.

Just to be clear, I wasn’t at all interested in having an intimate relationship with Lulu, but I apologize if I gave that sort of impression in a moment of weakness.

With all my might, I forced my eyes to focus on anyplace other than Lulu’s chest.

I should really pay a visit to Seiryuu City’s pleasure quarter before I end up sexually harassing someone. I might have looked fifteen on the outside right then, but luckily that seemed to make me an adult in Shiga, so hopefully I wouldn’t be turned away at the door.

The two girls were still naked, so I once again implored them to get dressed. “You can wear the long shirts I gave you earlier as nightgowns.”

“U-um, then…your services…” Arisa, who had been busily rolling up the blankets on the bed, trailed off in astonishment.

Were “night services” a standard for slaves in this world?

“No, I don’t need any of that. I’m going to have you two go buy yourselves some necessities tomorrow morning, so go to bed for now.”

“You don’t?!”

Arisa seemed stunned, but Lulu had started to cry huge tears as soon as the words left my mouth. I took care of her first, covering her body with a sheet and offering her a handkerchief.

Even for a slave, offering your body to some middle-aged man you just met—*although I look like I’m around their age*—must be too much to bear. It was no wonder that she would be relieved enough to cry.

If they were adult women, I might have come close to giving it a thought, but I definitely wasn’t going to do anything to a child. “I won’t be needing that kind of service in the future, either,” I assured them.

Lulu did seem to be uncomfortable with men, so I left the job of comforting her and wiping her tears to Arisa.

Looking at the two of them like that, you’d be hard-pressed to tell which one was the oldest.

When Lulu finally wore herself out crying and fell asleep, and Arisa passed out next to her shortly thereafter, I put a thin blanket over them, as well as a pelt like the ones I’d left with the beastfolk girls. Hopefully this would keep them warm until morning.

Was it my imagination, or did Arisa’s sleeping face look the tiniest bit insulted…?

Regardless, I was tired myself, and I climbed into the extra bed to sleep as soon as possible. Even with my eyes closed, I could still see the menu screen, so I operated it with my thoughts to turn it off so I could fall asleep in peace.



◆

And that brings us back to the situation I laid out at the beginning.

Weird, I didn't remember sleeping in the same bed as Arisa.

I brushed her hair aside absently, admiring its sleekness. She smiled adorably, a little bashful.

Sure, she's got a cute face, but she's also eleven. I'm not a pedophile.

Arisa giggled a little, prodding my chest with a slim finger.

Still, that finger is *kinda sexy*, a voice whispered in the back of my mind.

…Sexy?

Suddenly, it was like my personality had split into two: one part that was trying to accept Arisa's affection and one that found it extremely disconcerting. The former did its best to push the latter back into the dark recesses of my mind, but at the first sign of doubt, the tenacious latter half managed to make a comeback.

This tug-of-war was interrupted, though, when Arisa started planting kisses on my ear, my collarbone, and my chest in turn.

Moving on its own in response to her caresses, my hand brushed the nape of her neck. *You want her*, that same voice in my head informed me.

But this definitely didn't seem like the right reaction to a little girl. No matter what the circumstances, that was definitely wrong.

My blurry thoughts started to clear up a bit, and I used my mind to open up the menu and turn on the display of the log.

Aha! There's something in here!

I sat up slowly as Arisa looked through her lashes at me. Putting my hands on her sides, I pulled her close, so that her face was against my neck.

She seemed a little flustered, but nonetheless happily wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

Leaning close to her ear, I gently but firmly whispered a command.

“Arisa, I forbid you to use any magic or skills. That’s an order!”

Arisa’s hands loosened, and she looked at me with her face contorted in shock.

I used that moment of surprise to add another instruction. “And another order! Cancel the effects of whatever skills or magic you’re already using, right now!”

Within moments, the cancellation of the magic effect showed in my log. The information in the AR screen changed, too.

Just to be sure, I maxed out the skill points of the skill I’d just gotten, “Psychic Resistance.” I had apparently gained the skills “Night Vision” and “Psychic Magic,” too, but I left them alone for now.

“Why…?”

“That’s what I should be asking you! What were you trying to accomplish by manipulating me with Psychic Magic?”

It was true; during the earlier confrontation in front of the inn and just now, Arisa had been using magic.

The first time, outside the inn, was fine. She had used two spells—Calm Field and Weariness Field—most likely to quell the hostility the innkeeper and patrons harbored toward the beastfolk girls.

But just now, she had used three spells on me: Charm Person, Temptation Field, and Lusting Heart Field.

It was clear that she was trying to seduce me and manipulate me according to her will.

I had forgotten about this in the shock that Arisa was able to speak Japanese, but her AR information had said her skills were “Unknown”… Not “None,” but *“Unknown.”*

“…Psychic Magic? I don’t know what you mean…”

“Don’t try to trick me or play dumb. That’s another order. Now, what were you trying to do?” She wriggled out of my grasp, but I blocked off her escape route, interrogating her.

> Skill Acquired: “Interrogation”

Perfect timing. I put five points into the new skill and activated it immediately.

“Tell me the truth. What do you want?”

Arisa gave in and responded somewhat sulkily. “…I just wanted to serve you, master.”

Her usual graceful air had evaporated.

“I don’t understand. Explain yourself a bit.”

“Really! Don’t you get what I said? I fell in love with you at first sight, the very first time we met!”

What?! Love at first sight?!

I was so taken aback by this unexpected answer that I forgot to keep interrogating.

“Your soft, sleek black hair! Your innocent expression! Your familiar, babyish features! Your delicate physique! Your smooth, hairless limbs! I had only wished for such a master…! But now that I have the master of my dreams, he has no use for my services?! I can’t accept that! That’s why I had to use magic! So that you could be crazy about me, too!”

As soon as I paused, Arisa fired word after word at me like a machine gun, sounding increasingly desperate.

“So once I ‘fell in love’ with you, were you going to brainwash me?”

“No! That’s not it at all! It’s just like I said when I became your slave. ‘At all times, day or night, I will always serve my master with all my power.’ It’s a slave’s duty to seduce and please her master!”

What kind of logic was that?

What’s worse, it didn’t seem like she was lying.

But a slave couldn’t disobey her master’s orders, right?

“So that’s your story. What did you really want?”

“Well, I tried waiting for you to creep into bed with me, but I was falling

asleep…so I figured I'd hop into your bed instead, and when I saw your sleeping face, I just couldn't help myself!"

She was wearing a "Silly me!" kind of expression. A bit frustrated, I pinched her cheek. *This kind of punishment is appropriate, I think.*

"Oww! Awwight, awwight, I'm sowwie…"

Wow, her cheeks stretch pretty far. I was sort of beginning to enjoy myself, but Arisa was starting to tear up, so I let go.

"But I was a good girl to wait at first…"

"So you really just came after me because of your…desires?"

"Really!" She nodded.

"Honestly, what in the world *are* you?"

Her AR information read as follows:

Name: Arisa

Age: Eleven years old

Level: 10

Titles: Satou's Slave
Witch of the Lost Kingdom
The Mad Princess

Skills: Psychic Magic

Gifts: Self-Status Check
Status Check
Hide Skills
Item Box

Abilities: Never Give Up
Over Boost

What the hell? I'd never seen any of these skills and things before.

Arisa grinned impishly as she answered my question.

"I'm Arisa Tachibana. I'm Japanese, just like you."

Arisa

Satou here. My company is located in the holy land of nerds, which is probably why the nearest place to eat is a maid café. I went there every day, so I'm not really weirded out by being called "master."

"More specifically," Arisa continued, "I'm a former Japanese person who was reincarnated in the Kuvork Kingdom without losing my memories of being Arisa Tachibana. Are you also a reincarnation? No, judging by that black hair of yours, I'll bet you were summoned here as a hero. Am I wrong, Mr. Satou?"

Her AR information didn't display her Japanese name or status as a "former Japanese person."

I guess that made sense, since my status didn't show my real name, "Ichirou Suzuki," or my real nationality, either.

"What's the matter? You're quiet all of a sudden. Did you know you're the second Japanese person I've met here?"

My eyes went immediately to the sleeping Lulu.

"No, not Lulu. I never met her great-grandfather, but apparently he was Japanese as well. One's genes can be a terrible thing, you know. If she were born in Japan, she could've easily become a famous idol with those looks."

"What do you mean? I thought she was just speaking poorly of herself out of desperation. She must be popular here in the Shiga Kingdom, too, right?"

"I'm not surprised you would think that. But you heard what Nidoren said, didn't you? To the people in this world, that girl isn't beautiful at all."

"Are you just using Psychic Magic to—?"

"Not at all."

I thought perhaps Arisa was using her Psychic Magic to disguise Lulu's beauty in order to protect her, but she stopped me before I could even finish asking.

“By the standards of beauty here, she just has a flat, expressionless face; thin lips; skin that isn’t pale enough; and a small bottom. It’s as if she were designed to have every unattractive feature. Although it’s prevented anyone from buying her as a slave, at least.”

What? Wait, if a Japanese face failed to meet the criteria for good looks, didn’t that mean they’d consider me ugly, too?

As if my thoughts had shown clearly on my face, Arisa went on to clarify.

“You won’t exactly be considered handsome, but it seems like they just see you as a normal foreigner. But Lulu isn’t just ordinarily unappealing—she’s an object of sheer disgust. It’s uncanny how everything about her is slightly off.”

They say the standards of beauty change depending on the place and time period, but this seemed especially unlucky—no, I guess in her circumstances, it might have been better this way.

It was hard for me to accept it, but I’d have to keep in mind that the people here saw Lulu as an unattractive young woman.

Apparently finished with Lulu’s story, Arisa changed the subject.

“So, Mr. Satou, are you a transmigration or a transference?”

“Stop calling me that, please.”

“As you wish, master.”

Normally I’d be fine with “Satou,” but she kept emphasizing the Japanese pronunciation so much that I was afraid I’d forget my real name was Suzuki. (The natives here pronounced it more like “Sa-two.”) Not that it mattered much, but still.

“But back to the question at hand. Which are you, master?”

“What’s the difference?”

I answered Arisa’s question with a question of my own. Both terms were unfamiliar to me, so I had no idea how to answer her.

“A transmigration is a soul that died early in an accident or the like in the real world and was reincarnated in this one. A transference is abducted into this

world against their will by summoning magic. Heroes, for example.”

Abducted…

The word was loaded with negative connotations, so I wasn’t sure which category applied to me.

“Do transmigrations always start as babies?”

“According to legends, it can happen to adults, too, but in this world it only happens with babies.”

She seemed awfully sure of herself. When I asked her how she knew this…

“That’s what the god told me when I was reincarnated here.”

…was her answer.

She met a god?

If someone said a thing like that in Japan, everyone around them would definitely start to question their sanity or pretend not to know them.

“So a transference is summoned in their original form? Like their clothes, their possessions, their appearance…?”

“Yes, I’ve heard their clothes are the same ones they were wearing at the time they were summoned. Appearance, too, of course.”

Sure, my clothes had stayed the same, but why had I gotten younger?

“Is this just hearsay?”

“I heard this directly from a hero of the Saga Empire, so I don’t doubt that it’s true. The Saga Empire is the only country that can summon a hero from a different world.”

I wondered if I could figure out a way home if I went to the Saga Empire, then. I guess I should head there next once I was done sightseeing in the Shiga Kingdom.

And the other Japanese person Arisa had mentioned before must be this “hero.”

Now, what should I tell her? Should I tell her the truth about my situation or

keep it a secret?

Well, she could manipulate people's hearts and minds with that Psychic Magic of hers, but she was still the best lead I'd gotten so far.

"I see… Then I might not be either of those. I was taking a nap at my workplace, and when I woke up I was standing in a big wasteland."

"You didn't meet a god?"

"No such luck."

Arisa folded her arms in thought. I really had to get her to put on some clothes.

"So you came out in the middle of a summoning circle when you got here, then, right?"

"Nope, I was all by myself."

"Then did you start at a high level? Have infinite magic? Or tons of skills?"

"No, I started at level one, and I only had ten magic points. No skills, either."

…Well, I guess I did have the limited-use Meteor Shower icons.

"Really? That seems incredibly unfair, don't you think?"

Crap. Now I'm the one getting sympathy and being asked questions.

"All right, enough about me. Tell me about the skills you have. Your gifts and special abilities, too. Just to remind you, that's an order."

"I'd still answer even if you didn't order me to, you know. Firstly, my 'Psychic Magic' skill is level five. Pretty high, isn't it? I've put all the skill points I've gotten since birth into it."

…All of them?

Arisa was level 11. If it worked the same for her as for me, she should have 110 skill points. Wouldn't ten points be enough to max out just one skill like "Psychic Magic"?

"Arisa, I have a question."

"Ask me whatever you'd like! My bust size is—"

Pressing a pillow over Arisa's mouth to block this superfluous information, I continued my inquiry.

"How many skill points do you get when you level up? And how many points does it take to level up your 'Psychic Magic' skill?"

"Goodness, so violent. Every time I level up, the skill points I get are generally 2d6. That is to say, one six-sided die rolled two times. So between two and twelve, with an average of seven. And the number of points needed to level up my 'Psychic Magic' skill is different for each skill level. More specifically…"

I took note of Arisa's information in the memo section of the networking menu.

What did this mean?

There was a huge difference between the skill points we got when we leveled up and the number needed to level up a skill.

Was my case unique, or was there some kind of system to it?

"Is something the matter?" Arisa asked, looking anxious.

"No, it's fine."

She seemed concerned, but I evaded the question.

If what Arisa said was true, then my ability to learn skills was several times—maybe even dozens of times—more efficient than that of the average person. In a way, it was just as big of a unique advantage as the "Meteor Shower" and "Search Entire Map" skills.

It would probably be best to make sure that I could trust Arisa completely before I told her about all this. Until then, I'd just keep it a secret.

"Arisa, what happens when you learn a new skill?"

"I just choose one from the list to learn, of course."

So that part was the same… No, wait. I felt like I might be misunderstanding something here.

"So what causes new skills to appear on the list?"

"When my skill points increase. If you satisfy certain requirements, like the

number of skill points or a related lower skill, the new skill shows up. They appear when you have half the required points, which is convenient—you can decide whether to spend the points now or save them for a better skill.”

Hmm, so that’s different, too.

In my case, I learned skills just by performing a related action. Although they didn’t learn them quite as absurdly easily as I did, the beastfolk girls seemed to acquire them in a similar fashion.

Without mentioning my own situation, I commented experimentally that the way the beastfolk girls acquired skills seemed to be different from Arisa’s method, but she simply responded that there were special systems for transferences and transmigrations.

Although we’d gotten a bit off topic, I listened to the rest of Arisa’s explanation.

“‘Self-Status Check’ is just what it sounds like: a skill that lets me review my own status. It gives much more information than a Yamato stone. Most importantly, it lets me manage my stats, like STR and INT, and choose how to allocate skill points.”

Apparently, it was this skill that allowed her to select what skill to learn from a list when she leveled up.

But she could choose how her attribute values were allotted, too? My menu didn’t have that feature.

I got the feeling that my menu was like a subset of what Arisa had described.

“‘Hide Skills’ allows me to conceal information about the skills I have. Once it’s been used, my skills will appear as ‘none,’ even to Yamato stones and ‘Analyze,’ until I deactivate it.”

Did the fact that her skills appeared as “Unknown” in my menu mean I had a different kind of analyzing skill?

“‘Status Check’ lets me view the status of others. To be honest, ‘Analyze’ would’ve been better, but I didn’t have enough transmigration bonus points.”

To test it out, I let her try to read my status, but she got only the information

from my networking profile, just like a Yamato stone.

Arisa explained that “Analyze” was an analysis-type skill like “Status Check” but more comprehensive, though for looking at statuses, it wasn’t much stronger than “Status Check.”

Incidentally, a god gave Arisa’s “Hide Skills” to her, so even people with any analysis-type skills couldn’t see through it, she said.

I guess that was why it showed up as “Unknown” even in my display, too.

Normally, once “Hide Skills” was learned, the other person just had to have a “Status Check” skill level higher than the level of the “Hide Skills” being used.

But my networking menu, where I could edit the profile that others saw, was even more flexible than Arisa’s “Hide Skills.”

“‘Item Box’ is just as the name implies. It’s an item-storing system like the kind in a lot of games. Unlike the unlimited inventory that’s standard for heroes, it has a limited amount of space, but it doesn’t get bulky or heavy, so it’s still very useful.”

When I asked about the limitations, she explained that she could carry up to one hundred different kinds of items, with the same kind of item stackable up to one hundred units each. A very gamelike system.

For amorphous items, like water, one unit was apparently equal to about one liter.

Arisa proudly noted that she’d discovered a loophole where she could pack a lot of small items into a bag before storing them to get the same effect, counting by volume rather than amount.

My Storage system was more like the unlimited inventory that she mentioned.

I didn’t know if there was any difference other than the name, but it was useful either way, so I didn’t think it mattered.

“I’m getting thirsty from all this talking.”

Since Arisa was coughing a bit and holding her throat, I started to get up to bring her some water, but she stopped me with her free hand.

Instead, she suggested a demonstration of her Item Box, so I told her to go ahead.

“Item Box, open.”

Arisa chanted in a whisper and waved her hand theatrically, and a flat black hole opened up in front of her.

Is that the Item Box?

I didn’t get any black holes or fancy effects when I moved things into or out of Storage.

Arisa put her hands inside the black hole and promptly pulled out a jug of water. She brought it to her lips and drank straight from the container; her face in profile looked very proud.

Some water spilled over her lips and onto her bare chest. Even the way she drank water was too risqué for a girl her age.

How old was she on the inside, really?

“At least use a cup,” I said, wishing she would mind her manners, but she informed me that she tried to keep her usage of the box to a minimum, since each item taken out or put away cost her some MP.

She needed magic just for storing stuff? That was different from Storage, too.

Arisa finished drinking and started to put away the water jug, so I asked her to let me try doing it. It was sort of like putting something into a black case in which I could faintly see the outlines of other items.

> Skill Acquired: “Item Box”

I didn’t really need a skill that was just an inferior version of Storage, but all right…

More importantly, I was curious whether one of her remaining abilities, Never Give Up or Over Boost, had allowed her Psychic Magic to affect me despite our three-hundred-level difference in power.

Arisa chuckled. “Well. You got a good deal, didn’t you? Not many people can say they have a slave with a skill like that!”

“What else’ve you got?”

“Urgh…”

Arisa grumbled something about my greed, making a show of being reluctant before dramatically throwing up her hands in an “I give up” pose like foreigners do.

It was a little much, so I dealt her a light chop to the top of her head.

Of course, I made sure to go easy on her so that I wouldn’t hurt her by mistake.

“How rude! I happen to have two Unique Skills, thank you very much!”

Now she was striking a triumphant “Aren’t I amazing?” pose, so I ruffled her hair a little more roughly than necessary. She seemed pleased about that, despite her protests that I would mess up her hair.

But why did she refer to them as “Unique Skills” and not abilities, like her status screen had said?

Cutting off this line of thought, Arisa began her explanation.

“Even Lulu doesn’t know about these. The first one is called Over Boost. It uses up all my magic and stamina to increase the effect of a single skill or spell many times over! Isn’t that incredible? A skill befitting a heroine!”

Actually, it sounded more like a one-shot cannon.

“The other one is called Never Give Up. It’s a power that lets me carry on no matter how strong the opponent! Specifically, no matter how much higher the enemy’s defense or level might be, it gives my magic and attacks at least a ten percent chance of affecting them! Amazing, isn’t it?”

That one *was* amazing, I had to admit. This must have been how she was able to break through my magic resistance before. There were a lot of lines in my log that said **—magic resisted**, so there was no other explanation.

“However, I can only use it up to three times. I do recover one use per month, though. Since my magic wasn’t working very well on you, master, I ended up blowing through all three uses earlier.”

What a bothersome skill. I guess I was lucky I wasn't her enemy.

Later, she explained to me that even when the skill was activated, it was no use against an enemy that had a complete resistance to something. For example, there would be no point in trying to use "Flamethrower" against a firedrake that wasn't affected by fire attacks.

"By the way, master, how many Unique Skills do you have?"

"You just want to know how many? Not what they are?"

"That's right. Honestly, Unique Skills are our trump cards, so it's best not to tell anyone what yours are."

I was sure she was going to come at me with all kinds of questions, but surprisingly, she warned me firmly not to talk about it.

However, either way, I didn't even have anything called a Unique Skill in the first place.

Maybe the menu itself or the Meteor Shower spell I started with could be considered Unique Skills, but how would I find that out?

Looking at each tab of the menu, I noticed an inconspicuous option labeled **Abilities** in the Settings tab.

When I selected it, four names appeared.

"I have four."

"Oh my, that's remarkable. According to the god I met, the more skills a person has, the greater the caliber of their soul."

Caliber? I doubted a middle-class commoner like me had a particularly impressive soul.

Incidentally, my four abilities turned out to be Menu, Unit Creation, Unit Deployment, and Immortality.

So this menu of mine is an ability, huh? It did seem to follow a similar framework to Arisa's Unique Skills, so I guess I might as well think of it as that instead to keep things from getting too complicated.

The fact that my Storage, radar, map, and so on weren't displayed in my

Unique Skills must have meant they were all part of my “Menu” skill.

When I first got here, I might have thought that was pretty lame, but I definitely didn’t feel that way after experiencing the usefulness of the menu firsthand in the labyrinth.

The two unit-related skills sounded like something out of a strategy game, but they were grayed out and couldn’t be selected. “Immortality” was, too, so I had to assume that some kind of condition needed to be met for them to be activated.

My best guess was that Immortality was the ability to revive in a church or something after being killed, like in a game. Did that mean the release condition for that skill was dying? I’d rather not test that out, so if that was the case, I’d imagine it wouldn’t be activated for a long time.

At any rate, there was no point in wasting precious brainpower on something I couldn’t figure out the answer to with logic alone, so I put that thought aside.

“There are a few things I want to know more about.”

“Go right ahead.”

“How are you able to use Psychic Magic without a chant?”

She had definitely used it in front of the inn before, but I didn’t see her chant anything.

“Well…it’s kind of a hidden feature of Self-Status Check. Once I’ve learned a spell, I only have to think of the final command word in my head to use it.”

I got my hopes up for a second, but apparently, you did have to use the chant once to learn a spell.

I guess the only way around learning a difficult chant was by using a magic scroll.

Well, I had plenty of funds, so I could ask Zena or someone where to find a magic shop where I could buy more scrolls.

“Does that mean you can’t use magic, master?”

“I have a hard time with the chants…”

That wasn't a lie. There *were* three spells that I could use, but those were special cases.

"Oh, of course. I almost gave up on it myself when I first heard someone else chanting a spell, too. It ended up taking me about a year to learn."

"That's fair. I only tried for about two days…or I guess two hours, really."

"What? That's no time at all! If it was that easy to learn, there would be a lot more sorcerers here."

I didn't have a comeback for that.

Taking advantage of my momentary silence, Arisa complained that she was getting cold and started to cling to me. Peeling her off lightly, I picked up her clothes and blanket from next to the bed and pushed them onto her.

"Next—tell me what you have inside your Item Box. I don't want you pulling out a knife or poison or something and killing me in my sleep."

Judging by our interactions so far, she didn't seem to have any malicious intent toward me, but her "love at first sight" story was pretty ridiculous, so I figured it was better not to let my guard down for now.

"Let's see…I have five magic books, mostly about Psychic Magic."

Arisa piled some heavy-looking leather-bound books on top of the bed. The faint scent of ancient pages from bygone eras filled the air.

According to my "Estimation" skill, these books were worth far more than what I'd paid for Arisa and Lulu.

"If you sold these, couldn't you buy your own freedom?"

"If a slave has such belongings, people will simply take them away, not buy them. And if someone with purple hair like mine was to pull out a book on a detested subject like Psychic Magic…there's no telling what would happen to me."

I guess with a name like "Psychic Magic," people were bound to be afraid of brainwashing and mind control and such.

"Then shouldn't you have studied a different kind of magic that you wouldn't

be persecuted for knowing?”

“This is all I could get my hands on. I wanted to learn magic, so I taught myself with these.”

Well, I definitely understood the feeling of wanting to use magic.

More importantly…

“Is purple hair a bad omen?”

“It’s considered an ill omen as both a hair color and an eye color. Few people know the reason why that is, but whenever something bad happens, it’s always blamed on my hair color.”

Come to think of it, the slave merchant Nidoren had said something along those lines, too.

“That’s too bad. It’s the kind of color a stylish grandma would dye her hair.”

“Wh-why would you choose to compare me to that of all things…?”

Looking tired and crestfallen, Arisa leaned back on the bed, her lovely violet hair shifting. It was a shame that such a pretty color was seen as abhorrent for no apparent reason.

Whoops, we got off topic again. Let me get back to the main point.

“Is that all you have in the Item Box?”

“There’s also the water jug I had before and a few changes of clothes. Should I take them out?”

“Yeah, please do. You can leave the water jug in there.”

Looking at the clothes Arisa took out made my head start to hurt. A *yukata*, a sailor suit, a half-finished maid outfit… All of them seemed to be handmade. Arisa didn’t have the “Sewing” skill, but she’d apparently been good at it before she was reincarnated.

I made a note of the titles of the magic books, too, then had her return everything to the Item Box.

“You’re not going to take them away?”

Arisa had tilted her head anxiously, so I made my response clear.

“I’ll probably have you show me the books sometime, but no, I don’t see why I would take them.”

People would think I was some kind of pervert if I was carrying around child-size sailor suits and maid outfits, anyway.

“Oh, I know. Put this in the Item Box, too.”

I pulled out a small pouch from Storage under cover of the pillow, then handed it to Arisa.

“It’s heavy. May I look inside?”

“Sure, go ahead. There should be ten gold coins in all. Don’t hesitate to use them if there’s an emergency.”

Aside from Shigan currency, I had put in some coins from the Saga Kingdom as well.

This was a dangerous world, where just going on a date in the city could get you dragged into riots and dungeons that appeared beneath your feet. I thought it would be best to give her a bit of money, just in case anything happened.

“You’re giving gold to a slave…? Master, are you very rich?”

“I just happened to have a bit of a windfall, that’s all.”

Arisa’s eyes widened when she saw the contents of the purse.

I had intended for it to be a small amount, but I found out later that a commoner’s monthly wages amounted to less than one gold coin. The cost of living was clearly different here, so I couldn’t say for sure, but my impression was that one gold coin was comparable to somewhere between fifty and a hundred thousand yen… That didn’t seem like much to live on.

“I’m sure you know this, but don’t use it unless it’s an emergency, all right?”

“Of course!”

There was an ambiguity in Arisa’s answer that I didn’t like, but there was no one else I could entrust the money to, so I pretended not to notice.

I did have the “Sewing” skill, so maybe I could make amulets for the other kids with a gold coin sewn inside.

“Arisa, I have one last question.”

“Okay, let ’er rip!”

Arisa’s jovial reply made her sound like a baseball player.

“May I ask how you became a slave? This one isn’t an order. It’s all right if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Arisa was hesitant for a moment, then slowly started to speak.

“I tried to use my knowledge from my previous life to make my hometown prosper…but I failed. I was a princess then, you know,” she added lightly. “It went well at first, but then I met with failure so unnatural that the kingdom fell to civil war, and in the end a neighboring country captured me.”

“What did you do?”

“Just normal agrarian reform. As the basis of my reign, I showed them how to use humus, fertilizer, four-field crop rotation, and other basic hacks.”

I’d never heard the term *hacks* applied to domestic policy before. I assumed that meant she’d used her advanced knowledge to improve the agriculture of the kingdom.

“But how could that have failed so badly that the whole kingdom fell apart?”

“That’s why I called it an ‘unnatural’ failure. All the crops we planted in the humus-rich topsoil failed. The fertilizer that was in the decomposing process was suddenly infested with bug-type monsters, and the fallow fields that were recovering their fertility with clovers and turnips failed and became barren… That sort of thing.”

That certainly sounded like the kind of phenomenon you’d find in a fantasy world, but since she’d appended the word *unnatural*…

“Did somebody cause all that?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know that until much later. At the time, I felt terrible, convinced it was because of differences between the soil in this world and the

one we came from. They started calling me names like ‘Witch of the Lost Kingdom’ and ‘Mad Princess.’”

So that was where those titles had come from.

I’m sorry, Arisa. I assumed you used Psychic Magic to manipulate the kingdom and create a harem of handsome young men or something.

“Still, if the perpetrator wanted to take over the kingdom, what would be the profit in destroying it? That doesn’t make much sense to me.”

“They didn’t care about the state of some impoverished kingdom. They just wanted the ‘Withered Labyrinth’ that was under the castle.” Arisa gnawed on the ends of her curled fingers in frustration. “Once they took over the country, they appeased the angry citizens by holding a public execution of the king, the queen, and the crown prince.”

Regret darkening her face, Arisa’s eyes filled with tears.

“Then they gathered the remaining princes and princesses and said, ‘This kingdom was destroyed because of your stupidity. You are not fit to be royalty.’ On their orders, the royal sorcerers used a gift called “Geis” on the children, starting with me. It curses the victim to be a slave until the day they die. Believing that the kingdom had been ruined all because of my actions, I accepted the curse and became a slave.”

I reached under the pillow to use Storage again and produced a handkerchief to wipe away her tears.

“Why would they make you become a slave?”

“In order to carry out a ritual to revive the Withered Labyrinth I mentioned before. Slaves can’t fight back or run away, and unlike a contract, there was only one person in the whole kingdom who could undo a Geis…”

Arisa grasped the handkerchief tightly in one hand and my own hand in the other as she continued.

“Every month, on the night of the full moon, one of us would be sent into the labyrinth as sacrifices for that terrible ritual…”

Her grip on my hand slackened.

“After a year, the labyrinth had been resurrected. The only two sacrifices who survived were Lulu, my father’s illegitimate child, and me, with my violet hair. We were taken from the tower we’d been imprisoned in to a nearby villa. I don’t know why they didn’t dispose of us on the spot… Maybe they were keeping us as backups in case the labyrinth needed to be revived again.”

If Lulu was the illegitimate child of a king, that must have made her technically royalty by blood.

Since they seemed to be of very different races, I had mostly assumed that Arisa and Lulu were stepsisters, but I guess they were related by blood after all.

“Then, on the night of the next full moon, a tragedy occurred. A hell demon appeared out of nowhere, destroying the castle and its surrounding town. The villa that we were in burned as well, and Lulu fled with me into the mountains.”

Arisa had received an order not to leave the villa, but she was freed from this when the castle was destroyed and the retainer who’d been registered as her master was killed.

“I thought for sure that I would burn to death there, but since I noticed that Lulu’s title had changed to Masterless, we were able to escape in the nick of time. If I had been alone, I would surely have died there.”

Arisa sat on my lap now, her hand entwined in mine. Her hand still trembled, though, so I let her stay there.

“After that, we wandered in the mountains until the slave trader Nidoren found us, when we were on the brink of death. Slaves without masters can’t simply walk into a town, after all. I did my best to put up just enough of a fuss to avoid being sold to some perverted noble or something. I thought a hole would open up in my stomach from the stress alone.”

She was leaning her small head on my arm, so I couldn’t see her face.

“Couldn’t you have manipulated Nidoren with Psychic Magic to treat you as his daughters or something like that?”

“You’re right. But I was so desperate to behave that it didn’t occur to me until after we had gone through with the contract to become Nidoren’s slaves.”

“You still could have used magic to manipulate him after that…”

“If I did, it would have been a violation of the contract. My collar would have tightened around my neck—I could’ve even died.”

Hmm? Wait a minute.

I turned Arisa’s head to face me.

“Didn’t you just use magic on me earlier? How is *that* not a violation of our contract?”

Looking up at me, she grinned a little. “That was part of my service as a slave. I made an oath during the contract ceremony, remember?”

—At all times, day or night, I will always serve my master with all my power.

“See? I was just using my magic to ‘energetically’ serve you! So, if you’d just give in and embrace my body, I can…”

She started to come at me again with grabby hands, but I put a stop to that with another karate chop to her forehead.

“By the way, what was that hell demon’s goal?”

“I have no idea. Knowing demons, it was probably just looking for a labyrinth where they could raise a demon lord, no?”

Did that mean they were brood parasites, then? Like cuckoos?

“Do labyrinths exist to foster demon lords?”

“There are scholars who claim as much, but the gods have neither confirmed nor denied it. Still, just about every demon lord that’s emerged so far was first sighted near a labyrinth.”

Then did Mr. Eyeball create the labyrinth in Seiryuu City in order to summon a demon lord here?

Come to think of it, I think the landlady at the Gatefront Inn said something similar before.

“Oh, right… Can I ask you a question, too, master?”

“What is it?”

“Before we came into the inn, you said you ‘wouldn’t have made it out of the labyrinth alive’ without Liza and the other two, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“Have you been to the Labyrinth City Celivera?”

“No, I haven’t.”

That was the city where there was less discrimination against demi-humans, right?

I didn’t know if the streets there formed a labyrinth or if there were entrances to a labyrinth on the outskirts of the city, but I wanted to see it for myself sometime.

“Then was it a labyrinth in another kingdom?”

“No, no. I meant the one that was formed right here in Seiryuu City.”

“What?!” cried Arisa, dumbfounded for a moment. “So the disturbance Nidoren got caught up in was a labyrinth?!” Once she recovered, she practically shouted the question at me.

Your face is too close. Pushing her back, I explained the riot we’d happened upon and how the demon had created a labyrinth.

I omitted the part where I had put on a silver mask and defeated a greater hell demon.

“So you’re saying this hell demon created a new labyrinth?”

I nodded in response to Arisa’s astonishment.

Was that really so surprising?

“Well, there are only six living labyrinths in this entire continent. The newest one was created more than a hundred years ago. I read in a book that it sprang from the corpse of a demon lord.”

“Since a lesser hell demon created it, I assumed that labyrinths were commonplace around here.”

“As if it could be so easy! It’s supposed to be impossible to create a labyrinth without a legendary artifact. What could it have been trying to do…?”

“Mass-produce more demons and fight heroes, maybe?”

Paying no attention to my arbitrary response, Arisa pondered the matter with a serious expression.

Putting your hands on my shoulders while you do that is fine, but please stop trying to wrap your legs around my waist.

“If that was all, an old labyrinth like in Celivera would work just fine. The older the labyrinth, the larger the scale, so I don’t know why it would go out of its way to make a new one.”

“Then maybe it was just a diversion or part of some strategy for the future?”

Like to grab the attention of the hero, or something like that.

“That could be the case.”

Arisa didn’t look convinced. I patted her head gently.

There was way too little information to figure out what the demon was thinking. At the very least, there were no demons in the county or inside the labyrinth, and it didn’t seem like there were any hiding with mimicry like the eyeball demon had before.

Maybe one could be summoned, like the big guy I beat before, but there was no point in worrying about it before it happened.

If I let that kind of stuff weigh on me all the time, I’d probably just go bald.

“Perhaps I could enter the Seiryuu City labyrinth, too?”

Arisa looked up at me seriously as she spoke. *Okay, but why are you pushing out your flat chest like that?*

“I don’t think so. From what I heard from someone of authority, the entrance is under quarantine right now.”

“I see…”

Well, Zena hadn’t exactly said so in as many words, but that was the sense I got from what she had told me back at the castle.

“Why do you want to enter the labyrinth, anyway? What could you do in such a dangerous place full of monsters?”

“I want to enter *because* of the monsters.”

“Oh? Do you have a grudge against them or something?”

“Nothing like that. I just want to level up.”

Level up…? This isn’t a game…but I guess the fact that it’s reality is all the more reason to want to raise your level.

When the beastfolk girls’ levels had gone up, for instance, their base stats increased, and so did their chances for survival. In this dangerous world, having a high level was definitely important.

Still, the citizens here had pretty low levels despite all that. Even the soldiers were only around levels five to seven.

“If you want to go in that badly, I can ask my friend for you.” Arisa had seemed so deep in worried thought, I’d blurted the words without thinking.

“Really?!”

“Sure, but I don’t know if they’ll actually agree, so don’t get your hopes up too much.”

“Okay! Thank you!”

Arisa’s face shone with self-serving adoration, so I promptly removed her and finally managed to pull a shirt down over her head.

“Are there no other methods to level up besides defeating monsters, though?”

“Of course there are. But this is the most effective.”

This system reminded me of an MMORPG.

When I used to play, I would always set out to hunt the monsters that gave the most EXP.

“Apparently, killing monsters yields many times more experience than killing people or animals. This is only what I gathered from listening in on the soldiers and knights at the castle, though, so I don’t know the details behind it.”

That was probably for the best. If they all yielded the same experience, I could easily imagine nobles slaughtering slaves and peasants to gain levels or raising

livestock to kill and not to eat.

“Did you raise your level by defeating monsters, too, Arisa?”

“It would have been much faster if I had. But no, I did it by reading books. Did you know? When you acquire new knowledge, you gain a certain amount of experience. Thanks to that, I was able to level up while I was still confined in the castle.”

Oh, I get it. Since this wasn’t really a game, I guess it wouldn’t make much sense if combat was the only way you could level up.

For the rest of the evening, Arisa and I discussed the systems of this world until she fell asleep.

Misunderstandings Are the Spice of Love

Satou here. It seems like romantic comedies in every country and culture are full of misunderstandings and missed connections to add excitement. But in reality, those things tend to lead to breakups, so I prefer avoiding them.

Outside the window, I could hear the sounds of hustle and bustle on the streets. Had I overslept?

Fighting to resist the inviting warmth of the bed, I turned my thoughts to the events of the day before.

I had gained a lot of knowledge the previous night and had even learned how Arisa became a slave.

Just as Arisa was falling asleep, I had asked her if I should free her from slavery, but she explained that the Geis that had been placed on her bound her to being a slave.

Being freed from slavery would apparently mean she had opposed the rules of the Geis, and she would immediately start to bleed everywhere and die. *This "Geis" skill really is like a curse.*

A place with a lot of people, like the old capital or the royal capital, was bound to have someone with the skill to erase or rewrite a Geis, so I'd have to wait to free her until then.

Once I had figured out last night that Arisa had used magic to charm me, I had resolved to get away from her for a while first thing in the morning; however, I had learned some things that made me feel bad for her, too, and it would be pretty heartless to abandon a kid, without any relatives, from my own faraway country.

I might come to regret that kindness in the future, but for now, all I could do was focus on the present. *If something happens, I'll just blow right through it*

with my level-310 power and absurd wealth.

At that moment, the door burst open, crushing my arrogant determination.

You could at least knock.

“Are you awake, Mr. Satou? Your lover’s here to see you!”

Even in the morning, Martha was always very energetic.

Behind her, I heard Zena mumble, “I-I’m not his…” as she tried to cover Martha’s mouth in a flustered panic.

“Good morning.” I sat up and greeted the pair.

Felt chilly— Oh, right. My shirt was still off from that incident last night.

“Ooh, you’ve got a pretty nice bod!”

Martha looked at my bare chest with a great deal of interest. Zena cowered behind her and covered her reddened face with her hands, but she was clearly staring through the gaps between her fingers.

I would think someone in the military would be used to seeing a half-naked guy.

“I’m sorry you had to see this. I’ll get changed right away.”

I put my hands on the bed to hoist myself up.

“Oooh…”

Something felt warm.

Looking down, I was greeted by the sight of a half-naked little girl. My hand had landed on her bare chest— *Oh, right. She just fell asleep like that.*

Seeing that I was sharing a bed with a young girl, Zena’s face rapidly changed color from bright red to a pale white.

“…Master…please, no more… I don’t think I can take it…”

As if aiming to damn me further, Lulu chose this precise moment to start talking in her sleep.

I looked at her bed to see that she had rolled over in her sleep and was lying on her side with her back facing me. But her shirt had gotten tangled up in the

process, and her cute little bottom was in plain view. *Right…and she's not wearing underwear.*

On top of that, there was a red stain on the sheets…

Huh? She wasn't hurt, was she?

"H-h-how depraved! Satou, how could yooooou!"

Zena fled the room, sobbing into her hands.

Martha scratched her head awkwardly. "Sorry to interrupt… Take your time…" She shuffled out, closing the door behind her.



Wow, I'd never heard anyone say *depraved* out loud before.

The first thought I could muster was decidedly detached.

"Master, would you happen to have a clean piece of cloth? It looks like Lulu's menstruating."

I retrieved the cloth from my bag and handed it to Arisa without a word.

"Thank you. So, you're not going to go after her? If you don't hurry, she's only going to make things worse in her head, no?"

Well, she was just my friend, not my "lover"…

Still, I wouldn't want a friend to be convinced that I was a pedophile, either, so I guess I'd better run after her and clear this up.

Chasing her down half-naked wouldn't help my case, so I threw on the shirt that had fallen on the floor. Needless to say, I had been wearing trousers the whole time.

Checking the radar, I saw that Zena had just left the inn and was heading toward Center Street. *She's really fast… I guess she* is *in the military.* At this rate, she'd be passing below this room in just a moment.

…This feature is definitely useful, but it'd be pretty terrifying in the hands of a stalker.

As that idiotic thought passed through my brain, I judged the timing and jumped out the window onto the street.

I landed right in front of Zena, blocking her path. Startled, she tried to skid to a halt, and I caught her in my arms, spinning her once like a dancer to disperse her momentum.

> Skill Acquired: "Dancing"

"Zena, this is all a misunderstanding."

Zena put both her hands on my chest, trying to push me away. But there was very little strength behind her push. *I can't let her go now.*

If I did, she'd never believe me—she'd get caught up in negative thoughts and convince herself it was true, even if she didn't want to believe it.

“But you were sleeping with that adorable girl!”

“She must have been half-asleep and gotten into the wrong bed.”

In that case, this wasn’t a problem, right?

I mean, even yesterday, I was wearing underwear and everything. I’d like to take a moment to very loudly proclaim my innocence.

I did *not* have a Lolita complex!

“And there was the other girl with the black hair, too! W-waaah…”

“If you mean the elder sister with the poor sleeping habits, it’s apparently her time of the month.”

This part I whispered quietly into Zena’s ear, since I didn’t really want to talk about it on the street so loudly.

Finally, the force of Zena’s pushing was faltering.

“B-but Lilio told me that if a man buys a female slave, it can only be for services after dark…!”

Damn that Lilio.

Deep in my heart, I hurled curses toward the woman, who was probably patrolling outside the city right now.

Lilio was one of Zena’s guards and apparently one of her closest friends, so she was probably just trying to protect the pure and innocent Zena, but I had to draw the line at baseless accusations.

“That depends on the person. Those two girls are just my maids! Liza and the others can serve as guards, but they aren’t very well suited to going shopping for me and such.”

“…But…”

Maybe she understands now, but her feelings haven’t caught up yet?

I guess saying something like “If that were my goal, I would’ve bought a sexy adult woman” would just make her angry again, so I’d keep that to myself.

“Your outfit makes you look quite different from last time. The frills add a nice

touch of style to your classic tidy look… It really draws out your charms."

A time like this called for vague compliments.

Zena mumbled, "Oh…this old thing…" in an embarrassed tone, but she did look a little happier despite herself.

"It's lovely, but aren't you cold being so lightly dressed?"

"No, I'm quite used to it, so I'm fine."

That's not how this exchange is supposed to go, Zena.

You're supposed to take the guy's arm and say, "I'll be warm as long as we stay close!" or something playful like that!

"Come to think of it, there's a stall near here that sells some beautiful scarves. Would you like to go see? I'm sure they'd look great on you, Zena."

"Really? I'd love to!"

Perfect, I'd managed to change the subject!

On the first day that I came to Seiryuu City, I had noticed that Martha's eyes were locked on this particular boutique.

After we had inspected dozens upon dozens of scarves and shawls, Zena picked out a pink scarf, and I bought it for her as a present.

It took a little bit of a quarrel to get her to accept it, but by the time we left the store, her good mood seemed to have recovered completely.

…Women sure take a long time to shop, though.

When I returned to the inn with Zena in tow, Arisa was standing near the entrance beckoning to me. There was an entrance to the inn's courtyard meant for horse-drawn carriages right near where she was standing.

"Welcome back, master. I'm glad you seem to have cleared up the misunderstanding," Arisa said smoothly, as if she hadn't caused the problem in the first place. I flicked her lightly on the forehead. "Oww…"

"Thanks. What are you doing out here?"

"I was starting to get hungry, so I came to ask Liza to share some food with

me.”

“Did you eat already?”

“Yes, and Lulu is still eating with them. But she doesn’t seem to have much of an appetite…”

Right, I suppose cheese and smoked meat wouldn’t be very appealing if you weren’t feeling well. I gave Arisa a few coppers and asked her to go buy some fruit.

Meanwhile, I went back to the room to change my clothes.

Zena waited for me in the barroom on the first floor, where I suggested she drink some fruit-flavored water.

Back in my room, I poured some water from the Well Bag into the copper washbasin that was set against the table and used it to wash my face. I seemed to be free of bedhead, so I just ran a damp hand through my hair for good measure. *I’ll have to find out sometime what they use for hair product in this world.*

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Zena.”

“It’s all right. I’ve been chatting with Martha here.”

“I’ll leave you two alone.” Martha went back to her work right away.

Just as she left, Arisa appeared in the doorway, so I sent her to summon Liza and the others.

Lulu looked awfully pale, so I let her return to the room. The maid, Yuni, happened to be passing by, so I asked her to bring some water up to our room, giving her a penny coin as a tip.

I went back outside with Zena, where Arisa was just approaching with Liza and the girls.

“Use this money to buy clothes and daily necessities for everyone, please. I’ll leave calculation and price negotiation to you, Arisa. Liza, please protect Arisa and the girls from any pickpockets or kidnappers.”

I handed a small pouch containing ten silver coins or so to Liza. Arisa got

another pouch with two silvers and some change.

It would be dangerous to keep all the money in one place, so I figured it would be best to take the same precautions as if we were traveling abroad.

Arisa asked me in a whisper if she could use skills and magic for concealment and keeping an eye on their surroundings, so I granted her permission. I had forgotten to lift the ban I'd given her last night.

"I'll protect us, too, sir!"

"Me, toooo!"

"All right, you two can flank Arisa to guard her, then."

"Yes, sir!"

"'kaaay!"

Pochi and Tama seemed excited, so I patted their heads.

Wow, their hair felt a lot smoother than it used to…probably because they bathed every day at the castle.

"Oh, right. If you find a charmer who can use Everyday Magic, get them to use a cleaning spell on everyone's clothes."

With these instructions, I gave the girls a few more silvers to use for cleaning magic.

"Excuse me, master. If we have money left over, can we buy ourselves some sweets?"

"Sure, as long as it's no more than a large copper. It'll be lunchtime soon enough, so make sure you don't just buy snacks."

With an enthusiastic "Yes, sir," Arisa led the charge down a back road toward Teputa Avenue.

Pochi and Tama flanked her on either side, making her look like the ringleader of some neighborhood gang. Liza looked like their guardian as she followed close behind them.

"They seem quite informal for slaves, don't they?"

“I know that might not be the typical way to handle things, but I find it easier this way.”

I was sure I would have become absolute trash in no time if they ran around waiting on me hand and foot, so I definitely preferred this.

Nidoren had taught me a lot about slaves, but I thought I was allowed to be a little informal if I wanted.

◆

“Do you have the day off from work today?”

“Yes, the first stage of the investigation is over, so we were given one day off.”

Zena smiled happily, but if you asked me, giving them just a single day off in the time since we escaped the labyrinth seemed like an extremely sketchy business practice. What an intense work environment.

She didn’t seem to mind, so I wasn’t going to say anything, but I hoped she didn’t collapse from overwork.

“Will you be going back to your home unit tomorrow?”

“No, a newly established special labyrinth force will be taking over starting tomorrow. I won’t be able to go back to my usual patrol unit for at least five more days.”

Zena explained that there were two different kinds of patrol units: those that went on long patrols for two or three days at a time and those that went out for only one day.

Units that included magic soldiers would usually be sent out on the longer ranging patrols, so once she rejoined her unit, I probably wouldn’t be able to see her much.

Come to think of it, hadn’t Arisa wanted to go into the labyrinth?

“Zena, is the labyrinth closed to everyone but military personnel right now?”

“Yes, and it will probably stay closed for several months at least. Why? Is there someone you know who still hasn’t come out of the labyrinth?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. I was just a bit curious, that’s all. I’m sorry if I worried you.”

Looked like Arisa wouldn’t be getting her wish anytime soon.

Especially given the situation with the beastfolk girls, maybe we should head to Labyrinth City when we were done sightseeing in Seiryuu City?

It’d be a little sad to say good-bye to Zena, but I was sure I could come back and visit again.

“Satou, do you have any plans for today?”

I was so lost in thought, I responded to Zena’s question without really thinking about it.

“Yes, I was planning to go to a general store to see if they could point me toward an inn that’ll accept demi-humans. I can’t just let Liza and the girls keep sleeping in the barn, after all.”

“U-um, in that case, would it be all right if I join you?”

Wringing her hands, Zena looked up at me anxiously.

“I don’t mind, but are you sure you want to waste your precious day off on something so boring?”

“Yes!”

I didn’t think it’d be much fun for her to follow me around while I looked for a place to stay… But her smile was so bright as she replied, I couldn’t turn her down.

So with Zena in tow, I headed toward the general store across from the plaza at the main gate.

“Hello, is anyone here?”

There was nobody to be found on the first floor of the general store, so I called out loudly.

I could see on my radar that there was someone on the second floor, so I adjusted my volume accordingly. Since I got the “Amplification” skill before, I could raise my voice without any strain to my throat.

A calm voice called, “Coming!” from the second floor, and I heard the patter of footsteps coming down the stairs.

Shortly past the entrance of the general store was a wooden counter, behind which there was a sofa set and a massive work desk.

There were all kinds of documents piled up on the table by the sofa set. The place had the atmosphere of a detective’s office from a bygone era.

“Thank you for waiting. I’m Nadi, a general merchant.”

A woman who looked about twenty or so appeared from upstairs, her red hair woven up in a bun. She was wearing a white shirt and a deep-emerald-green jumper skirt.

“What can I do for you today?”

“Well, I was hoping you could help me find an inn or a house for rent…”

I explained that I needed a place that would allow my demi-human slaves to stay with me, and with good security.

A quiet place would be nice if possible, but that wasn’t as high a priority as the first two things.

“With demi-humans, you’ll be best off in the west quarter or the nearby workers’ district. I’d be worried about the chances of crime at an inn in that area, so I think a rented house would be ideal.”

Nadi flipped through some folders of real estate information.

I was surprised that they actually had ledgers like that—but I guess it would be rude to say that out loud.

“What does your budget look like?”

“Well, I suppose around two silvers would be ideal. If that’s not enough, I can go as high as one gold coin.”

“In that case, there should be some options.”

Based on the fact that the Gatefront Inn was considered a bit expensive at one large copper coin a night, and considering the extra people with me and a little margin of error, I estimated about two silver coins.

I thought that would be a lot, but judging by Nadi's reaction, I guess it was just barely enough.

"I believe that these three places would be able to meet your requests. However…" Nadi hesitated for a moment before she explained. Apparently, all three of these houses had a questionable history.

I decided it would be best to have a look at each one before deciding whether to rent any of them.

House number one was a two-story estate over three thousand square feet in size, and a member of some criminal guild had assassinated its former owner. It had the appearance of a stately Western house, with ivy climbing the stone outer walls.

When I examined the floor plan in 3-D with my map, I discovered a huge hole in an area that couldn't be seen from the main gate.

This was probably where the assassin broke in, and they'd just left it as is.

Garden shrubs made it impossible to see the hole from outside the grounds, so I asked for a tour and then led them to the hole—under the guise of getting lost, of course.

We passed by the second house without stopping the carriage—the reason being that it was directly behind a street lined with brothels.

As soon as Nadi began to explain as much, Zena instructed the coachman to keep driving, her voice hard.

I could see from the side that her face was turning bright red, which was kind of cute.

The third house was a crumbling mansion right near the outer walls of the city, said to be haunted by ghosts.

Apparently, it had been the home of a noble until about a hundred years ago. It was the biggest Western-style house I'd seen yet, but we definitely couldn't live there.

Part of it was that I really disliked horror and gore, but more importantly, the basement of the haunted mansion appeared to be the hideout of a criminal

guild.

All kinds of murderers and other serious felons were lurking around inside.

I was sure they must have started the rumor that the place was haunted in order to stay in hiding there until things blew over.

…Hmm?

There was some strange movement on my radar. A few dots were moving around just outside the grounds of the mansion.

Finding it suspicious, I took a closer look on the map and discovered an underground tunnel that led outside the city. My guess would be that it had been there since a noble owned the mansion. It looked like it was being used for smuggling and such.

Nadi started to head inside, but I stopped her.

“I have a strange feeling about this place. Let’s not go in. It’s probably cursed.”

Zena looked at me with surprise. I guess that wasn’t the sort of thing that someone would say after escaping a labyrinth full of wandering skeletons and monsters.

“If there’s a ghost or some kind of undead monster, you could always pay a temple to come and do an exorcism.”

Nadi proposed the sort of solution one would expect from a fantasy world, but if we actually called a priest, I was sure the criminals below would just hide themselves away.

I’ll write a letter later explaining what I know and drop it off at a guard station or something.

I was sure my “Secret Maneuvers” skill would come in handy there.

◆

In the end, none of the houses we visited met all my requirements, so our rental house tour came to an end.

“With a budget of two silver coins per trimoon, I’m sure there must be more

options out there. I'll check with some other companies this afternoon and find a few more properties that might work."

Nadi seemed to be more than willing to take charge, so we decided I'd return to the store again in the evening.

I'd meant for my budget to be two silver coins per day, but apparently, the standard measurement for rented houses was trimoons (ten-day periods).

I really needed to check these things more thoroughly.

Since I now had time to kill until evening, I asked Zena if there was anywhere she wanted to go. Apparently, the restaurant she liked required reservations in advance, so it wouldn't be possible to go there today.

Zena looked a bit crestfallen about this, but Nadi came to her rescue.

"A flea market just opened up yesterday in the plaza nearby. There are always tons of bargains there, so the shop manager and I usually go around on the last day picking up things on clearance." To Zena, she added, "It's a great place for a date," causing Zena's face to turn red.

Since we were already there, we decided to have a look around the flea market and come back to the store after.

According to Nadi, there was a popular love story called *The Tragedy of Muno Marquisate* being performed on the outdoor stage that had been set up in the market.

There were a lot of people there, so I narrowed down the range of my radar, zooming in to a radius of fifteen feet around me. I knew this should be enough to get a good idea of who was coming near me.

"Master! Sir!"

"Found yooou!"

Pochi and Tama both vigorously latched onto my waist.

Behind them, I could see Liza and Arisa as well.

"Oh? What happened with the shopping?"

"Our baggage was starting to get heavy, so we dropped it all off at the inn.

Look at this!”

Arisa took off her hooded overcoat and handed it to Liza, then did a little twirl on the spot.

Her pale pink skirt fluttered in the air, showing off a glimpse of her bare legs—although, being a child, there was nothing whatsoever to “show off.”

These must have been new clothes from Teputa Avenue.

Pochi and Tama opened their overcoats, too, proudly showing off their new outfits. Tama wore a cute ruffled pink dress, Pochi wore an outfit like Martha’s, with a white dress shirt and yellow skirt, and Liza now sported a sturdy-looking getup that looked like a military uniform. She was wearing trousers underneath a skirt.

Pochi and Tama tried to twirl around and show off like Arisa had, but since the plaza was getting more crowded, Liza stopped them.

“You all look very cute.” I patted Pochi and Tama over their hoods, praising everyone. I wasn’t just being polite, either—they really were cute. “By the way, is that a wig?”

“Heh-heh, that’s right! It’s to hide the color of my hair.”

Indeed, Arisa was wearing a golden-blond wig.

Apparently, she bought it in order to keep her violet-colored hair from causing problems with its cursed association.

“Is that all right?”

“Yes, of course.”

Since it’d ward off trouble, I’d consider it a necessary expense.

“But there is one more thing that I wanted to talk to you about buying…”

Arisa pressed her nonexistent chest up against me, batting her eyes at me coquettishly.

“Cut that out. What is it that you need?”

I pulled Arisa off me as I asked the question.

Zena's gaze seemed to be boring a hole into me, for one thing, and it'd be even worse if Pochi and Tama started copying that behavior.

After letting Zena know where we were going, I went with Arisa to see what she wanted to buy. The open-air stall she led me to had *karuta*-style playing cards on display.

With permission from the young shopkeeper, I picked one up to examine it.

The front of each card had drawings of wells, buckets, and so on, while the back showed a Shigan word that corresponded to the picture.

The pictures were monochromatic, but key points were made to stand out so that it was easy to understand what was being depicted, for the most part. I wasn't sure at first what the "water" card was supposed to be, but there weren't many other ambiguous cards like it.

There were a hundred in the set altogether, each one carefully illustrated.

This might be a good way to teach Pochi and Tama some vocabulary.

"What an interesting idea."

"Thanks! I thought of them myself, to teach my kids back home how to read."

Apparently, the shopkeeper started out by drawing them on wood scraps with charcoal. Thinking he might be able to sell them, he became acquainted with a painter and talked him into making a set, then looked for a company to sell them.

However, he explained that he wasn't able to make a deal, as they couldn't come to an agreement between the cost of production and the selling price. Apparently, the cards cost four silvers to make, but the company wanted to sell them for only one.

"So each one is painted individually?"

"Well, yes, of course…"

Wouldn't it be much cheaper to use woodblock prints?

I started to propose this out loud, but Arisa tugged my arm and stopped me, putting her index finger over her lips.

“What is it?”

“You were going to suggest prints, right?”

Arisa spoke to me in a whisper, so I responded in a whisper as well.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I didn’t see any prints in my castle, either. It’s dangerous to just go around teaching people new techniques, you know!”

“They have seals here but not woodblock prints?”

“That’s just how technology goes.”

Come to think of it, I vaguely remembered that even in history back on Earth, there were more than a thousand years between the invention of seals and the invention of woodblock printing. I guess it took a while to take a technique from one field and apply it to another.

I was sort of surprised that the people who’d been reincarnated or summoned into this world before me hadn’t already spread things like woodblocks and printing, though.

Since Arisa had experienced the consequences of this sort of thing before, I gave in to her wishes and stopped myself from suggesting the prints.

Wrapping up our private discussion, we returned to the young shopkeeper.

“Sorry about that. I guess she didn’t like our complicated conversation.”

“Oh, no—I should be the one to apologize. Not many people take interest in this sort of thing, so…”

There weren’t many people interested? It seemed like the kind of thing that would sell pretty well.

“Well, I’d like to buy a set. How much is it?”

The young man’s melancholic expression brightened a bit, and he said one set would be four silver coins… *Wait, didn’t it cost that much to make them?*

“Are you sure? How will you make any profit, then?”

“It’s all right. I’m happy enough just to have someone who understands the

appeal of my product buy it at all.”

I couldn’t just be indifferent to this poor man’s plight. It’d be a shame to let his great idea go to waste.

“What’s your plan for the next time you make them? It seems like there’s a demand, so the only problem is the price. It wouldn’t be so bad to experiment a little, right? You could try to find cheaper material or maybe some method of cheaply mass-producing them.”

I couldn’t help but make a small comment as I handed him my payment… A little bit of advice couldn’t hurt, right?

I stole a glance over my shoulder just long enough to see the fire returning to the young shopkeeper’s eyes as we walked away from the stall.

I handed Arisa the study cards I’d purchased.

“What’s left to buy after this?”

“A few small personal necessities and such. If there’s enough room in the budget, is it all right if I buy some sewing tools and a hand mirror?”

“Sure, as long as it’s a necessary item and within the budget, I don’t mind. In fact, it’s fine if the hand mirror is a little outside the budget, so go ahead and buy one for us.”

Checking my reflection in the water in the washbasin was a pain, so I’d been wanting one.

I did get an item labeled **Broken Mirror** in my spoils from the Valley of Dragons, but I’d probably hurt myself if I tried to use it.

Parting ways with the others as they left to continue shopping, Zena and I started to head toward the stage to see the play, but Arisa’s voice stopped me.

“Master, aren’t you going to see the stage play?”

“That’s the plan.”

“You bought the tickets they were selling at the entrance to the flea market, then?”

“No, I didn’t…”

I didn’t know they were selling the tickets there.

It was pretty busy here, but I was sure we could get there if we just followed the flow of the crowd.

“Lilio told me you just have to pay a penny at the stage entrance…”

“You could do that, but then you’ll have to stand in the back and watch. The tickets cost two coppers, but you can get a seat inside if you have them.”

“It’s ten times more expensive just to be able to sit?”

Zena was surprised, but I just thought the standing seats were very cheap.

I didn’t know how long the play was, but I was sure it would be better to sit.

Apparently, Arisa and the others wanted to go, too, so I said I would buy tickets for the six of us, but Liza insisted on doing it for me instead.

I gave Liza a little pouch with twelve copper coins, and the rest of us headed toward the stage, still browsing the flea market as we went.

We ended up leading the kids around with us as we looked at the stalls, which I worried was unfair to Zena.

I apologized to her tentatively, but she seemed to be having fun, and I didn’t sense any displeasure as she walked around holding hands with Pochi and Tama. Still, I’d have to remember to follow up with her about it later.

The stalls at the flea market were something of a mixed bag.

One stall had very junky-looking accessories crafted from bone, mixed in with some lovely silver earrings.

“These would match your blond hair perfectly, Zena.”

“They are very nice…”

Zena looked pleased as she held them up to her ears and asked how they looked, so I was quick to praise her.

Off to the side, Arisa announced that she wanted something, too, so we bought some ribbons at the stall next door.

I bought them for everyone, of course, including Lulu, who was resting back at

the inn.

Zena looked reluctant to part with the earrings as she put them back. I would've bought them for her right away if she had just asked like Arisa did.

Arisa and the girls took Zena's hand and led her to the next stall, so I took that opportunity to buy the earrings she'd been looking at. *I'll give them to her on the way home or something.*

We met up with Liza once she had gotten the tickets, and I bought her a tassel for her spear as thanks for her troubles.

Wherever we went, I was able to buy things for much cheaper than the price my "Estimation" skill suggested. I wasn't sure whether that was because of my "Haggling" and "Negotiation" skills or simply the nature of a flea market.

On our way toward the stage, pickpockets and extortionists approached us twice, but my radar let me know that someone hostile was approaching, so I was able to take care of it easily.

I caught the pickpocket and turned him in to a group of stern-faced men who'd been hired to patrol the area by the person running the flea market.

This sort of criminal would probably be dealt with severely by the law, so that was all well and good, but then I had to deal with the men trying to hit on Zena.

Whenever they went after Zena, Liza or I stepped in to physically remove them.

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"Beautiful maiden, I long to admire your smile not beneath the moonlight but beneath the bright and shining light of the sun."

"Aah, my beloved Zen, this castle is but a prison to me. Use your magic to whisk me away from here!"

On the stage, a man in a sorcerer's hooded robe was romancing a black-haired actress in a gown. Their enthusiastic performance lost a bit of its impact in front of a cheesy painted moon, though.

…*Zen, huh?* Ever since meeting Arisa, I'd been on the alert whenever I heard a Japanese-sounding name. *Zen* could definitely be written like the Buddhist

concept or the kanji for *virtue*, for example.

I wasn't really interested in stories of star-crossed lovers, so I couldn't focus on the story, and my mind ended up wandering.

On the other hand, Zena and Arisa seemed to like the story very much: They were leaning forward in their seats, completely absorbed in the story.

The play was apparently based on a true story, so the number of characters made things a little confusing. It must have been too hard for Pochi and Tama to follow, because they had fallen asleep using my lap as a pillow.

Liza was watching the stage with a serious expression, but she seemed to be focusing on the scent of spit-roasted meat wafting from somewhere behind the stage, not the play itself.

Her eyes had narrowed as if she was sizing up her prey the moment the scent of roasting chicken fat drifted toward us, so there was no question about it.

While I'd been entertaining myself by pinching the noses of the dozing Pochi and Tama, the story unfolding on the stage had moved forward.

"I have you now! How dare you, a lowly plebian sorcerer, abduct my fiancée, Princess Liltiena? I, Marquis Muno, will see that you pay for this crime!"

With his knights in tow, the portly marquis had apparently tracked down the heroes of the story.

Standing at the edge of a set made to look like a cliff, the hero waved his staff, protecting the heroine. For some reason, there was a woman in a maid-like outfit standing behind them.

That maid sure looks like she'll raise an event flag.

With a dramatic flourish during the final line of his speech, the actor pulled away the black curtain at the front of the stage to expose the painted backdrop to the bright sunlight.

"Ahhh!"

"Geh!"

Zena and Arisa recoiled in their seats, each grabbing on to one of my arms.

The painting that had been revealed depicted a gallows and the bodies of those who had been beheaded.

Personally, I thought it was in bad taste, but judging from the shrieks and cheers of the audience, it seemed to be well received.

The people in this city seemed pretty open to violence.

“Father! Mother! Damn you, Marquis, you’ve claimed even the lives of my young siblings and cousins…!”

“You think you’ve any right to be angry? A commoner rebelled against the marquis. It’s only natural that his entire family should be beheaded! Be thankful that I saw fit to spare them any torture before disposing of them!”

A flood of red tears poured from the hero’s eyes. *How did they do that?*

The protagonist’s magic blew violently, sweeping the knights who protected the marquis off to the side of the stage.

Of course, it wasn’t real magic, just some tacky cutout images and lame sound effects, but it garnered another big cheer from the audience.

Considering that there were real sorcerers in this world, shouldn’t they be using Light Magic or Wind Magic or something to liven up the play?

“Such fine knights you have! But there is no one left to protect you. Now I will take my revenge for my family!”

The protagonist brandished his long staff.

Then, just as I expected, the actress in the maid outfit began to move.

Deliberately facing toward the audience, she pulled out a dagger and raised it slowly.

“Behind you!”

“Look out!”

The audience screamed at the hero. *Yeah, I know the feeling.*

Zena didn’t cry out with the others, but she was clearly wrapped up in the story. Her hand gripped my arm with such force that it was a little painful.

Naturally, the protagonist gave no reaction to the audience's cries and slowly began to walk toward the actor who played the marquis as he chanted a spell.

At that moment, the attendant rushed over and thrust a dagger into the hero's back.

"You! You were working for the marquis all along?!"

"You are unworthy of the princess's hand!"

Despite having been stabbed in the back, the protagonist quite loudly denounced the maid-looking actress. Once his line was delivered, he very dramatically fell to his knees.

Too late, the heroine came rushing up to the fallen hero.

"That dagger is coated in deadly poison from the tail of a wyvern. You will never be able to save him." The maid gave some unnecessary exposition to the crowd.

The heroine simply cried and clung to the dying protagonist.

"Let us meet in the afterlife, my love…"

"Oh, Zen!"

Finally, the leading man expired.

"Princess, you must return to the marquis."

"Never! This body belongs only to Zen. I shan't let the marquis do as he wishes with me!"

With that, the heroine pulled out the dagger from Zen's back and plunged it into her own breast.

There were cries of empathy from the crowd for the heroine—especially from the female audience members.

Startled by the noise, Pochi and Tama looked around frantically until I reassured them that the crowd was only cheering for the play.

Both of them plopped their heads back into my lap contentedly. I scratched them behind the ears and turned my attention back toward the stage.

I'd heard this was a tragic love story, but I was surprised it was so depressing.

I thought it would end there, but apparently, the play was still going.

Tossed over the side of the cliff, the protagonist's corpse was brought back to life, and one by one, the undead hero took his revenge on the marquis's family.

The maid who had killed the hero before stabbed him again with the poisoned dagger, but with a cry of "Poison has no effect on this undead body!" the protagonist avenged himself. The manner in which he defeated her had been cleverly foreshadowed by their relationship in the first half, so it was actually pretty interesting.

However, in an unsatisfying twist, he was inexplicably defeated at the last second by a Holy Knight just as he was about to finally take his revenge on the marquis.

Apparently, many of the other audience members felt the same way I did, as booing arose from the audience.

But some of them were booing with a smile on their faces; it seemed that the audience was expected to jeer the marquis and the Holy Knight at this part of the play.

Oh, it's still going?

"Yes, I will rot away in this earth! However, I will take this land, your marquisate, along with me! I curse you, Marquis Muno!"

Black smoke spouted from where the hero had fallen, and when the smoke cleared, the painted backdrop had been changed to depict what looked like a wasteland.

"Holy Knight! I cannot bear to see my people suffer because of my own deeds. Please do whatever you can, for their sake!"

"Oh, how very noble! Just as one would expect from the head of the Muno family, which has existed since the era of the ancestral king Yamato!"

I felt like the marquis's personality changed all of a sudden. The Holy Knight was praising him quite a lot, too.

In the end, the marquis sacrificed himself to protect his people, and the play

concluded with the scene of him taking the curse from his land at the cost of his own life.

After the play ended, Arisa (who'd been watching enthusiastically) said she was thirsty, so I gave her some fruit water and let her rest under a nearby tree.

"Would you like some, too, Zena?"

"Thank you."

Accepting the bisque mug, Zena brought it to her lips and gulped down the liquid. She must have been very thirsty, too.

I gave a cup to Liza as well, who offered the flavored water to Pochi and Tama.

Feeling a bit hungry, we went to buy something that looked like flatbread from a nearby cart.

What led me there was the inviting smell of soy sauce cooking. The product was called gabo flatbread, apparently made with the fantasy crop called the gabo fruit. It was very cheap, costing just one penny coin for two pieces.

In addition to the regular kind, there was a variety filled with onions cooked in diluted soy sauce, so I ordered one of each. Apparently, there'd been a big rush of customers coming from the play, so there were no premade flatbreads left.

The stall next door was selling thin pancakes that looked sort of like *okonomiyaki*; they seemed tasty, so I ordered some of those, too. These were called crappes, a name I'd never heard before.

While I was waiting, a middle-aged woman holding a crappe approached me. It was the person who'd been sitting in the seat in front of mine at the play.

"My, aren't you the gentleman who was sitting behind me? Are you a foreigner, by chance?"

"Yes, ma'am. My name is Satou. I'm a peddler."

"Goodness, how polite!"

Once the woman introduced herself, we chatted while my crappes were being cooked, and she explained to me the reason behind the farce at the end of the

play.

“I’m sure you found the last bit of the play rather awful, didn’t you?”

“You mean when the Holy Knight showed up without an introduction, and the marquis’s character suddenly changed?”

“Yes, well, you see…”

According to the woman, when the play was first written some twenty years ago, it ended with the sorcerer taking his revenge on the marquis and then being defeated by the Holy Knight. However, it had apparently been changed due to complaints from the nobility.

Furthermore, Princess Liltiena had been the daughter of a commoner in the original story, and the events were set in motion when the amorous marquis abducted her away from her husband.

I see… So those developments felt so out of place because they were changed later.

Once my flatbreads and crappes were ready, I thanked the woman and returned to the spot where everyone was waiting.

“What did you buy?”

“Normal and onion-filled gabo flatbreads and some kind of snack called a crappe.”

Everyone was very intrigued, so I broke the gabo flatbreads into small pieces and handed them out.

Zena politely declined her portion with a dry smile, so I split it with everyone else and tried a bite.

Ugh. That’s bitter.

It was a strange, terribly acrid taste that made me feel nauseous with every bite.

It might have tasted good to the locals who were used to the flavor, but I couldn’t eat it. Activating my “Pain Resistance” skill, I forced myself to chew it up and swallow it.

I quickly washed it down with a gulp of fruit water.

Once I recovered and looked around at everyone, I saw that the beastfolk girls were making slightly strange faces but still eating normally, while Arisa looked like she was on the verge of tears as she chewed.

“Arisa, if it’s too gross, you can just spit it out in here.”

“Fanks… I can’f eaf fhis.”

I held out a handkerchief, and Arisa quickly rid herself of the stuff that was in her mouth.

Come to think of it, I guess Zena did tell me a while back that gabo fruits were gross. I got caught off guard because of the deceptive smell of soy sauce.

Luckily, the crappes were normal and delicious.

It was somewhat like a thin, hard *okonomiyaki*, but since it was made with miso sauce instead of *tonkatsu* sauce, it was really something else entirely.

Under the shade of the tree, we chatted idly as we enjoyed the crappes.

“Even when you know they’re coming, those emotional scenes at the end coming one after another are too much to bear!” chirped Arisa.

“I have to admit, I cried at the part when Princess Liltiena committed suicide to follow Zen into death.” Zena rubbed her eyes, which looked a little red.

“Really? If it were me, I would’ve grabbed the dagger and taken revenge on the marquis myself! You can’t do anything if you’re dead.” Arisa’s cheeks were full of food as she rebutted Zena’s remark.

“It’s so crisp and tasty, sir!”

“Yummyyy!”

“I wonder what they used to make the sauce… I’m picking up a very faint taste of meat.”

Meanwhile, the beastfolk trio was more interested in discussing the crappes than the play.

“But surely you agree that the marquis is at fault for tearing the lovers apart?”

“Well, since Princess Liltiena is the one who betrayed her fiancé by taking a new lover, I think you could say *she* set the tragedy in motion…”

Arisa and Zena seemed to have a slight difference in values, as their voices were getting louder and louder.

Arisa was asserting that “love is all that matters,” while Zena insisted that “it’s only natural to marry a noble for the sake of your family.”

“Well, in that case, shouldn’t you be happy with the fiancé your family picked for you instead of our master?!”

“…I—I don’t have a fiancé…” Zena quailed a bit at Arisa’s words.

Incidentally, Zena and I weren’t “lovers,” nor would I be willing to consider her a love interest for at least another four or five years.

“Isn’t that because you joined the army to avoid getting a fiancé? I’m pretty sure the kingdoms around here don’t let you retire from the army for at least five years.”

That Arisa sure was well-informed.

“What does retiring have to do with being engaged?” I asked. “Noncombatants in the military can still get married, can’t they?”

“When women get married here, they’re required to join the household right away.”

I see, so if you couldn’t get married for five years while you were in the military, that sort of discussion wouldn’t come up until your retirement was approaching.

I’d imagine circumstances would be different for high-ranking nobility, but I believed Zena was from a lower-class noble family, so it probably wouldn’t happen at such an early stage.

“A woman has to be willing to throw away everything for the person she loves, or she shouldn’t fall in love at all!”

“But to ignore the will of the head of the family…”

“If you’re such a Goody Two-shoes, someone else will steal your beloved

away from you!”

Arisa seemed to be getting a bit carried away, so I stopped their debate by whacking her lightly on the head.

“You’re going too far.”

I could understand Arisa’s point, but I didn’t think she should go around pushing Japanese values in a foreign country with a different culture.

I apologized to Zena, who was close to tears, and forced Arisa to bow her head in apology as well.

She seemed reluctant at first, but after a moment she apologized to Zena. “I’m sorry.” *Arisa can be surprisingly meek.*

> Skill Acquired: “Mediation”

> Title Acquired: Mediator

Pochi and Tama looked anxious, maybe thinking we’d gotten into a fight.

“Want to get more crappes? Or should we go get some of those meat skewers?” I offered.

“Meat skeweeers?”

“The crappes were yummy, but meat skewers sound even better, sir!”

“Shall I go and buy them, master?”

I had suggested it only to improve the mood, but the beastfolk girls were very quick to respond.

Liza, in particular, was already on her feet and looking ready to sprint toward the meat skewer stall.

Aren’t you jumping the gun a little?

I gave Liza a few coins and instructed her to buy one for each person. Arisa tagged along behind Liza with a cry of “Leave the haggling to me!”

“Us, toooo?”

“We’ll help, sir!”

Tama and Pochi scampered off after them, too.

After a long struggle to eat the somewhat hard, sinewy meat, Zena’s face softened, but it seemed like Arisa’s words were still bothering her a little.

Marauders at the Gate

Satou here. Ants have become synonymous with hard workers, but there are some varieties whose "work" causes all kinds of problems, much like termites. Apparently, there are ants in this parallel world that are even more dangerous…

Just as the Gatefront Inn came into view, we encountered some soldiers of the count's army who had just returned from patrol.

"Ah, Zenacchi!"

"Lilio! And Iona and Lou, too!"

Finishing up their roll call in the plaza in front of the main gate, Zena's three escorts came over to us.

They must have fought another wyvern or something, because Iona and the others had scratches all over their heavy armor. The large-framed woman called Lou was missing one of her shoulder pads.

Rushing over to them, Zena hurriedly began to cast a healing spell with her Wind Magic.

"Master, I'll go ahead and bring our baggage inside."

"All right, thanks."

Arisa and the beastfolk girls split up at the entrance of the inn, heading toward the room and the barn respectively.

Since Zena couldn't talk while she was chanting the healing spell, I spoke to Lilio and the others in her stead.

"Looks like you had a rough time. Did you run into another wyvern?"

"If wyverns showed up that often, I'd have quit being a soldier by now." Lilio shook her head and sighed. *So that kind of gesture is the same here as it is in*

Japan.

“No, today we had an encounter with a monster called a giant fanged ant.”

“Damn that rat bastard! If I see its lousy face again, I’ll make roasted skewers out of it!”

Iona supplemented Lilio’s statement, and Lou chimed in confusingly.

So was it an ant or a rat? I wish they’d be clear about this.

Noticing my puzzled expression, Iona clarified further.

“Before we ran into a pack of giant fanged ants, we happened to see a ratman cavalryman invading our territory. Lou thinks that he may have been the one who led the ant monsters to us, hence her anger.”

So the ratman had used a technique called “mob training” in MMORPGS—grabbing the attention of monsters and leading them toward other players.

Seemed like the kind of move that could lead to war between Seiryuu County and the ratmen.

But was it really all right for them to tell an outsider these things? Maybe that kind of discipline was lax around here, or the Shiga Kingdom didn’t put enough emphasis on information control.

“He was wearing a distinctive red helmet, so if I catch him, I’ll bring him straight to the gallows!”

The completion of Zena’s healing Wind Magic spell interrupted Lilio’s blustering.

“Thanks, Zenacchi.”

“You’re welcome.”

Zena smiled warmly at the trio as they thanked her, then turned her attention to healing the other wounded soldiers.

“Aaah!”

A young girl’s scream arose from the courtyard of the inn.

Shoot, I forgot my radar was still zoomed in.

That was little Yuni's voice. She probably just saw a snake or something, but it still worried me, so I headed toward the source. For whatever reason, Lilio and company followed me.

"Gotchaaa!"

"Master! Look what we did, sir!"

Tama came racing toward us, carrying something in both hands above her head. Next to her, Pochi held a slim piece of firewood in one hand.

The three soldiers drew their swords in unison.

Alarmed by the sudden bloodthirst directed toward them, Pochi and Tama stopped in their tracks.

"Don't worry, it's dead," I told the soldiers as an AR pop-up confirmed this information. Then I turned to Tama. "Where did that ant come from?"

Yes, the prey that Tama was carrying toward us was the corpse of a giant flying ant.

"We beat iiit!"

"It jumped down at us from the top of a carriage, sir!"

The two flailed excitedly as they answered my question.

The dead ant, which Tama tossed to the ground, was covered with dents that suggested it had been hit with a blunt object and had a hole in its head where Liza must have stabbed it with her spear.

"Master, there do not seem to be any others lurking about."

Carrying her spear over her shoulders, Liza appeared with a report. Yuni was close behind her.

Clearly frightened, the trembling little girl was clinging to Liza's overcoat.

Hmm…the variety is a little different, but could this be related to the enemies the soldiers fought?

The range of my radar's Enemy Detection was relatively narrow, so I opened up my map to check the forest that spread outside the main gate.

…Red. The red dots of light that signified enemies were approaching from within the forest in countless numbers.

“Pochi, Tama, go and fetch your short swords. Arisa, bring Lulu here. Liza, grab the tent that we used to make the bed in the barn.”

“Yes, sir!”

“’kay!”

“Okay.”

“Certainly, sir.”

At my instructions, the four of them promptly ran off. I thought Arisa, if not the beastfolk girls, would ask me why, but she simply did as I requested.

Surprised by my sudden actions, Iona looked at me uncertainly.

“Did something happen?”

“A giant flying ant like this would never act on its own. Most likely, more will follow. You should send out as many scouts as possible…”

I was proud of the explanation I’d created with my “Fabrication” skill, but before I could even finish my statement, an alarm sounded from one of the guard towers of the city’s outer wall.

They must have sighted the ants approaching.

I watched as Zena and the soldiers all rushed over to gather near their commander.

The landlady of the inn and her daughter, Martha, both peered outside as well, looking anxious. With Liza gone, Yuni had started clinging to my leg instead, so I ushered her over to them.

As far as I could tell from the information on my map, the giant flying ants were only around level 3. On their own, they would be much weaker than the well-armed soldiers of the count’s forces, only about as strong as a normal human adult.

However, these giant flying ants had sharp claws and an outer shell much harder than that of an ordinary ant. And on top of that, they could fly. That was

more than enough to make them a threat to ordinary humans.

My first thought was to just rush out of the city and use Fire Shot to roast them while they were still airborne, but the flying-type monsters were faster than I expected; by the time I had made up my mind, the ants had already reached the city walls.

The horde of insects aimed to fly straight over the wall into the city at first, only to quickly change their trajectory and wheel away at the last second, like a bird that's just noticed a glass window in front of it.

A few of them didn't turn fast enough and crashed into something above the wall. Even the ants that avoided crashing seemed to have a hard time flying, and as they slowed, the soldiers on the city wall quickly shot them down.

What was that?

"Looks like the anti-monster barrier above the wall is working quite well."

Arisa had returned with Lulu at some point while I was distracted, and she resolved my confusion as if she'd read my mind.

"But they got through, didn't they?"

"Well, it isn't Space Magic. It would take too much magic power to keep a barrier there like a physical wall at all times."

But didn't the barrier at the Valley of Dragons give me some physical resistance? …No, that wasn't important right now.

"Arisa, you and Lulu take refuge inside the tavern. Stone walls on three sides'll surround you, so it should be safe there. I'll have Pochi and Tama protect the entrance, so don't worry."

I gave Arisa her instructions, then, once Pochi and Tama returned with their short swords, I stationed them right outside the inn. I used a desk and the tent that Liza had brought back to create a barricade, just in case the ants invaded.

"Pochi and Tama, please protect the entrance."

"Yes, sir!"

"What about yooou?"

“Liza and I will drive away any monsters that come near the inn.”

People who had been working outside the city came rushing in through the gate. It looked as though some of them were injured.

Meanwhile, the count’s army was getting into formation in front of the gate. Zena was using defensive magic to protect them from above, but it seemed like the number of people was making it more difficult.

After the last straggler, a dog-person slave carrying a large, heavy-looking basket, the main gates slowly began to close.

Like an ill-mannered jerk who rushes onto the train after the doors started to close, a single ant jammed itself in through the closing gate.

“It’s just one monster! Crush it with the gates!”

From inside the guard station by the gate, the voice of the knight Sir Thorne rang out, yelling at the gatekeepers.

But it wasn’t just one ant anymore.

In the brief moment that the gates stopped closing, another ant, and then another, started to thrust themselves through the gap, widening it until the ants behind them were able to break in to the city.

Along with Zena, the troops who had only just returned from patrol began to intercept the ant invasion.

Zena’s Fallen Hammer spell struck down the ones that tried to take wing upon entering the city; Lilio and the others used crossbows to fell those that escaped her magic.

Wary of the crossbowmen and Zena’s magic, the remaining ants stopped trying to fly.

A ground-based battle was more advantageous for the count’s army, but the number of ants was a problem.

A dozen or so managed to get around the troops and started to attack Liza and me. The nearby stores, too, of course.

“Master, please leave this to me.”

Liza swung her black spear toward the ants. Lunge, parry, strike—she took out ant after ant with a single blow to each.

Some of them flew at a low altitude toward the horses in the courtyard, so I took them out by shooting pennies at them.

Hmm, this is a little too easy.

With a bit more ingenuity, I felt like I could even hit an enemy that was behind cover.

While I was distracted by coming up with such unnecessary tricks, I neglected to keep an eye on Liza's situation, and a few ants started to get close to the Gatefront Inn.

"We won't let you pass, sirs!"

"No entryyy!"

Pochi and Tama stood squarely in the path of the several ants that were trying to invade the inn.

From inside the inn, I heard people screaming as they saw the ants up close.

"Take this, sir!"

Pochi pulled out the two short swords hanging readily at her waist and struck down the leading ant with a single attack.

As soon as she landed, two other ants brought their claws down toward her from either side—

"Your guard's dooown!"

Tama hopped onto Pochi's back, using her short sword and buckler to stave off the attacks.

"Thank you, Tama!"

"Don't worry—be happyyy!"

Where had she learned that—? Oh, it must have been Arisa.

As the ants drew back their claws, Tama whirled through the air, impaling the one on the left with her short sword.

The recoil sent Pochi flying to the ground, but she sprang back up in seconds, piercing through the head of the ant on the right with her blade.

The little warriors defeated all three ants in the blink of an eye, earning them some reluctant praise from inside the inn.

In less than a half hour, nearly all the ants in the plaza had been exterminated.

There were a few close calls like the one Pochi had, but there were also times when an ant would suddenly freeze unnaturally in place or start spurting blood from its eyes and mouth.



This was probably Arisa's Psychic Magic. Glancing at her, I saw her making peace signs at me with both of her small hands.

More importantly, I noticed a few ants charging the general goods store where Nadi worked. Nadi seemed to be hiding in the basement, so she would probably be fine, but I decided to go help out just in case.

"Liza, can you take care of things here for a moment?"

"Understood!"

As if to emphasize her brisk response, Liza brought down two ants with a single sweep of her spear.

I made my way toward the general goods shop, dodging the ants that attacked me on my way.

Once I had entered the store and couldn't be seen from outside, I took out a metal bar from Storage. It didn't seem to be a mace so much as the handle of some other weapon.

I could just kick them, of course, but since it would be hard to fight in such a cramped space, I randomly chose what seemed like an appropriate weapon. I didn't use the Magic Gun because it would leave suspicious traces on the corpses of the monsters, but also because I didn't want to shoot a bunch of holes in the shop's walls.

Instead, I used the bar to bash an ant that tried to attack me.

> Skill Acquired: "One-Handed Mace"

Oh, I guess I didn't have the mace skill yet.

I didn't really have any plans to make this my main weapon or anything, so I decided against putting any skill points into it for now.

Two ants had gathered by the wooden door that led into the basement, so I beat them down one after the other.

When I shoved aside their corpses, I found that the door was now full of holes. *Yikes, that was close.*

I knew from the status info on my map that Nadi was fine, but I called out to

her anyway to reassure her.

“Nadi, are you all right?”

“Y-yes, I’m fine!”

The stairway had turned yellow with the acid spit by the ants. Unfortunately, I didn’t have anything on hand to neutralize the acid.

I guess I could cover it with gold coins and let them melt over the acid, but let’s save that for a last resort.

For now, maybe I could break down some rocks or something from Storage and spread that over the stairs…

But before I could put my plan into action, a delicate figure suddenly burst into the store.

“Nadi!”

“Boss!”

It was a lone young boy. He had green hair, gathered into a single long braid like a hero from a kung-fu movie might have, and was wearing a simple tunic and pants. If there was anything that made him stand out, I’d say it was his peculiar pointed hat.

“…■■■ ■■■ ■■ ***Ivy Control*** *Tsuta Sousa!”*

He cast a spell, and the decorative ivy plants inside the store wriggled to life, stretching out like tentacles toward the basement. After a short time, Nadi was carried up from the basement, ivy wrapped around her waist.

Awesome. Now, this *is the kind of magic I’d expect from a fantasy world.*

“Thank you very much, Mr. Satou! And you, too, boss.”

“I’m an afterthought?”

“Of course not! I’m very grateful.” Nadi gave the stoic young boy and me each a kiss on the cheek.

“Who’s he?” the kid asked her brusquely.

“He’s a customer who requested help finding a house for rent, and now my

savior, too. If Mr. Satou hadn't shown up, I would've been eaten by ants before you arrived."

Turning his head toward me, the boy muttered "Thanks" so curtly, I had to wonder if he was thankful at all.

But when an AR pop-up appeared to relay his information, I couldn't hide my surprise.

The boy was one of that most famous of all fantasy races—an elf.

◆

"Is something the matter, Mr. Satou?"

"No, no, I've just never seen an e… Um, someone with green hair before."

I was about to say "an elf" but caught myself at the last second.

"Yes, the boss is an elf, a spirit of the forest. Amazing, right?"

"An elf? Do you have long ears?"

"Ugh. No."

At my words, the store manager frowned and turned away like a sullen child.

His behavior seemed immature, but apparently, he was the ripe old age of 280.

The elf's name was Yusaratoya Bolenan. I learned later that "Bolenan" was the name of the forest in which he lived, and it served as a sort of family name for the clan of elves from that forest.

"Oh, come on now, boss. I'm sure Mr. Satou is referring to the long-eared Booch clan. Their race has long ears like bamboo leaves, right?"

Nadi attempted to smooth things over with the manager, looking to me pointedly for confirmation.

I nodded quickly.

"The first hero who founded the Saga Empire called the long-eared folk 'elves,' so even a thousand years later there are many people who misunderstand the term."

I see, so the first hero had made the same mistake…

I'd bet anything that the first hero, just like me, was corrupted by the influences of that series about a "cursed island" and ended up mistaking the "long-eared folk" for elves.

…Hmm? Wait, this was more than a thousand years ago?

A Japanese person from such a long time ago wouldn't know the word *elf*…

Was the flow of time here different from the real world?

"That's why confusing elves with long-eared folk is generally frowned upon."

"Is that so? I didn't know, but ignorance is no excuse. Please allow me to apologize for my rudeness, sir."

Nadi gave me a smile as I thanked her and bowed my head deeply in apology to the manager.

"Mm-hmm. It's fine."

"C'mon, boss. When you say it like that, it doesn't seem like you forgive him at all."

"Show him."

After exchanging words with the taciturn store manager, Nadi lifted his long hair aside to show me his ears, which were normal aside from a slightly pointed tip.

The elf casually batted away her hand, but he didn't seem particularly offended.

Given their familiarity, I had to wonder if they were a couple or maybe even married.

At any rate, I didn't want to overstay my welcome, so I figured I should go back to the others.

"Well, Nadi, I'll come to discuss the rental houses again soon."

"Certainly. Thank you very much for today."

Saying my good-byes to Nadi and the manager, I left the store.

By the time we made it outside, the battle in front of the gate had already ended.

All the monsters that had gotten into the city had been exterminated, and the soldiers and other brave warriors had gathered to start getting rid of the ants' corpses.

"Satou!"

The sharp-eyed Zena spotted me right away and came rushing over.

She must not have been used to running in a skirt, because she tripped on it just as she reached me and stumbled forward. I quickly reached out an arm and caught her before she fell.

"I'm sorry…"

"Are you all right?"

Zena was hanging on to my arm now, which felt rather pleasant.

I wouldn't have minded staying that way a little longer, but I could feel the gazes of her soldier escorts painfully boring into me, so I helped her steady herself and drew back.

According to Zena, there hadn't been any serious casualties, civilian or military.

Even the injured had only minor wounds, and priests who'd heard the alarm and come running had already started treating them.

Leaving the healing to the expert priests, Zena and her company were apparently going to go scout outside the city along with the light cavalry.

"It's too bad that you won't get to have the day off now."

"It's unfortunate that I have to leave in the middle of our outing, but Wind Magic is very useful for detecting enemies. And we have to leave quickly. It would be terrible if any of the surrounding villages were attacked!"

Zena explained that the other villages did have an anti-monster defense system called "barrier posts," but they weren't as powerful as the barrier above Seiryuu City's walls.

I saw Zena off as her squad set out with some light cavalry in tow. Apparently, other magic soldiers were mobilizing as well, and more units would soon be departing.

Liza called out to me from in front of the Gatefront Inn, so I headed that way. A man who appeared to be a soldier was standing nearby.

“Are you this one’s master?”

“Yes. My name is Satou.”

I accepted the small pouch Liza handed to me as I answered the man’s question.

Checking inside the bag, I found a few cores from giant flying ants.

“Monster cores must be sold to the local government immediately. Hand them over, please.”

“That’s fine with me, but shouldn’t tending to the injured and cleanup come first?”

Finding it suspicious that the man was in such a hurry, I checked his status in the AR display. So he was from the accounting department of the count’s army.

“That’s someone else’s job,” he said shortly, then snatched the bag away from me and walked toward the other soldiers.

He didn’t even check how many cores there were or ask me my name, never mind settling the payment. Maybe I was being paranoid, but it seemed to me that he was trying to pull one over on me.

“Wait just a moment, please.”

“What is it now?”

I called out to stop him, and he glared arrogantly over his shoulder at me. I plainly stated my requests to the man’s profile. “I would like you to issue me a receipt. Please write on this paper the number of cores and the amount of monetary compensation, along with your name and affiliation.”

I didn’t really need the payment, since I had plenty of assets, but I didn’t like the idea of someone else snatching away the fruits of the beastfolk girls’ labor.

“What? You calling me some kind of crook?”

“Merchants like myself are very cautious people. Even if you were a hero or a saint, I would still want written documents, not just a verbal agreement.”

The second half was all talk, of course. My “Fabrication” skill was working alarmingly well.

The man grumbled a little, but he reluctantly accepted my paper and ink and scribbled a few lines. The price he started to write was less than my estimated market price, so I drew out the math on the ground, then got him to correct the “miscalculation.”

“Is this good enough? Damn pushy merchant!”

He was being pretty rude, but I ignored it and accepted the paper. Apparently, I could take it to the government office and exchange it for money.

The man was wearing a ring with a seal, but I noticed that he didn’t stamp it onto the paper. All the official paperwork I’d gotten before, like the document when Liza’s spear was confiscated, had a seal in addition to a signature.

“You don’t have a seal?”

“I just forgot it!”

The man scowled when I pointed it out, yanked the paper out of my hands, and stamped the seal onto it violently.

“There, are we done now?!”

I didn’t have any other ideas, so this time I accepted the paperwork and tucked it away in my breast pocket.

Looking annoyed that he’d failed to snag a little extra money, the man grumbled to himself as he stomped away.

What a small-time crook. I bet he’ll lose his job over fraud or embezzlement one of these days.

> Skill Acquired: “Calculation”

> Skill Acquired: “Coercion”

> Title Acquired: Beginner Merchant

> Title Acquired: Gray Merchant

Looking at my log, I saw that I'd acquired some new skills and titles.

When had I coerced anyone? I'd like to give whoever was in charge of this skill system a piece of my mind.

◆

By the time the sun went down, the townspeople had regained their composure.

Apparently, the giant flying ant that had attacked Pochi and Tama before had slipped in with a cart that had arrived at the Gatefront Inn not long before.

I found it strange that the gatekeepers hadn't checked inside and found it, but it had apparently come in right before Lilio and the patrol team returned, so it might have been overlooked in a cursory check. *They should be more careful.*

"These kids really are something. To think that such small girls could protect the inn from those monsters!"

The landlady thanked Pochi and Tama, who looked bashful.

I thought Liza was really the one who kept most of the monsters away…

But she didn't seem to want to boast about her success.

I'd have to buy her some kind of reward later, like some chicken skewers from that stall with the red flag.

"Is this spot all right?"

"A little more to the right. Yes, that should be out of the wind and any dust from the carriage entrance."

The landlady's husband had carried a table into the courtyard, and she instructed him on where to put it down. Afterward, he returned to the galley through a back entrance, then reappeared along with Martha, food in hand.

"I'm afraid I still can't give these girls a room at the inn, since the other guests will make a fuss, but we've got to thank them somehow! At the very least, let us treat you to some of my husband's masterful cooking."

The food they brought included the quiche I'd eaten before, a thick and

delicious vegetable stew, and even a whole roast of some kind of small animal. The AR display for it read **Roasted Short-Eared Rabbit**. Another large platter held a mountain of mashed potatoes, and some kind of small oblong-shaped croquettes were arranged on a long dish.

“It smells great.”

“The smell of happiness, sir!”

“I’m hungryyyy!”

“Just wait a little longer.”

Standing off to the side so as not to interfere with the serving of the food, the four excited girls made a heartwarming picture.

“I bought them, Mr. Satou!”

“Thank you, Yuni.”

Yuni brought over a basket full of fruit, and I gave her one of the fruits and a few pennies as thanks.

The fruits were for Lulu. On top of her already poor physical condition, I think the shock from the giant flying-ant raid had made her a bit anemic, so she looked pale and drained next to me.

Arisa had been looking after her until a short while before, but in the end she gave in to her hunger and went over to the table.

I wished I had some kind of medicine or something. Maybe after the meal, I could look for an alchemy shop or a pharmacy in the west quarter.

I should note, by the way, that the meal was very, very tasty.

The Rat Princess

Satou here. When I was a student, I read all kinds of books regardless of the genre, but one thing I could never do was figure out the culprit in a mystery novel. I always ended up falling for the red herring.

“Come again, young master.”

“Yes, I certainly will.”

Standing outside a brothel, I responded diplomatically to the sexy woman’s businesslike words, then stepped back into the nighttime streets.

Once I’d put Arisa and Lulu to bed, I had gone to the west quarter to look for some pain medicine and ran into some merchants I’d apparently saved in the labyrinth; they treated me to some stiff drinks, and in the end I wound up tagging along to their favorite brothel.

One thing led to another, and I ended up gaining the skills “Seduction,” “Pillow Talk,” “Sexual Techniques,” and “Chiropractic Massage.” I acquired some titles, too, but I’ll leave those to the imagination.

The merchants I came here with drank quite a lot, so by now they were probably in heaven with their respective companions.

Well, that was fun and all, but if I went home like this, someone (likely Arisa) was bound to notice the smell of perfume on me.

Leaving the brothel, I headed down an alley toward West Street. There I found a young girl with a short staff who seemed to be a charmer, using Everyday Magic for some ladies of the night, so I got her to use cleaning and drying spells on me, too. The fee at night was a little high, but considering how refreshing it felt to be rid of sweat, it was well worth it.

This area was close to the workers’ district in the north, so I wanted to take a horse-drawn carriage, but unfortunately there were none around at this time of

night except a few reserved ones.

Oh well. Guess I'll just have to walk.

Like Main Street, West Street was lined with wooden streetlights at regular intervals. Rather than using lightbulbs, the streetlights were apparently lit with an Everyday Magic spell called Lamp, cast by charmers hired by the west quarter.

Apparently, these magic lamps were in effect for two hours, so the night was broken up into three "nightspans"—first, second, and last nightspan.

During last nightspan, only every other streetlight was lit.

It was currently second nightspan, so all the streetlights were lit, but they were still very dark compared to Japan's shopping districts at night. They might as well have been a line of paper lanterns with candles inside.

Under the streetlights, scantily clad prostitutes were looking for customers.

I was relieved that none of them was underage, but a single copper for a whole night seemed cruelly cheap.

I'd already engaged in enough entertainment that night, so I had no desire to accept their offers. Besides, the AR displays above their heads contained the disconcerting message **Status Ailment: Disease/Venereal [Latent]**, so I would definitely have to pass.

A few of them even read **Status Ailment: Disease/Venereal [Active]**.

…Yeah, it was very important to have protection.

On the way back to the inn, I found a pharmacy and bought headache medication for Lulu.

The cost was more than ten times my estimated market price, but when I haggled with the pharmacist, he tried to give me weak medicine that was long past its expiration date; only when I pointed this out did he give me the real thing at a decent price.

As I longed for Japan and its straightforward price tags, I noticed in the log that I'd gained the "Analyze" skill for some reason.

It was the menu's AR display that did all the analyzing, not me…

But it seemed like it might come in handy, so I allocated a few skill points to it.

Last nightspan must have rolled around while I was walking back, since only half the streetlights were lit now.

Beneath the hustle and bustle of the streets, I thought I heard the flapping of wings, so I looked up into the night sky.

I couldn't see the creature, but I figured out its identity when a single feather drifted down for me to analyze. According to my new skill, it was a kind of bird called a shadow owl.

No wonder it could fly so late at night.

I held the surprisingly handsome feather up to the light of the streetlamps, then tucked it away into Storage in the shadows of my cloak, planning to give it to Pochi and Tama as a souvenir.

Since it was so late at night, there were less and less people on the road.

I didn't know if it was because of those circumstances or thanks to my "Keen Hearing" skill, but whatever the reason, I heard the faint noise of metal striking metal.

When I stopped in my tracks and strained my ears, I could hear that someone was fighting on the next street over.

I wasn't a particularly curious person, but I was sure I would feel miserable if I heard the next day that someone had gotten murdered or something.

If it's a fight between drunks I'll just leave it alone, but if it's a robbery or something like that, I'll fight off whoever looks like the bad guy.

With that resolution in mind, I stepped into the dark, unlit alley. I was pretty sure this was around the same area where we'd visited the mansion during the day. The basement was the hideout of some kind of crime guild, so maybe some organization members were fighting among themselves?

The moonlight cast stark shadows over the alley.

Squinting, I saw a short child surrounded by some threatening figures in the

darkness.

This reminded me that I'd gained the "Night Vision" skill before, so I put some skill points into it and activated it right away.

As if I'd turned up the brightness setting of the dark alleyway, outlines of people and objects came sharply into view.

It was sort of like using that night-vision device called a Starlight scope.

There were no other people around. I knocked down a piece of lumber that was leaning against the wall, making a loud noise.

It would have been great if this was enough to make them run away, but instead two of the figures surrounding the kid started to glide toward me.

They were…shadows.

The things drawing closer to me could only be described as shadows in the shape of a person. An AR floated above their heads to give me more information.

They were called shadow stalkers. Level 11 monsters. Just as their appearance suggested, physical attacks wouldn't work on them.

I didn't know whether they got through the barrier around the city or came out of the labyrinth, but since I didn't need to hold back against monsters, beating them should be no problem.

I took my Magic Gun out of Storage, pointed it at one of the shadows, and pulled the trigger.

I fired several times, assuming that the enemy would dodge, but it either had slow reflexes or was overconfident in its special traits, because it made no effort to dodge a direct hit from my bullets. The shadow dissipated at once, and a red core fell to the ground.

But while I was defeating the first shadow creature, the second one had gotten too close.

It swung a black blade down toward me. It seemed to be all shadow, too, because I could barely see it from the front.

I shifted sideways, dodging in accordance with the instincts my “Evasion” skill gave me.

I heard the blade slice through the piece of wood behind me.

We ended up switching places in the process, which allowed me to notice the sharp cross section of the scrap wood that had been cut in my place.

I would’ve rather not gotten cut like that, if possible. Minor wounds would probably heal on their own thanks to my “Self-Healing” skill, but I’d rather not find out how effective it was if I had a limb cut off.

I readied my gun, aiming to defeat the thing before it could change its stance.

…What?!

The shadow moved in a way that would be impossible for any human, bending its arm backward to strike at me again with its blade.

I was just barely able to avoid it.

As I fell to the ground in the process, I aimed my Magic Gun and disposed of the shadow with three rapid-fire shots.

Whew! I’d forgotten for a minute that my opponent wasn’t human…

I slapped myself on both cheeks, trying to pull myself together.

If I didn’t hurry up and help this kid, the shadows were going to kill him.

I saw the occasional red flash of a hatchet-like weapon in his hands, so it seemed like he was holding off the three remaining monsters from getting too close for now.

The kid seemed pretty skilled with the weapon, but he couldn’t move very well because he was protecting something behind him.

It looked like he had a few injuries from the shadows’ blades, which occasionally warped and bent like whips.

I took aim with my Magic Gun to snipe the two that weren’t directly in front of the kid. This time, I put the gun on full power, so it took only one shot to defeat the first shadow.

However, with the power on maximum, it took a little longer between each

shot.

As a result, my plan to take care of everything from a distance didn't quite work out.

The other shadow noticed me and started to approach. I tried to shoot it down anyway, but as it came toward me, it split into several shadowy arrows and streaked toward me.

There was no room to avoid it in this narrow alley.

At least, not horizontally.

I kicked off the wall and escaped into the air above.

The arrows changed trajectory and chased after me, but I continued avoiding them by jumping back and forth between the walls.

It was a dizzying move, but with the help of my "Spatial Mobility" skill, I was able to pull it off without upsetting my inner ear.

Once the shadowy arrows re-formed into the shape of a person, I took that opportunity to land a shot with my gun.

A heavy *thud* resounded through the alley.

…Damn.

The blood loss must have slowed the kid down too much to dodge the shadows' attacks completely, because he had collapsed against the stone wall.

I quickly checked his HP… *Good. He's still alive.*

It looked like the shadow had turned into a black ball and attacked the kid. He'd been able to dodge the whip attacks, so it must have changed to something more direct.

There was a crack in the center of the sphere. I could see the handle of the kid's hatchet sticking out of it. But I thought physical attacks wouldn't work—*Ohh, it must be a magic weapon.*

I launched myself forward fast enough to gouge a hole in the ground, skimming over and closing the gap in seconds like a character in a fighting game.

I arrived in front of the shadow in just three steps and planted a firm kick on the end of the hatchet, driving it deeper into the shadow's core.

I felt the light sensation of something breaking beneath my foot, and the shadow dissipated, the shattered fragments of its core falling to the ground. Ignoring the pieces as they rolled away into the darkness, I retrieved only the magic hatchet.

The most important thing now was to check the child's condition.

He was slumped against the wall, limp as a puppet with snapped strings.

…No, according to the AR display, he wasn't a child at all.

I rushed over to his side, pulling off his hood to check his face—and if I hadn't known what to expect beforehand, I probably would have screamed.

Covered by a red helmet was none other than the gray-fur-covered face of a rat. Despite his animal nature, his visage seemed to suggest he was the aloof type.

He was a gray-ratman cavalryman. His internal organs must have been damaged, because he was coughing up dark-red liquid. Because of his **Serious Injury [Internal Organ Damage]** status, his HP was steadily declining.

"…Who're yew?"

The ratman opened his eyes slightly and interrogated me in a raspy, hard-to-understand voice.

"Grrr, yew one o' his minyins, tew?"

"I'm not with them."

I didn't know who he was talking about but immediately denied it anyway. He probably meant whoever had sent those shadows.

My radar informed me that there was another being in the bundle of cloth he was protecting. Whatever creature was in there must have been unconscious, because it didn't even twitch.

As I spoke with the ratman, I read the information on the AR screen that appeared. I was a little surprised by its contents.

“Well…’m done for. T-take care o’ da brinsiss.”

“All right. I will.”

Apparently relieved at my rashly made promise, the ratman quickly lost consciousness.

Of course, there was a reason I’d made such a promise. I had a good hunch about the one he called the princess—or “brinsiss,” as his pronunciation made it sound.

Now, time to take action. His HP was still slowly draining away.

I pulled out a cloth from Storage to stop the bleeding from his external wounds.

> Skill Acquired: “First Aid”

> Title Acquired: Paramedic

I obtained a skill as conveniently as ever, so I quickly allocated some skill points into it and activated it, then redid the first aid.

The smell of blood and the ratman’s odor made me wrinkle my nose as I worked.

Okay, looked like his HP had stopped decreasing.

From Storage, I took out a black, hooded overcoat that would blend into the darkness and put it on.

Pulling the hood down low over my eyes, I wrapped a long towel around my mouth like a scarf. Just to be safe, I changed the name field in my social networking tab, leaving it blank.

Now my identity was completely hidden.

I thought the silver mask would be too noticeably reflective in the moonlight, so I didn’t wear it this time.

I lifted the ratman and the princess and held them to my chest, then kicked off the stone wall to jump on top of the roof. Then, leaping from roof to roof like a phantom thief, I made my way to the general store.

I knocked loudly on the back door.

Unfortunately, checking the map, I saw that both the manager and Nadi currently had the **Sleeping** status condition.

It looked like both of them lived on the second floor but in separate rooms. *So I guess they're not a couple.*

I didn't want to make a lot of noise and draw the attention of the gatekeepers or something, so I used a wire from Storage to unlock the door. My "Treasure Box Unlocking" skill seemed to be enough to do the trick.

> Skill Acquired: "Unlocking"

> Title Acquired: Lock Picker

I went inside and laid the two down on the slightly hard sofa in the reception area.

The ratman's helmet knocked against the wooden frame of the sofa, making a dry clunking sound.

Oh, looked like the store manager had noticed.

His status display had changed from **Sleeping** to **None**. He started to move quietly, probably to wake Nadi.

"B-boss? …Are you here to ravish me?"

"No."

My "Keen Hearing" skill let me listen in on the situation upstairs. Oddly enough, Nadi sounded rather hopeful.

With Nadi following behind him, the manager headed down the stairs.

I didn't want him to mistake me for a suspicious intruder and attack me, so I spoke up first.

"Good evening. Sorry to bother you. Nadi, it's me, Satou."

"What? Mr. Satou?! What could you possibly need at this hour?"

Nadi's voice sounded suspicious. *I guess I can't blame her.*

"I brought an acquaintance of the manager's. He's severely injured, so I was hoping that you could treat him right away…"

“Acquaintance?”

Hearing that an acquaintance of his was injured, the manager and Nadi emerged from the shadows of the stairs.

“■■■■ ***Mana Light*** *Matou!”*

The manager waved his long staff and cast a spell. It lit up like an LED.

“A ratman? Judging by that helmet, this must be that famous red-helmeted rat cavalryman who has a bounty on his head…”

“Dunno him.”

Nadi recognized the ratman’s gear while the store manager spoke up doubtfully. I corrected his mistake.

“Mr. Manager, your acquaintance is the one wrapped in this cloth here. The one with the red helmet called her ‘princess.’”

“A ratman princess? As far as I know, the only honorific titles among ratman tribes are Chief and Warrior…”

So the ratmen are a warrior tribe? Nadi is surprisingly knowledgeable, I thought.

I unwrapped the cloth to show them what was inside.

“…Mia.”

Just as I had suspected, the “princess” the ratman had been protecting was an acquaintance of the store manager’s after all.

Nadi gave a yelp of surprise after peering into the cloth. I understood how she felt.

Because the “princess” inside the cloth was a little girl with white skin, long hair that was a light blue-green, and pointed ears.

“Isn’t that an elf?!” Nadi exclaimed.

She was right—and it was precisely because she was an elf that I had brought her to see the store manager, the only other elf in the city.

They even shared the same family name: Bolenan.

Nadi's cry seemed to have awoken Princess Mia, who opened her eyes slightly. She gazed around slowly, taking in her surroundings.

She stared in my direction for a while with unfocused gray eyes, mumbled the word *Pretty…* and drifted back into unconsciousness.

What exactly was she referring to as *pretty*? I was a little intrigued, but it was probably more important to focus on the quickly dying ratman.

"So, what should we do about this guy in the red helmet? Bring him to the gatekeepers?"

"Protector."

"Hmm… Since he's Princess Mia's protector, the boss doesn't want to turn him in."

"Not 'princess.'"

"And apparently, Ms. Mia is not a princess."

Nadi elaborated on the overly concise words of the manager.

Behind us, I heard the sound of a heavy cough.

"More importantly, I think he'll die if we don't treat him soon."

"Hm."

Nadi hurriedly jumped into action. "This looks bad. I'll call on Horn, the back-alley ex-priest. He usually treats anyone, regardless of their circumstances. It looks like you've at least stopped the bleeding, so please free up his respiratory tract with magic, boss. We should probably take off that distinctive red helmet and hide it somewhere, too."

Grabbing a cloak that was hanging on the wall and throwing it on over her pajamas, Nadi headed outside.

"It's dangerous to go out alone at night. I'll come with you."

After the store manager began his spell, I set out after Nadi.

◆

The next morning, Arisa was once again giving me a hard time.

“Honestly! Why would you go to a brothel when you have me?! I don’t see what’s not to like about having a beautiful girl like me ready to serve you at any time!”

“Calm down.”

I wasn’t about to start seeing an elementary school–age girl as an object of sexual desire.

Arisa was enthusiastically tearing off her pajamas as she approached, so I grabbed my cloak from the bed and covered her with it.

“Ooh, smells like boy…”

This damn pervert…

Arisa started to take a deep whiff of the smell of my cloak but suddenly cried out, “This smells like an animal!” and tossed it away. “Don’t tell me you like them hairy?” she asked accusingly.

What was that supposed to mean?

I had an idea of what she was getting at, but there was a limit to how much rudeness I could take.

“I helped a dying beastfolk person last night on my way home from buying *Lulu’s medicine*.”

I emphasized “Lulu’s medicine” in order to divert her rage.

“Oh? Was it a woman?”

“No. It was an old guy who seemed kinda detached.”

“So it was boys’ love, then? I get it now! It’s like that scene in *Dora x Hebi* when the muscular tiger-eared older man suddenly pushes down the young boy with rabbit ears! I can’t stand it!”

“Quit yelling stupid things and put on some clothes. That’s an order.”

I definitely wasn’t interested in turning this into a boys’ love story.

All this noise seemed to have woken up Lulu. She still looked a little pale.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better than yesterday, thank you.”

“I bought some medicine for you to take when the pain gets too bad.”

I handed Lulu the package of painkillers I’d bought yesterday and repeated the usage warnings I’d been given at the pharmacy. Oddly enough for this kind of medicine, it was apparently best taken before or between meals.

“Oh, right. Arisa.”

“What is it?”

As I opened the medicine for Lulu and put it in a glass with some water, I relayed the information about the labyrinth that I’d forgotten to mention yesterday.

“Aww, so ordinary civilians can’t enter the labyrinth in Seiryuu City?”

“Yeah, it seems like it’ll be impossible for now.”

I made a vague attempt to comfort Arisa as she sat glumly on the bed.

“Master, are you going to settle down in this city?”

“No, once I’m done sightseeing here, I’m thinking of heading south toward the old capital.”

“Sightseeing?!”

I was already just about done touring Seiryuu City, but I still had to keep my promise to go with Zena to the restaurant on the other side of the inner wall.

After that, I planned to head toward the old capital and the Labyrinth City Celivera, where the beastfolk girls should be able to live normal lives.

The reason I’d decided on the old capital as my current destination was that it was apparently famous for its beautiful river and nighttime scenery.

“Oh, oh, in that case…”

Arisa drew closer excitedly.

“After the old capital, I want to go to Labyrinth City!”

“Yeah, I’d like to see it, too.”

“Really?! Then it’s a promise!”

Arisa stuck out her little finger, so I made a pinkie promise with her. She giggled as she looked at our linked fingers.

With Arisa in tow, I headed toward the stable to meet the beastfolk girls for breakfast.

I'd have to talk to them about the old capital and Labyrinth City, too.

After I had everyone eat breakfast, I headed out alone to the general store.

"Good morning. How are they?"

"Both of them are still sleeping."

Nadi looked tired as she reported back to me.

The ex-priest Horn had treated the red-helmeted ratman's wounds, but since he could use only low-grade Holy Magic, it seemed the ratman hadn't fully recovered.

The bleeding seemed to have stopped, but apparently, his damaged internal organs could be fully healed only by intermediate Holy Magic or better.

Huh? Wait, I thought the store manager had "Foundation Magic" and "Forest Magic"—can't he use one of those for healing?

Curious, I asked Nadi about it.

"The boss's magic isn't fit for medical treatment. He told me that the most it can do is disinfect wounds and stop bleeding."

I guess if the manager were able to use healing, we wouldn't have needed to go call on the ex-priest Horn in the first place.

"You can't use a magic potion or anything?"

"An intermediate magic potion would work, but those are way too expensive for us to get our hands on."

I'd given away all the magic potions I got in the labyrinth to help the wounded, so I had none on me.

I wouldn't mind lending them the money to buy some, but I got the feeling that would be too meddlesome of me.

Nadi seemed to misunderstand my silence.

“Don’t worry about the medicine,” she said, trying to reassure me. “The boss made an arrangement with an acquaintance. As long as we gather the ingredients, he’ll make it for us on the cheap.”

Apparently, the store manager had left early in the morning to head for a somewhat distant mountain forest to gather those ingredients.

It seemed like the manager would take care of the ratman, so next I asked about Mia.

“The princess didn’t seem to have any external wounds. She still hasn’t regained consciousness?”

“Little Mia’s not injured, but she seems to be severely fatigued. The boss said she has all the symptoms of someone who’s been short on magic for a long period of time.”

Magic deficiency… I wished I could transfer some of my own excessive MP to her. Still, what could have weakened her so much?

“It should be easy to cure her symptoms with the boss’s Foundation Magic spell Mana Transfer or the Forest Magic spell Stamina Charge, but…”

Nadi explained that even if they used magic to restore her MP or stamina, it simply drained away as if they’d poured water into a pot full of holes. Despite the manager’s long years of experience and Nadi’s extensive knowledge, neither of them could figure out why.

I used my map to look at Mia’s status.

She was 130 years old. Female. Level 7. She had two skills—“Water Magic” and “Archery”—and a gift, Spirit Vision. Her titles were Cradle Master and Child of Bolenan Forest.

Judging by the words *child* and *cradle* in her titles, it seemed 130 years old was still very young for an elf. Her appearance, that of an elementary or middle schooler, belied her true age.

Mia appeared to be a nickname, her real name being Misanaria Bolenan.

I would have expected a nickname like Misa or Ria, but I guess Mia was more

in line with elf custom.

She didn't have any status afflictions such as a curse or disease, and there didn't seem to be anything strange in her titles. Maybe the Cradle Master title meant she was bedridden, but I doubted it.

As far as I could see, she hadn't even recovered 10 percent of her stamina, but it seemed like her magic gauge was filling up slowly but surely.

Maybe the store manager's treatment had worked this time?

I wanted to convey this information to Nadi, but I couldn't explain how I knew it. *Maybe I'll try bringing up the subject and guiding her to notice it herself.*

"Is there anything that would help besides healing magic?"

"A mana potion would certainly heal Mia, but once again, they're too expensive," she added drily. "Everybody's poor here." Her smile was strained. "I'm sure bringing her to a mana source or an underground vein would help her recover, too, but the only sources around here are in the count's castle or the Valley of Dragons."

I see… A "source"?

I wanted to ask her more about the term but had to postpone my questioning when I heard a noise upstairs.

It was coming from the room Mia was sleeping in, so I checked my map and saw that her status had changed from **Fainted** to **None**.

Nadi didn't seem to have heard it, so I tried to hint at her.

"I think I heard something upstairs. Maybe she's awake?"

"Wow, Mr. Satou. Your ears are as sharp as any elf or rabbitfolk."

Rabbitfolk? Like…bunny girls?

There didn't appear to be any in Seiryuu City, but that was something I'd like to see.

Nadi and I went upstairs to visit the room Mia slept in.

I waited outside the door for Nadi to give me the go-ahead to come inside.

“Mia, are you awake?”

“Who?”

“I’m Nadi, the clerk of this shop. My boss—the manager—is Yusaratoya.”

“Yuya’s…?”

Mia’s voice sounded as youthful as her appearance suggested. It was a little husky, probably since she’d just woken up.

“Who’s out there?”

Mia seemed to have noticed me waiting outside.

Was it just strong intuition? No, maybe she just noticed that there were two sets of footsteps coming up the stairs.

“That’s the person who rescued you and your red-helmeted friend.”

“Mize?”

Mia murmured as Nadi spoke.

Between her and the store manager, I had to wonder whether speaking so little was a racial characteristic.

“Is Mize the ratman with the red helmet? He’s asleep now that he’s been healed.”

“Mm.”

It would have been more accurate to say we’d “finished his emergency first aid,” but to say so honestly would probably just fan the flames of Mia’s anxiety.

After this interruption, Nadi finished introducing me.

“So, the person outside the door is called Mr. Satou.”

“…Satou.”

“Is it okay if he comes in?”

“Mm.”

Nadi called to me, and I entered the room.

My guess was that it was Nadi’s bedroom; it was refined and tasteful but

somehow quite feminine at the same time.

I felt like there were a few too many decorative plants, though.

“Satou?”

I nodded and introduced myself. “Nice to meet you. I’m Satou, a peddler.”

With her silver eyes and lovely face, she almost looked like a doll.

“Spiritualist?”

I tilted my head uncertainly at Mia’s sudden question.

I could use a little Fire Magic, but from what I understood of my introductory magic books, spirits had nothing to do with it.

Of course, if there were any sexy water spirits like undines or voluptuous forest spirits like dryads, I’d be happy to meet them.

“No, I’ve sadly never met any spirits.”

“Can’t see them?”

Mia’s expression looked mystified.

I asked Nadi if they were really something I should be able to see. “Only people with the gift of Spirit Vision can see them,” she informed me.

Mia did have the Spirit Vision gift. But the store manager didn’t have it, so I guess not all elves could see spirits.

I helped Nadi give Mia a drink of water.

“Do you think you can eat something?”

“Mm.”



“I’ll go make some soup or porridge, then. Can you stay with Mia awhile?”

Nadi seemed apologetic as she asked, so I readily agreed.

While the simple scent of porridge started to drift up the stairs, Mia and I passed the time by talking about spirits.

Of course, without Nadi around to be my trusty interpreter, I wasn’t able to piece together the full details about spirits from Mia’s short words.

Sprinkled in among unhelpful adjectives like *fluffy* and *sparkly*, I managed to gather that they were creatures that “make underground veins flow,” “channel mana,” and “have attributes.”

I also gained two skills from the conversation, “Elvish Language” and “Decryption,” and apparently won over Mia as well.

I’d gained the “Elvish Language” skill when I asked Mia how to say “good morning” in Elvish. I think the reason I learned “Decryption” goes without saying.

After eating the porridge, Mia started to look sleepy.

“I’m sorry for staying so long. I’ll be heading home soon.”

“Mrr.”

I started to stand up from the chair next to the bed, but Mia stopped me by grabbing on to the sleeve of my robe.

“Stay,” she requested anxiously.

Well, I guess I can stay until she falls asleep.

◆

“This letter means *chair*, right? That makes ten cards for me!”

“Whoa!”

“Arisa, you’re too good at this, ma’am!”

“Tama, Pochi, don’t waste time being envious. Focus!”

“You’re so smart, Arisa.”

I heard everyone's excited voices coming from a corner of the courtyard of the Gatefront Inn. That last voice tipped me off that Yuni was playing along with my set of kids.

I didn't see them when I entered the courtyard, so I looked at my radar and found them gathered in a small hiding place in the shadow of a hedge, playing some kind of game.

They were all sitting in the circle around a spread of facedown cards set up like a game of Concentration.

Oh, those were the cards I'd bought yesterday.

Watching them for a moment, I gathered that they had to guess what vocabulary word the face-up letters represented in order to acquire that card.

They could confirm the answer by looking at the picture on the back, so even players who didn't know the letters yet could learn from playing.

"Looks like fun."

"Master, sir!"

"We learned letterrrrs!"

Pochi and Tama spotted me in the shadows and immediately rushed over.

"Look at this, sir!"

"Three carrrds!"

The pair held up the cards they'd won, clearly hoping for praise as they looked at me. Just as they had hoped, I patted them both on the head. "Great job."

While I was at it, I thought I'd ask them about the cards they'd learned.

"What's this card called?"

"That one's *meat*!"

No, it was a goat.

"And what's this one?"

"That's *meat*, too."

Nope. It was a rabbit.

I looked over at Arisa, who surely knew they were wrong.

“Well…they looked so confident when they said ‘meat,’ I couldn’t bear to tell them they were wrong,” Arisa confessed with a wry smile.

I tried to teach them the correct words.

“Were we wrong? It’s a goat, but it’s still meat, sir.”

“Huuh? It’s a rabbit, but it’s meeeat.”

The two girls looked puzzled.

“Then does that mean this card is *bird*, not *bird meat*?”

Liza joined in on the conversation, looking surprised. *If you know what kind of animal it is, why do you need to add “meat” at all?*…was what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t quite do it.

I guess that was how Arisa felt.

Instead, I ended up teaching them the words one card at a time.

“How do you write *meat*, sir?”

“Like this.”

There was no “meat” card, so I added one by hand.

> Skill Acquired: “Painting”

> Skill Acquired: “Penmanship”

> Skill Acquired: “Games”

Drawing a single card netted me a windfall of skills.

As a bonus, teaching Pochi and Tama the word for *meat* had earned me the “Education” skill. This seemed useful, so I maxed out its skill points.

Maybe I should keep a list of ideas for actions that might earn me skills and have a skill-acquisition rally or something.

Chatting with the girls as I made the card, I learned to my surprise that Arisa couldn’t read or write Shigan letters.

“The kingdom I came from was terribly chauvinistic. I couldn’t get anyone to

teach me—they said even royal ladies didn't need to know how to read! I snuck into my older brothers' classes to learn to read and write the official language so that I could read my magic books."

Arisa usually acted spoiled, but she was actually quite worldly.

"So learning cards like these won't take me more than three days, just you watch!"

Supporting her bold claim, she already knew thirty of the one hundred cards in the deck.

"That's amazing! What's your secret?" Yuni still hadn't managed to memorize a single card, so she asked Arisa for help.

"I remember the groups of letters as a single picture. Why not try it with some words that interest you?"

"Oh, Yuni! So this is where you've been hiding!"

There was a rustling in the hedges, and Martha appeared. Her hair had gotten tangled in the thin branches, so I helped free her.

Arisa's nostrils flared, and she muttered something incomprehensible like "They're not daphne bushes, but they'll do!" Maybe it was a reference to a manga she'd read in her previous life or something.

When Martha appeared, Yuni looked flustered.

I guess she's probably still on the clock.

"I'm sorry, Martha."

"Goodness, you're such a child. Come on, then. I'll help you with cleaning the stalls in the stable and changing out the hay, but only until lunchtime."

Martha scolded Yuni lightly, then rolled up her sleeves, ready to make up for her little protégé's error.

"Oh, um…I did it already."

"Huh?"

Yuni spoke up apologetically, peeking up at Martha with her eyes round and innocent.

“Pochi and Tama helped me, you see.”

Apparently, she’d finished her work early thanks to the pair’s help, which was why she was playing with the others.

“We went like, ‘Raaah!’ and got water from the well, sir!”

“And we took care of horrrses.”

The two girls explained the work they’d done with the help of vigorous gestures.

“Very good,” I praised them, petting each on the head. Tama nuzzled my hand happily in response; Pochi stayed still except for her tail, which wagged back and forth so hard, it looked like it’d fall off.

In the end, after warning Yuni that she should always report in when her work was completed, Martha ended up joining me in watching the card game.

◆

“Hello there! My name is Arisa.”

“I’m Pochi, ma’am!”

“Tamaaa.”

The three young girls started introducing themselves as soon as the door to Mia’s room opened.

The sound of the girls running up the stairs must have frightened Mia, who had pulled her blanket up over her head and was peering out cautiously through a little crack.

When I mentioned over lunch that I was visiting not just the ratman knight but also the princess he was protecting, everyone insisted on coming along to meet her.

I figured Mia was probably lonely anyway, and we could give Nadi a break from watching her.

Of course, Liza and Lulu came along with the younger kids. Those two were downstairs helping Nadi. The medicine Lulu had taken this morning seemed to have worked; she had eaten lunch normally, and her complexion looked much

better.

“M-Mia.”

Mia pulled the blanket down just under her eyes and shyly introduced herself with as few words as ever.

I couldn’t hide my surprise when I looked at Mia’s bashful face.

Her eyes, which I was sure had been silver before, were now a beautiful emerald green.

It didn’t seem like she’d been replaced with another person or anything, so maybe the color of a person’s eyes changed when they were using Spirit Vision?

“What the…?”

“She’s a princess, sir!”

“Your hair’s prettyyyy!”

Arisa was staring at Mia’s face in shock, too, though for a different reason.

She was probably misunderstanding the same way Nadi had.

“Didn’t you say she was a rat princess?!”

“No, I didn’t. I said she was a princess being defended by a ratman, remember?” I corrected her. I had to admit, I’d used rather misleading words in hopes of messing with them a little.

I guess Arisa wasn’t able to tell with Status Check that Mia was an elf when she was under a blanket, though. Unlike my menu AR display, it seemed like she needed a visible target to analyze it.

Egged on by Arisa’s boldness, Pochi and Tama quickly became comfortable with Mia.

“I’m going downstairs for a minute. Take care of Mia for me.”

“Okeydoke.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Gotchaaa!”

“Mrr…”

My kids were happy to comply, but Mia grumbled reluctantly. Her hand shot out from under the blanket and grabbed my sleeve, releasing me only when I insisted I would be right back.

Why was she so attached to me?

Downstairs, Nadi was shoveling food into her mouth at an alarming rate.

“Thanks so much. All I’ve eaten today is a tiny bit of porridge in the morning.”

Finishing her simple meal of rye bread and soup, Nadi sat back contentedly and took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of the light herbal tea Lulu had poured for her.

“Herbal tea” made it sound fancy, but it was really just hot water with some aromatic leaves floating in it. It wasn’t as strong as mint, but the aftertaste was quite refreshing. It was apparently very cheap, too, with a full bag of leaves selling for a single penny coin.

“Mr. Satou, you’re a merchant, right?”

Taking a sip of her tea, Nadi casually started a conversation.

Oh yeah, I guess that is what I’ve been telling people. It was getting a little awkward, since I hadn’t done a single merchant-like thing since arriving in the city, but I stuck with it anyway.

“Then you have a horse-drawn carriage?”

“No… I did have a pack horse, but it ran off on me after the starfall a while back.” I was pretty sure that was what I’d told Iona, too.

“Oh, that’s terrible. Well, if you happen to have the funds, why not buy yourself a carriage now?”

She made a sudden proposal with a look of concern.

According to her, an acquaintance of the store manager’s was a merchant who was retiring, so he was looking to sell his carriage and the two horses that came with it.

Once I was done sightseeing in this area, I was planning to bring the beastfolk girls somewhere that they could easily live in peace, so this was a perfect

opportunity…but there was one problem.

“That would be excellent, but I don’t have any experience driving a carriage…” I had a normal license, but I’d obviously never driven anything horse-drawn. I fell silent for a moment, unsure whether to decline the offer or ask if she could introduce me to someone who could teach me the basics.

At that moment, I noticed that Lulu looked like she wanted to say something, so I changed the subject. “Lulu, if you have something to say, feel free to do so.”

“U-um, well, I’ve actually driven a one-horse carriage before…” She trailed off and bit her lip a few times, but finally Lulu managed to force out the words to say that she had some experience.

“Well, then, I suppose you can teach me. In that case, Nadi, I think I’ll buy it after all, if I may.”

“What a quick decision. But don’t you want to know how much it costs, Mr. Satou?”

Crap, I’d gotten carried away because of all the gold coins I had in Storage.

I glanced outside and found a horse-drawn carriage passing through the plaza, using my “Estimation” skill to check the price. A pretty neat trick, if I do say so myself.

“I trust you on that, Nadi. As long as we can keep it within this budget, it’s not a problem. You can keep whatever’s left over for yourself.”

I handed Nadi a bag full of gold coins, trying to model my expression after a trader in an old movie with ulterior motives.

The bag contained the market value plus an extra two gold coins, so it should be plenty as long as we weren’t being duped.

If the negotiation broke down here, my “Negotiation” and “Haggling” skills would have to come into play.

“When did you…”

Nadi looked perplexed, but she dutifully counted the coins and issued me a temporary receipt.

I guess my performance was a little too good. It would've been more natural if I had proposed an amount and provided it to her later rather than putting the coins in a pouch in Storage and offering it right away.

All right, enough regrets. I'll just be more careful next time.

◆

"Let's practice camping before we go on a journey!"

At Arisa's suggestion, we decided to set up a practice campsite in a vacant lot in the west quarter.

Nadi had gotten permission from a person in power for us to use it. Normally it would be fine to just use it without permission, but since we'd be using fire in this case, it was better to ask beforehand.

The lot was full of grass and other weeds, so I used a sickle I'd bought from a nearby hardware store to start making a place for us to practice.

I had sent Arisa, Lulu, and Liza to buy more necessary tools and supplies that we'd use for camping.

"Cutting weeeeds?"

"Leave it to us, sir!"

Pochi and Tama happily started cutting the grass.

I worked along with them, making a heap of all the clippings in one spot. In the area where we'd be making our impromptu kitchen, I pulled the weeds up by the roots instead of cutting them.

Next, I stacked some stones Pochi and Tama had gathered to create a makeshift stove. I was relying on my memories of camping as a student, but I think I managed to do a pretty good job.

Since we had time to kill before the shopping group came back, the three of us lay back on the bed of clippings to look up at the clouds.

I'd noticed movement in the skill acquisition log while I was working, so I checked it then. I had gotten even more skills than I'd expected. There were six in total: "Weeding," "Farming," "Cultivation," "Collecting," "Masonry," and "Camping."

“Camping” seemed like a skill that I should’ve gotten a long time ago. But I guess all I’d really done in the labyrinth was hang a tent over some rocks and take a nap, so maybe that didn’t count. The requirements were still very unclear.

“We’re back, and we brought supplies!”

Arisa returned, with Liza and Lulu close behind.

Liza fine-tuned the temporary stove, then put a pot on the fire. It looked like she’d already drawn water beforehand.

“Eh-heh-heh, look, look!”

The item Arisa was holding up to me proudly was a kettle, complete with a whistle.

I wasn’t sure if it was for outdoor use or just because there were no gas stoves in this world, but it looked like it was meant to be hung on a pole and heated over a fire, just like the pot.

Lulu put some tea leaves in the kettle and hung it up next to the pot.

The menu for today apparently featured a stew made with dried meat and three kinds of chopped root vegetables, with a side of rye bread.

It turned out that white bread could only be bought on the other side of the inner wall. I had no problem with rye bread for now, so I figured there was no need to go out of my way unless I got sick of it.

Liza had put aside her spear for a kitchen knife today, serving as our cook. Lulu helped out with smaller roles like peeling vegetables, and Arisa cheered them on. Pochi and Tama had been put on kettle-watching duty.

I headed over to a corner of the vacant lot to retrieve a tree stump. We could use it as a table.

Nobody was watching, so I pulled up the stump with brute force. This normally would’ve been impossible without heavy machinery, but the help of my abnormally high STR stat made it an easy feat.

I lopped off the thick roots of the stump with the magic hatchet that I’d “borrowed” from the red-helmeted ratman.

Before long, I heard the kettle start to whistle. But for some reason, instead of taking it off the fire, Pochi and Tama came running over to me.

“The kettle’s maaad!”

“Help us, sir! The kettle man is angry, sir!”

…The “kettle man”?

Pochi and Tama had apparently never seen a kettle with a whistle before, and they were startled by the keening noise that the steam made.

“That’s just the sound of the whistle telling us that the water is boiling.”

“It’s not maaad?”

“Why does it whistle when the water boils, sir?”

I tried to explain the mechanics of steam to them, but they didn’t quite understand.

“Of course they wouldn’t. They’re children, not science majors. How are they supposed to understand that water’s volume multiplies by one thousand when it vaporizes?”

That’s wrong, Arisa. It multiplies by 1,699.

Of course, I didn’t actually voice that objection to Arisa; instead, I opened the lid of the kettle and lifted it up lightly.

“Look at this.”

The kettle’s lid was rattling in the steam.

“When water gets hot, it turns into this white smokelike stuff. The smoke is very strong, so it can easily move something light like this lid.”

Arisa tore up a nearby piece of grass and made a waterwheel. Or in this case, a pinwheel.



She held it up to the kettle and let the steam spin it, then pulled it away and blew on it to spin it herself.

“Just like when a person blows out air, the steam blowing through the whistle makes a noise.”

“Arisa’s amaziiing!”

“You’re so smart, ma’am!”

To my chagrin, Arisa’s explanation seemed to get through to Pochi and Tama easily.

If I learned to use Water Magic, I’d like to try developing a spell that blew enemies away with steam or turned into a wall or something. Although, I supposed that might exist already.

Once we had finished the meal and were relaxing contentedly, I noticed a light on my radar and turned my head.

Locking eyes with me, three cat-people and dog-people kids froze in their tracks. I recognized their stuffed animal–like appearance right away.

“Forrr the chick’n, sirrr.”

“Thank’oo, sirrr.”

“It was rrreally tasty.”

The beastfolk kids thanked me repeatedly, and each one placed a little leaf full of nuts and berries on the stump I was sitting on.

“What are these?”

“Trrreats, sirrr.”

Were these thank-you gifts?

At once, Pochi and Tama came running over.

Arisa and Lulu had gone with Liza as their escort to buy some fruit for dessert, so they weren’t around.

“No fightiiing!”

“You musn’t bully our master, sirs!”

Apparently, they thought these kids were attacking me and were clearly ready for all-out war.

“It’s all right. These kids brought me nuts as thanks for the grilled chicken I gave them.”

At this, Pochi and Tama relaxed their fighting stances.

“These are chinquapin nuts, sir! They’re very tasty, sir!”

“And these are wolfberriiies. They’re good, toooo!”

Picking up the treats on the little leaf plates, the girls told me their names.

“They’rrre forrr him!”

The children didn’t seem to like that Pochi and Tama had picked up some of the treats without permission, and they raised their voices in protest.

I certainly wanted to accept their gifts with gratitude, but considering what I’d heard from Pochi and Tama before, I was concerned that they needed this food far more than I did.

…I know, I’ll give them a thank-you gift for their thank-you gift.

If they’d come a little earlier, I could have given them some stew and bread…

But I still had almost five pounds of dried meat, so I figured I could give them that.

“Thank you very much.”

I wrapped the nuts and berries in a handkerchief and tucked them away in my Garage Bag.

The children seemed satisfied at this and started to leave, so I called out to them.

“I have a favor to ask.”

“Whazzit, sirrr?”

“We have so much of this that we couldn’t eat all of it. Do you think you could take some for me?”

Pochi and Tama looked like they were about to speak up, so I hastily covered

their mouths.

I was sure they were going to tell me that they could eat any amount of meat just fine.

“Arrre you surrre?”

“Yes, you’d be helping me a great deal.”

Pochi and Tama stared at me with protest in their eyes, but I pretended not to notice.

I waved at the beastfolk kids as they left, carrying the wrapped parcel of dried meat like a precious object.

At some point, Pochi and Tama had discovered the fun of rubbing their heads against my stomach, so I let them carry on until Arisa and the others returned.

◆

On the way back from our “camping practice” (which was really just pretext for a picnic), I stopped by the general store to fill out the necessary paperwork for purchasing the horse-drawn carriage.

We arranged for Nadi to complete the purchase that day, with delivery scheduled for noon two days later.

It was a surprisingly speedy process.

While we worked on the paperwork, Arisa suggested that we should bring Mia back to her home.

Nadi said the elves lived just south of the old capital, so it should be easy enough to go there after sightseeing in the city.

When we brought it up, Mia seemed quite enthusiastic, and I was certainly interested in seeing an elf village, so it was decided that we would talk to the store manager about it when he returned to Seiryuu City. *I guess we do need to get her guardian’s permission.*

But even after we made our decision, the manager still didn’t return.

Still, Nadi didn’t seem too worried about her beloved boss, so it was probably fine.

As for the horse-drawn carriage, when it was time for the long-awaited introduction and test drive, Lulu and I headed outside the city so that she could help me practice driving it.

“The weather’s very nice again today.”

“…Yes, sir. It is, sir.”

I tried innocuously chatting about the weather, but Lulu’s expression was as stiff as ever.

Lulu seemed anxious about being alone with me; her shoulders were tense. The horses seemed to sense her nerves, too, as they were snorting roughly and couldn’t seem to calm down.

“You don’t need to be so tense. I’m not expecting you to start behaving like Arisa—in fact, I’d rather you didn’t—but I hope you can be more comfortable with me like Pochi and Tama.”

“But…I’m a slave. That seems so strange…”

Lulu’s voice was so faint it was practically inaudible. *It seems like it’ll take a while to change her mind.*

For now, maybe I should start by getting her to take deep breaths and relax.

“Lulu, breathe in slowly…”

I took the reins from her while I gave her instructions. Thinking it’d be best to relieve the tension from her body as well as her mind, I showed her how to do some seated stretches that I sometimes used in the workplace.

Maybe because I’d gotten a youthful new body when I came here, I hadn’t had any stiff shoulders or anything, so I hadn’t done them at all recently.

“Do you feel a little better? As long as we’re here, would you like to chat a little?”

I deliberately looked away from Lulu and up at the clouds, speaking in a laid-back tone.

Her tension seemed to have abated a little, but she still gave only short responses like “yes” and “indeed.”

That's right…isn't Lulu uncomfortable with men?

According to Arisa, her male cousins and and neighborhood kids had bullied her sometimes, so it wouldn't be that surprising.

She didn't seem to be too comfortable with talking, either. In cases like this, it was best to let them talk about what they do want to talk about instead. If it was about something she liked or could brag about, she should loosen up a bit. That was how it was for my nerdy friends and me, after all.

Now then, what topic would be best?

I thought for a moment, then settled on the topic of Arisa.

"…It's true! Arisa's just so amazing!"

Apparently, my decision had been the right one.

Lulu seemed to be enjoying herself as she talked about Arisa.

Her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were a little flushed. She was always a beautiful girl, but this only made her even more so.

Oh, yikes. My thoughts had veered into dangerous territory for a second there. Scary.

"You really love your little sister, don't you?"

"Yes! Although sometimes it's hard to tell which one of us is really the older one."

"She certainly doesn't act like an eleven-year-old."

"Well, Arisa has always been a genius, ever since we were little."

I wasn't sure if she was a genius so much as she just had a lot of knowledge from her previous life. I wondered if she'd actually talked to Lulu about that?

Well, whatever. As long as we're on the subject, we might as well delve into it a little.

"What was she like back then?"

"Well, for example…"



Her high opinion of Arisa seemed to blind her to certain flaws, but I let her talk as much as she liked, not offering any boorish corrections or objections.

Eventually, Lulu started to cough and hold her throat from the unfamiliar overexertion, so I handed her some water.

We continued on this way until close to noon, with Lulu happily bragging about Arisa to her heart's content.

Hearing the echo of distant thunder, I looked up to see dark clouds stretching out over the mountains.

I think we still have a few hours, but we'd better take care of our main objective here before we get rained on.

"Shall we get started on the driving practice?"

"Yes! I'm sorry, I've just been going on and on about Arisa…"

Once I reassured Lulu that there was no need to be embarrassed for talking so much, we began the lesson.

Of course, as soon as I started to steer the horse-drawn carriage as Lulu had shown me…

> Skill Acquired: "Driving"

> Title Acquired: Coachman

…I immediately gained the necessary skill, so with each part of our lesson, I put more skill points into it.

I could have maxed it out right away, but I wanted to be considerate, since Lulu was teaching me, and taking our time with the lesson helped to facilitate more relaxed communication with her.

And over the course of our chat, I was able to learn more general knowledge about driving carriages.

The "Driving" skill would teach me all the subtleties I needed to know, but it wouldn't teach me why I needed to do things that way.

So I relied on Lulu for that supplemental information.

As it turned out, though, Lulu had only ever driven a coach inside a town before, so I thought it would be best to have a veteran coachman teach me some things, too, before we left on our journey.

Every time there was a rumble of thunder in the distance, the space between Lulu and myself shrank a little.

I guess she must be afraid of thunder.

Not only that, but she shrieked a little and latched onto my arm when there was a flash of lightning over the mountains.

If Arisa had been around, I had the feeling that she would've wanted to get a closer look when she heard the thunder.

Suddenly, I felt someone watching me from the nearby forest, so I turned around.

There was nobody there. Nothing strange on my radar, either. Maybe it was a bird or a small animal—no, it was an owl.

Lightning flashed again, and I caught an ominous glimpse of the owl silhouetted against the dark clouds.

I somehow felt as if our eyes had met for a moment, but then the owl seemed to lose interest in us and left to alight on the roof of a different carriage headed into Seiryuu City.

"U-um…master…?"

My sudden silence seemed to have made Lulu anxious.

If I made her uncomfortable now, after we'd finally gotten a little friendlier, there would be no point in my having listened to her sing Arisa's praises for so long.

"I'm sorry. I thought I saw a huge bird in the forest, so I got a little distracted."

"Was it a hawk?"

"No, it was a bit rounder than that, so I think it might have been an owl…"

Making a suitable excuse, I managed to recover, smoothly making the atmosphere more relaxed again.

◆

When we entered the city and returned to the front of the general store, the sharp-eyed Tama was quick to spot us and wave from the second-floor window.

I moved to wave back, but her face had already disappeared from the window, so I was stuck with my hand in the air for no good reason.

Lulu giggled a little, so I covered my embarrassment by asking her to direct the carriage toward the Gatefront Inn.

Well, I was glad she'd finally opened up to me a little.

"Welcome back, sir!"

"Masterrrr!" Pochi and Tama came running up eagerly, so I caught them in my arms. Mia was behind them, attended by Arisa and Liza.

"Satou."

"Hi, Mia. Are you able to walk around a bit now?"

"Mm. Magic potion."

"She seems much recovered thanks to the magic potion that the store manager brought back. This was my first time seeing one! It was amazing."

Arisa supplemented Mia's short statement.

Checking on the map, I saw that the store manager was indeed on the second floor of the general shop. We must have just missed each other, as he'd returned to Seiryuu City just after we headed out.

"I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Mm, thanks."

Mia seemed like she wanted to say something, and behind her, Arisa was looking at me and pointing emphatically at Mia's head.

Mia's hairstyle today was different from usual. Normally, she wore it down loosely over her back, but today she had put it up into two pigtails.

It appeared I was supposed to comment on it now.

"That's a very cute hairstyle. It suits you well."

“Mm.”

Mia responded to my compliment with a low, shy voice.

Arisa suggested that we get something good to eat in celebration of Mia’s recovery, so I asked if Mia herself had any suggestions.

“Honey pastries.”

I hadn’t expected such a prompt response, so it took me a second to react.

Possibly taking my delayed reaction as a rejection, Arisa quickly followed up.

“She took an interest in them after Pochi and Tama mentioned eating them before.”

“Liza ate them, too, sir!”

“They were sweet and happy tastinggg!”

Remembering the experience, Pochi and Tama pressed their hands to their cheeks.

“I thought it’d be nice if Mia and everyone could eat them, too,” Arisa added sweetly.

I see. So Arisa wants to eat them, too, and she’s using Mia as an excuse.

They weren’t very expensive, so I gave Lulu and Liza a few silver coins and asked them to buy enough pastries for everyone to have several.

I could have asked Arisa, but I had a feeling that the recuperating Mia would have wanted to go, too, so I left it to the two of them.

Suddenly, Tama looked up at the roof of the Gatefront Inn.

“What is it, Tama?”

“Hmm…that bird is weeeird.”

Tama was tilting her head uncertainly at an owl that was perched at the very top of the roof.

…Is that the same one I saw when Lulu and I were practicing with the carriage earlier?

Seeing that we’d noticed it, the owl flew off somewhere.

“Hello, Nadi. Is the manager here?”

“Oh, welcome back, Mr. Satou. The boss is with Mize right now.”

Who’s Mize again…? Oh right, the red-helmeted ratman.

I thanked Nadi and headed up the stairs to the second floor.

The children stayed downstairs on the sofa and started spreading out the vocabulary cards on the table. *They really seem to like that game.*

It looked like rain was imminent, so there weren’t any customers in the store, but I warned them not to bother Nadi just in case.

Knocking on the door lightly, I entered the room.

If this had been a woman’s room or a pubescent boy’s, I would’ve waited for an answer before knocking, but since it was just some old guy’s, I figured it was fine to just wait a few seconds before coming in.

Upon my entrance, the manager looked at me and gave a short wave of welcome.

“Satou.”

“Zatoo? Yew saved my life, sah…”

The ratman thanked me in his raspy, barely intelligible voice. As far as I could tell, it wasn’t because he was injured but rather that his mouth, much like the dog-people kids’ I’d met before, wasn’t well suited to forming the words.

I asked how he had ended up protecting Mia and being attacked by the shadow stalkers.

Of course, this was mostly just out of curiosity, and I wouldn’t have been surprised or bothered if the two had refused to explain, but instead they gave me an unexpectedly detailed explanation.

A sorcerer had kidnapped Mia from her hometown in the elf village and had taken her to a facility called the Cradle. She’d escaped while she was being transported and happened to run into the ratman, who helped bring her to Seiryuu City to seek the store manager’s help.

The red-helmeted ratman explained he’d been close by at the time because

he was investigating whether the Cradle might be the cause of the increasing amount of withering plant life in the mountains near his village.

By his account, the reason the ratman had called Mia a “princess” despite their evident lack of a common race was that he had developed the habit in his youth when visiting the elfin village to train.

The reason the sorcerer had kidnapped Mia was unknown. I got the feeling that the store manager might know something, but he seemed to have no intention of talking about it, so I ignored it.

Then, pursued by the giant fanged ants and giant flying ants that served the sorcerer, the ratman had used some of his contacts in the underground world to sneak into the city.

So that sorcerer had sent the giant flying ants that attacked Seiryuu City, too?

I also learned that he’d used rock salt that could be collected near his village to buy passage into the city.

…Oh right, I have to ask the manager about bringing Mia back to her hometown.

“Manager, I was thinking…”

The sudden rumble of thunder outside the window and the shrieks of Nadi and the girls downstairs cut off my sentence.

“Nadi!”

The store manager nimbly darted out of the room.

I hurried down after him. The ratman followed behind me as well.

When the three of us arrived downstairs, we saw Nadi and the young girls clutching one another.

“What’s wrong?!”

“B-boss…”

Half kneeling, the ratman kept a sharp eye on the entrance of the shop like a sentry.

However, I didn’t see any signs of an enemy on my radar.

Aside from Arisa wincing and crying “uncle” while Pochi and Tama clung to her on either side, there didn’t seem to be any problems at all.

I peeled the beastfolk girls off Arisa before they could suffocate her.

“What on earth…”

A crack of lightning cut me off this time.

Shortly thereafter, a trickle of rain quickly turned into a downpour, covering the outdoors with a dark curtain of rain in the blink of an eye.

Sitting down on the sofa with the girls on either side of me, I realized why they had screamed a few moments ago.

They had just been startled by a lightning strike.

The store manager used magic to light up the room.

The light illuminated Nadi’s face; clinging to the store manager’s arm, she looked frightened but happy. Inwardly cursing all happy couples everywhere, I forced myself to give her a begrudging smile.

I didn’t mind Arisa and Mia clinging to my arms, or even Tama’s fingernails digging into me as she curled up on my lap, but I wished Pochi had latched on somewhere other than my face. And that she would stop yanking on my hair.

I lifted Pochi up gently and sat her on my lap next to Tama.

“Th-thunder man is scary, sir!”

“Flash flash, baaang!”

“It’s so dark, sir!”

“And the trees are crackiiing?”

Pochi and Tama were panicking a bit, tearfully flailing their arms as they demonstrated the absolute terror of thunderstorms. *Is it really that scary?*

And worse yet…

“Thunder is really quite dangerous, you know! Really dangerous! Aaze told me so. A lightning strike can bring down even dragons, you know. Even dragons! It’s true!”

Wow, who are you supposed to be?

As if her usual unwillingness to talk was a figment of my imagination, Mia suddenly unloaded like a machine gun.

I'd never heard the name Aaze before. Maybe it was her mother?

"So are you afraid of thunder, too, Arisa?"

"…whuh, muh?"

Scared enough you can't even talk, huh? Arisa's face had gone white as a sheet, and she quickly burrowed into my arm.

I was concerned that she was going to try something funny again, but I could feel her stiffen with fear every time the thunder rumbled, so I guess there was nothing to worry about this time.

Tama was clinging to my chest, her head turned slightly to watch the rain outside.

"What's wrong?" I asked her, but an especially loud thunderclap drowned out my voice.

A flash of lightning illuminated a small shadow just outside. There was a dot of light on my radar, too.

Emerging from the curtain of heavy rain, a large owl flew inside and landed on the counter with a *thud*.

…It was the same owl from before. Was it taking shelter from the rain?

Its round eyes fixated on Mia.

An AR display gave me more information on the creature. It was designated a shadow owl, the same kind I'd seen the night I encountered the ratman.

That was all well and good, but its title was Zen's Familiar. *A real familiar? Now, that's fantasy-like.*

But…if it was a familiar, chances were good that it worked for a sorcerer.

In which case, the person commanding this owl might very well be the same sorcerer who kidnapped Mia.

And apparently, that sorcerer's name was Zen.

I felt like I'd heard that name somewhere before… Oh, right—the protagonist from the play I'd seen with Zena and the others. I thought that tragic love story was based on a true story, but it must just be a coincidence. After all, the sorcerer Zen who was the protagonist of that story was executed at the end.

I tried to shake that useless information out of my mind.

For now, I had to deal with this familiar. I tried searching on the map for the sorcerer behind it, but when I searched the whole city and even the whole county, he was nowhere to be found.

…Where is he controlling it from?

For now, let's just catch the familiar. If we don't take away his eyes and ears, there's no telling whether he might send monsters after Mia again.

Keeping an eye on the owl, I lifted Pochi and Tama from my lap and gave them to Arisa and Mia respectively, then stood up from the sofa to keep the four of them protected behind me.

The magic light cast a long shadow on the wall of rain behind the owl.

Something gushed forth from that dark shadow, and everything around me froze in place, as if time had stopped.

…Fear.

Yes, that figure was like the very embodiment of fear itself.

All of us were swallowed up by pure fear, forgetting even to blink. It was impossible to think of fighting against such a thing.

I wanted to scream and run away—the only thing stopping me was the need to protect the kids and my last remaining shred of pride. The girls under my protection were all that brought me back to my senses.

After a moment, the fear abated slightly.

Was it Arisa's Psychic Magic?

With the tiny sliver of my mind that was still lucid, I was able to open the menu.

It was incredibly slow—like an ancient PC. Cursing it all the while, I opened the skill tab and scrolled down to the skill I needed.

After what felt like an eternity, I found what I was looking for.

The “Fear Resistance” skill.

I operated the menu with my mind to change it from **Inactive** to **Active**—and right away, time began to move again.

My mind became startlingly clear.

My field of vision, which had been constricted by fear, spread again like the tide going back out.

The sound of the rain, too, reached my ears once again.

Despite how long it had felt, it had been only seconds since the shadowy figure had appeared.

As proof of that, it was still in the middle of emerging from the shadow of the owl.

Though up until a moment ago it had seemed like an enormous opponent, I could tell now that he was only a little taller than me.

It was a hunched-over man in a dingy brown robe. His hood hung low over his eyes, obscuring his features.

Unlike the owl, which had flown inside, this guy had simply materialized here.

As if to confirm his abrupt arrival, a white point of light suddenly appeared on my radar. It turned to red almost immediately.

This must have been magic, although I didn’t know what kind.

I shifted my gaze to the AR display next to his head.

His name was Zen, his level very high at 41. **Skills: “Unknown.”**

I had a bad feeling about this. Was he another anomaly like heroes or Arisa?

Before I could read to the end, the sorcerer Zen took a step forward and glared at us, his line of sight settling on Mia.

I had a feeling that his eyes had lingered on Arisa and me for a moment

before that, but maybe it was my imagination?

“I’ve come for you, Mia.” His voice was like an undead creature’s that had crawled up from the depths of hell. Behind me, I felt Mia tremble as she hung on to my sleeve.

This must be the sorcerer who’d kidnapped her before, then.

Underneath the hood, his face was dark in spite of the magic that lit the room. All I could see were two small glints of violet light that smoldered like embers.

Since Mia was too frightened to speak, I responded in her stead.

“How do you do, Master Sorcerer? I am Satou, a merchant.”

“Hmph. I have no business with a lowly merchant,” Zen spat arrogantly. “Although, I’m impressed, descendant of a hero. To be able to speak so easily while being flooded with fear is a feat worthy of praise.”

Who are you calling a “descendant of a hero”?

If he was assuming that from my name and black hair, he must really be…

“I had planned to let you go, but if you’re going to oppose me, I won’t let you off so easily.”

Zen made a demonstration to give his words weight. He put his hand on the countertop, and the wood dried up and rotted in the blink of an eye.

I didn’t know if this was a spell or some magic tool, but in any case, it would be dangerous to let this guy touch me. I had the “Decay Resistance” skill, so I could probably endure it to an extent, but I had no desire to put that to the test.

In a game, a sorcerer opponent usually meant you had to be wary of magical attacks with a wide area of effect, but since his only goal seemed to be abducting Mia, we were probably safe from that here.

“I would prefer to abstain from violence, but Mia is a friend. I’m afraid I cannot let her be abducted against her will.”

“I wonder, would you still be saying that if I were to rot your right arm off like I did this wood?”

Zen crossed through the rotted remains of the counter, taking another step toward me.

“Is there no way I can convince you to leave us?”

“A foolish question. If you wish to protect Mia, then show me how brave you really are. My madness is not so shallow as to be stopped by mere words.”

Well, I guess I’ll take you up on that, then.

Being careful not to leave a pit in the stone floor, I dug in and aimed a punch at his abdomen, right in the solar plexus.

I was trying to replicate the Chinese martial arts I’d seen in a comic, and my “Hand-to-Hand Combat” skill helped make it a reality.

I could kill him in one blow if I went too overboard, so I also used the senses my “Abduction” skill gave me to hold back just enough.

…That was light.

Rather than knocking him out, I had intended to stop the blow just after hitting his body, but I still hadn’t expected it to feel so light.

Looking down, I saw that my fist had gone straight through Zen’s now semitransparent body.

“What?!”

As I stared in shock, something grabbed on to my ankle and lifted me into the air in an instant.

My vision was suddenly turned upside down. Thanks to my “Spatial Mobility” skill, though, I was able to look around smoothly without any complaints from my inner ear.

The giant force that had grabbed me was actually several black tentacles that had shot out from Zen’s shadow.

So he could control shadows?!

I wasn’t taking any damage, but I felt a tingling pain in my captured ankle.

I knew Arisa and I were the same way, but an opponent who could use magic without any chanting was a real pain.

> Skill Acquired: “Shadow Magic”

> Skill Acquired: “Shadow Resistance”

What the hell is “Shadow Resistance”?! I wanted to complain, but now wasn’t really the time for that. Instead, I put skill points into the skill, increasing my ability to combat this unreasonable form of magic.

Thanks to my new “Shadow Resistance” skill, the prickling numbness in my leg vanished.

“What a surprise. So you’re a martial artist masquerading as a merchant, are you? I doubt there are many people in the world of your level who can move quite like that.”

“Well, I had no clue there was such a thing as a sorcerer who could manipulate shadows, so I guess we’re even.”

It seemed silly to continue speaking respectfully toward a hostile opponent, so I decided to be more casual.

Still, I guess he underestimated me since I’d set my level in the networking tab so low. This was a good way to catch someone off guard, but I wished there hadn’t been any need to do so in the first place…

“You’re still talking big in such a position? I’m impressed.”

Another new shadow rose up next to Zen, forming into a fist.

A punch from that would definitely be painful. I slipped my hand into the pocket of my robe, planning to pull out my Magic Gun from Storage.

“Get your hands off my masterrrr!” Arisa cried out desperately. At the same moment, I felt something pulling on the right side of my body.

According to the log, she had used a Psychic Magic spell called Shock Wave.

For just a moment, Zen staggered back.

There was no change to his HP gauge or stamina, but the spell must have had a knock-back effect. His hood fell away, revealing his face to the light.

…It was nothing but a skull.

In place of pupils, two purple flames were ensconced deep in his empty eye

sockets. If it wasn't for my "Fear Resistance" skill, I probably would have screamed. I looked over the rest of Zen's status, which I hadn't finished reading earlier.

"…a wraith?" Nadi murmured in a hoarse voice.

Arisa had cast Remove Fear before her attack, releasing everyone from the status affliction.

Nadi's guess wasn't far off, but this opponent wasn't so simple.

"I'm a bit offended to be lumped in with such base undead creatures."

Looking irritated, Zen turned to glare at Nadi. The shadowy fist that had been ready to attack me shot toward her instead.

I twisted my body in the air, using the Magic Gun I'd just pulled from Storage to intercept the fist.

The magic bullet hit the fist dead-on and vaporized it, but the base of the shadow it had come from kept moving toward Nadi without any loss of momentum.

I pulled the trigger for the next bullet, but the minuscule time lag prevented me from firing.

"Nadi!"

The store manager leaped out in front of Nadi, brandishing his long staff and opening his mouth to begin chanting a spell.

But the tip of the shadow smashed right through the staff, striking him square in the chest.

The sight gave me an idea.

I yanked my bound leg away from the shadows that held it, stomping on the base with my other foot.

The instant I escaped, I dashed forward and punched the shadow that was headed toward Nadi and the manager.

"Absurd! Yes, this is absurd! Hmph…!"

I pulled up my fist from the stone floor that I'd crushed along with the

shadow, then stood up. I had assumed that I wouldn't be able to touch it because it was a shadow, but I'd misunderstood.

If they could interact with us, then we could interact with them, too…

"A shadow whip made with Shadow Magic can only be stopped by magic or magic items."

…or so I had thought.

I was glad I hadn't smugly announced that or anything. That would have been embarrassing.

More importantly, the store manager's HP gauge didn't look good after that blow to the chest. Destroying the shadow must not have erased the momentum behind it; Nadi, who had caught the manager when he was sent flying, was unconscious as well.

"I won't gib yew the brinsiss!"

The ratman took up a fighting stance next to me, holding the store manager's broken staff.

Behind me, I heard Arisa starting to give Pochi and Tama some kind of orders.

"Pochi, Tama, I'm going to distract him. You two take Mia and escape through the back. You can do that, right?"

"We fight together, ma'am!"

"Beat the bone maaan!"

"You'll do no such thing! You can't beat him. His level is much too high!"

Just then, Mia spoke up in a trembling voice, rejecting Arisa's proposal.

"…No. You run."

"What's the point of running away and leaving you behind? I'm not just trying to help you get away because you're our friend. Our master's wish is for you to escape, so that is my top priority."

If Arisa weren't a child, I felt like I might just fall for her.

"But…"

“No buts. I’ll create an opening for you, so please don’t worry about us and just run!”

Was she planning on using a Unique Skill? She used pretty clichéd phrases for such a little girl, though.

If she could break through my defenses, I was sure she’d have no trouble with a mere level-41 opponent.

I fully intended to take care of him before it came to that, though.

“Master Sorcerer. Forgive my ignorance, but would you mind letting us all in on your identity?” I asked, pointing the gun at Zen.

I already knew his identity, of course. The AR display informed me that he was the **Undead King**.

An undead of the highest rank, equaled only by legends like the Lich King and Nosferatu.

“Hmm. Sometimes a merchant, sometimes a martial artist. Is your true identity a gunman?”

Without answering my question, Zen replied in a tone as hackneyed as Arisa’s, his fleshless mouth moving in an eerie laugh to match his words.

“Perhaps I have many identities.”

If I had to pick one “true” identity, I would suggest “parallel-world tourist.”

“How amusing. Very well, Satou. Let us see if you can add ‘Hero’ to that list of identities—”

“Master, Mr. Rat, move aside!” Before Zen could finish his statement, Arisa’s voice abruptly cut in. “Take thiiiis!”

I leaped out of the way just as Arisa shouted.

Zen took a direct hit from an invisible attack.

He stumbled back—but that was all.

“That was close. To think you’d have a Unique Skill! And that hair… You must be a reincarnation, too, hmm? I didn’t realize you were wearing a wig.”

Too? Then just as I suspected, Zen must be a transmigration just like Arisa.

“Nngh, he resisted it…”

Arisa’s body hit the sofa with a *thud*. That attack must have used all her magic and stamina.

The other girls gathered around the fainted Arisa, crying out her name and checking to be sure she was all right.

Having dodged too late, the ratman started leaking bodily fluids from his eyes and mouth, and he passed out as well. It didn’t seem like his life was in danger, but there would probably be unpleasant side effects if he was left alone.

Taking advantage of the chance Arisa had created, I pointed the Magic Gun at Zen’s shoulder and pulled the trigger.

I would have been a little reluctant to shoot at another person, but since he was some kind of undead creature, I had no problem with gunning down a threat.

The magic bullet raced toward him, but a magical barrier appeared before him and warded it off. It looked like a wall of transparent black glass.

So the Magic Gun won’t work…

I couldn’t just use Fire Shot on him inside. If I used it carelessly, there was no doubt in my mind that the whole shop would burn down.

I could probably beat him easily with one of the Holy Swords or Divine Blades I had in Storage, but it would definitely kill him, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do that. He certainly looked like an apparition, but I still felt like I’d have a hard time sleeping at night if I killed something with a human consciousness.

Demons like Mr. Eyeball and his friend, the natural enemies of humanity, were one thing, but…

“Using power beyond one’s place is begging for destruction. If you do not want that girl to become a plaything of the gods, you should not let her use that Unique Skill again.”

“I’ll let her know when she wakes up.”

Half listening to Zen's advice, I tried to come up with a plan.

"Very good. Then I'll be taking my leave."

…Was he giving up on capturing Mia?

I was about to feel relieved about Zen's casual withdrawal, but then I whirled around when I heard screams behind me.

"My strength is gooone…"

"Let me go, sir!"

"Satou!"

Shadow whips had lifted Pochi and Tama up into the air.

Countless shadows had sprung from the floor and wrapped around Mia, who cried out my name desperately as they dragged her down, half her body already disappearing into the dark.

The shadows drained Pochi's and Tama's stamina and tossed them onto the couch. Luckily, they didn't seem to be wounded.

My biggest concern right now was Mia.

"Mia!"

Mentally apologizing to Pochi and Tama, I leaped toward the elf girl.

I tried using my bare hands to tear away the countless shadows around Mia, but they didn't break, only stretching like rubber.

Fine, then, I thought, and started shooting them with my Magic Gun instead—but new whips formed from the shadows faster than I could destroy them.

Tossing aside the Magic Gun, I grabbed Mia and tried to pull her out of the shadows, but the force with which they were dragging her down was stronger than I'd thought.

Mia let out a cry of pain.

My strength was still greater than the shadows', but Mia's HP was slowly but surely ebbing away. If I pulled any harder, she might be torn apart.

"It's no use."

Zen scorned me as he sank into the shadows beneath his feet.

Arisa tried to shoot at him with the Magic Gun I'd tossed aside, but just like before, a barrier stopped the bullet short.

"You cannot hope to defeat transcendent power like mine, so you would do well to accept the unfairness of the world. If you do not fear death, come and visit the Cradle. I look forward to your break-in with that 'wisdom' and 'courage' of yours."

Leaving his ridicule as a parting gift, Zen vanished into the shadows. He didn't stay to ensure that Mia was fully absorbed—was it confidence or just carelessness?

My body felt as if it was going to be dragged in, too, for a moment, but my "Shadow Resistance" kept me from sinking more than an inch or so.

"Master!"

"Arisa!"

At that moment, Liza and Lulu returned, crying out when they saw the disastrous scene inside.

I made a decision.

"Liza! Lulu! Please get treatment for everyone. Call Zena or the ex-priest Horn!"

With those brief instructions, I tossed a pouch full of gold coins over to Liza. It was the one containing Viscount Belton's crest; if the need arose, he might be able to help them, too.

"Don't worry about me. I promise I'll come back with Mia!"

Without waiting for their reply, I sank into the shadows along with Mia.

The Cradle of Trazayuya

Satou here. When information is transferred from person to person, its contents are altered. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, each person inevitably filters and changes it.

The place we'd sunk into was pitch-black.

There was no light and no sound, as if we were truly inside a shadow. Of course, there was no air, either.

Naturally, that was a little painful. Slowly but surely, my HP and stamina were decreasing. However, they would periodically recover thanks to my "Self-Healing" skill.

It might even be possible that I can no longer die of suffocation with this body.

But even if there were air to breathe, I was sure not many people would be able to stay sane if they were trapped in a place like this for a long time.

A little dizzied by the lack of oxygen, I couldn't focus on my thoughts.

…Right. Mia.

I couldn't even see my own body, so of course I couldn't see Mia. I tried feeling around with my hands, but I couldn't even tell up from down, so that wasn't helping, either.

I took the magic tool called a Tinder Rod out of Storage and pressed the button to ignite it. I thought I would at least be able to see my own body with it, but it did absolutely nothing.

I couldn't see anyone but myself on the radar, either.

I tried breaking out the old "Search Entire Map" skill. Unfortunately, there was no change to the radar display. *Maybe I really am the only person here.*

I opened up the map.

The window displayed the following words: **No map available for this area.**

“Seriously, is this a game?!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

Then, as if in response to my cry, the shadowy space broke apart without a sound, shattering into fragments like glass and disappearing.

◆

I was now inside a large chamber that looked like a place where you’d have an audience with a king.

It was a huge oblong room, the size of two school gymnasiums lined up side by side. The floor was made of stone, and the walls were lined with thick pillars; attached to each pillar was a candlestick, which filled the room with LED-like magic light.

A throne sat on a raised platform, next to a glowing red orb about six feet in diameter floating at around knee height. It looked like a much bigger version of a monster core.

There she is!

Mia was unconscious on the throne.

Next to it, a beautiful blond woman I’d never seen before was tending to Mia. Her face bore a strong resemblance to Mia’s, as if she were an older version of the girl.

But their body types were quite different, since she had outrageously large breasts. They had to be a D…no, maybe even an E cup.

…But that’s not important right now.

Zen stood nearby, running his fingers across an apparatus like a music stand next to the throne. Before I could run over, he noticed my arrival.

“How absurd!”

He looked surprised but didn’t stop manipulating the music stand.

“Yes—honestly, this is absurd! How did you escape from my flawless shadow prison?! It should have been impossible for a low-level cur like you!”

Are you surprised, impressed, or just making fun of me? Pick one and be clear

about it.

I felt a little unsteady on my feet, possibly as a result of the shadow space I'd been trapped in.

"That's because I have a talisman of light. Shadow magic won't work on me."

Whoops. I was just planning to lie to him, but I got a little carried away. Was my "Fabrication" skill running too wild?

"A trial must be fair. I cannot accept any cheating. Only those who have captured the Cradle can enter this room. That is a crucial rule."

When he finished speaking, Zen nodded in agreement with his own words.

"Are you playing at being the game master?"

If you want to play a life-or-death game, keep it to virtual reality, please.

"A game, you say! True enough, people cannot die here in the Cradle, but this is no child's play."

…People couldn't die? What did that mean?

"And in order to complete the capture, the hero who's managed to get to this room must defeat me, the Undead King!"

What was this guy talking about?

Did he want someone to capture the Cradle and kill him?

His objections were starting to anger me a little. Did he cause trouble for Mia and my kids and injure the store manager all because of this nonsense?

"If you want to die, just do it yourself. Don't drag others into it."

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha! As long as I have the gods' *blessing*, I cannot die."

For some reason, I sensed an undertone of irony in Zen's words. The way he said *blessing* made it sound like it was more of a curse.

It was a little unpleasant, but his lengthy prattling gave my legs enough time to recover.

I crossed the 130-foot distance in an instant, landing right next to Mia. Rescuing her was my top priority.

Just before my fingertips could reach Mia's clothes, Zen's hands stopped moving across the operation pane on the stand.

"Now then, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to exit the main stage."

◆

The feeling of the ground beneath my feet as I ran forward was suddenly different.

More importantly, the scene before my eyes had changed completely.

I somehow managed to stop myself right at the edge of the cliff that had suddenly appeared. My feet dug in to the ground so hard that the edge of the cliff started to crumble beneath me, but I escaped to solid ground with a light step back.

"What happened? Where am I?" I muttered to nobody in particular.

From what I could gather, I'd been teleported by some kind of magic or something. It seemed different from Zen's ability to travel from shadow to shadow—but where in the world had I ended up?

I looked over the scenery spread out before my eyes. The area seemed to be some kind of mountain pass.

The cliff on which I stood overlooked a basin that seemed like it could hold Seiryuu City many times over, surrounded by mountains on all sides.

The bottom of the basin was shrouded in mist, but I could faintly make out the withered, leafless branches of some tall trees.

The surrounding mountains were bare of greenery, too, and there wasn't an animal in sight.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Then I opened them and looked around again.

…It's still there.

This time, I kept my eyes closed awhile and counted up prime numbers, trying to calm my mind.

Then I steadied my resolve and opened my eyes again, but it still hadn't

disappeared.

So it really wasn't an illusion.

I stared at the enormous tree that loomed in the center of the basin.

If it were just a normal large tree, that would be fine.

But, to my immense disbelief, this tree was just as large as the mountains surrounding it.

"Is this what they call a 'world tree'?"

I had no idea how it wouldn't collapse in on itself at that size, but I'd have to entrust that problem to future generations of researchers and focus on what I had to do for now.

The AR display next to the apparent world tree read **Cradle of Trazayuya**.

The giant tree was adorned with filaments that looked like a spider's thread. It was hard to see them clearly among the branches, but judging by the scale, I would guess that they were passageways.

If I wanted to rescue Mia, my destination should be somewhere in that tree.

Opening my map, I saw that this region was called the Gray Rat Emirate. Luckily, it appeared to be the territory right next to Seiryuu County, so I wouldn't be stuck in the middle of nowhere after rescuing Mia.

I used "Search Entire Map" to explore the emirate and choose a route back home in advance.

The nearest populated settlement, a gray-ratman village, was far on the other side of the mountains, so even if I had to use Meteor Shower in the process, there would be no innocent casualties.

A stairway to the Cradle stretched up before my eyes. I'd walked a little ways along the edge of the cliff from where I'd been before.

However, these particular stairs were actually just a series of glass-like panels floating in midair. It was probably magic; there was no visible support at all. They were each about ten feet wide, but with no handrails, it looked as if you'd be sent flying headlong into the basin below if a gust were to blow through.

Normally, I would have been very reluctant to use these, but my “Fear Resistance” skill kept me perfectly calm.

…That’s pretty dangerous.

Once this incident was taken care of, I’d have to make sure to deactivate “Fear Resistance” again.

Once I’d made my way up most of the stairs, I heard a buzzing sound.

Looking toward the source, I saw bee monsters bearing down on me.

They were still far away, so they hadn’t shown up on my radar yet.

Opening my map, I saw that the area name had changed from **Gray Rat Emirate** to **Cradle of Trazayuya**.

Immediately, I used “Search Entire Map” to lay bare everything there was to know about the Cradle.

Additional information about the approaching bee monsters showed up in an AR display.

They were called “crimson needle bees,” and they were small-fry with single-digit levels. They appeared to be poisonous, though, so I took out a Magic Gun to dispose of them before they could get any closer.

The Magic Gun I usually used was still back at the general store, so this was a spare one.

I started reading through the information about the world tree. If Zen knew I was doing this, I bet he’d say I was “cheating.”

It looked like I could just climb straight up the tree trunk, but if he used the special functions of the Cradle to teleport me again, there’d be no point.

I guess I’ll have to try playing by his rules.

If my goal was just to vanquish Zen and the Cradle, I could make short work of it with Meteor Shower, but that wasn’t an option if I wanted to get Mia home safely.

“What is this?”

There was an imposing gate at the entrance, which was no surprise.

But I couldn’t hide my bewilderment at the sign hanging next to it.

The name of the facility and the rules for conquering it were written out in Elvish. Below that, the instructions were repeated in Shigan and four or five other languages.

It read as follows:

> *This training facility is meant to be used by elves. The protective safeguard devices will not work for any other race, so proceed with caution.*
>
> *There are no rules prohibiting anyone from using the training center, but you do so at your own risk.*
>
> *The training center is not responsible for any injuries or destruction of property that occur inside.*

So it was some kind of forest dungeon meant to be used by elves for training.

According to the disclaimer, there were safeguards inside, but they’d be no use to me if I was going to destroy the Cradle. And I doubted that the so-called protection would keep Mia safe if the facility broke down.

Zen had said people couldn’t die inside the facility, but I had no way of checking whether this meant he had extended the effects of the safeguards to races other than elves.

As far as I could tell from the map, the training facility was actually the artificial spiderwebs I’d seen before, rather than a dungeon inside the tree.

There were some parts where the thick outer shell of the tree trunk had been eroded, but most of the facility appeared intact.

Once I passed through the gates, there was a monster lying in wait for me.

Its title read **Wandering Monster**, so this seemed to be a random encounter rather than a planned ambush.

It was about three feet tall in the shape of a preta, a hungry ghost.

I thought it was a goblin, the epitome of small-fry monsters, but the AR display specified that it was a **Weed Goblin**.

Basically, it was a cluster of weeds imitating a monster.

I was able to defeat it with a single kick, sending the weeds flying everywhere with a light *poof*. I guess that made sense, since it was only level 1 or so. A whitish core fell to the ground, but I left without picking it up.

The Cradle had a total of two hundred floors, divided into groups of ten floors that were connected by a total of twenty spiral staircases.

The first staircase was right before my eyes, with each of the eight doors along the way serving as openings to different levels.

The label First Grand Staircase was written on a monument in front of the stairs.

A few branches stretched from the walls in the large atrium-style hall around the staircase, from which sprouted lantern-like sources of light and various fruits.

However, it seemed unnatural that a single branch bore oranges, pears, and melons. It was like something out of science fiction, where scientists used genetic engineering to alter the DNA.

There were monsters stationed in each of the rooms attached to the large staircase, and the higher the floor, the higher the level of the monsters. This added weight to the sign on the entrance that had claimed the place was a “training facility.”

If I had been visiting under different circumstances, it might have been a good way for my kids to train.

At the top of the grand staircase, the door to the 10th floor was adorned with nine holes.

According to the black stone tablet next to the door, it could be opened using jewels called “key orbs,” which could be obtained only by defeating the boss monsters on each floor.

Although Zen had denied it, I could only see this as an RPG.

If you tried to open the door without the jewels, a “gatekeeper” would apparently appear and challenge you to battle.

Defeating this gatekeeper would also unlock the entrance, so I decided to

fight it immediately.

When I used the knocker on the door, a magic circle appeared on the landing in front of it, and a fully armored knight appeared.

The AR display told me that it was a monster called **Living Armor**. At level 10, it was certainly stronger than the other monsters I'd seen in this area, but from my point of view, there was virtually no difference between them.

I dodged the hatchet swinging down toward me and casually dealt a front kick to the living armor's center.

It would probably hurt to kick it with my toes, so I twisted at the waist to drive my heel into it instead.

"Geh!"

I'd gone overboard. I had fully intended to defeat it in one blow, but the armor was more brittle than I'd expected, so my foot went straight through to its back.

I nearly fell over but managed to recover by moving the living armor's body into Storage before I lost my balance.

"…Phew, I rushed that a little."

I muttered aloud to the empty room to play off my embarrassment, then walked through the door that had swung open as if to invite me in.

On the other side was a second grand staircase leading up to the twentieth story on the opposite side of the world tree. This layout was seriously ripped straight from a video game.

…A game?

Just before breaking into a run, I screeched to a halt instead.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but the structure of this dungeon seemed a lot more obviously gamelike than the one that had been under Seiryuu City.

It was as if someone very familiar with console RPGs had created it.

In which case…

I opened the map, searching only for monsters on this floor.

…there it is.

A creature with a level that was unthinkably high for the 10th floor.

I pushed through a hidden door in the wall and proceeded down a hallway made of ivy that ran straight along the path, like a mass of plumbing.

At the end of the corridor, the vines gathered together, forming a cocoon-like object about sixty feet around.

What I was looking for was in the center of this mass.

If I could defeat this thing in battle, I should be able to make a shortcut to the upper levels.

If someone who enjoyed classic dungeon-crawlers designed this place, then there should definitely be a gimmick like that in here.

Those games always had a setup like this. By stationing such a powerful guardian here, the designer could ensure that low-level players couldn't use the shortcut, but at a high level they could defeat the guardian to access the deeper levels of the dungeon more easily.

"Don't hide. Come on out."

In response, a lump in the ivy drew open, and a soft green light seeped out from within.

I waited for the powerful guardian to make its appearance.

"Oh, c'mon—don't bother me. I don't have much magic right now, y'know. We can fight some other time."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

"Ughh, I'm telling Traya about this. I'm not gonna go easy on you!"

What emerged from the cocoon was a green-skinned little girl who looked about five or six years old. Her emerald-green hair, more than twice the length of her body, dragged on the floor behind her.

…This was the boss?

Per the AR display, she was a level-21 dryad. Her actual age had so many digits that I couldn't be bothered to read it. She was definitely much, much

older than Mia.

She seemed pretty lethargic, but for some reason her eyes sparkled when she saw me, and she leaped toward me.

I didn't sense any intent to harm, so I just caught her.

"Are you a human? You should be mine!"

"Come again?" Her words were so unexpected that I gave an admittedly stupid response.

But why had she asked if I was human? Could she tell that I was level 310?

"I'm sorry, but if you're proposing to me, I'll have to ask you to wait another fourteen or fifteen years."

Why was I this popular only with younger women and children?

I wished a sexy adult would fall for me once in a while.

"I'm hungry. Gimme food!"

"All I have is some dried meat. Will that do?"

I had left the rest of my food with Liza and the others.

Once I got back to Seiryuu City, I'd have to replenish my stocks of food and treats.

"I don't need your dumb human food. Gimme magic!"

As far as I could tell from the AR display, the dryad had powers like "Charm Person," "Drain Spirit," and "Drain Magic."

I didn't want my MP to be permanently reduced, so I asked her for details, but her response wasn't very reassuring: "It'll only hurt for a second, then it'll start to feel good."

When I pressed further, though, it turned out that it was no different than using magic normally, and the MP would recover with time as usual.

In that case, I had a ridiculous excess of magic, so I guess it was fine.

"C'mon, please?"

"All right. How does it work?"

“Like this.”

The little girl placed her hands on my cheeks.

I thought she was going to draw it out like that, but before I could react, she brought my face down to hers and kissed me. To make matters worse, she even pushed her tongue into my mouth.

I had forgotten that while she looked like a little girl, she was actually extremely old.

After about ten minutes of her doing what she wanted, I was finally released.

“Phew, I’m stuffed!”

Her face flushed with satisfaction, the girl puffed out her flat chest.

…I’m just going to forget this ever happened. Yeah, I’ll think of it like I was bitten by a dog or something.

“As thanks, I’ll open the corridor for you! You wanna use it, right?”

“Yes, please do.”

Thank goodness. If I found out that I’d been wrong about the shortcut after all that, it would’ve been nothing short of devastating.

She’d taken only about three hundred MP, so I’d recover from that in a few minutes, but the emotional damage was much more severe.

I walked into the corridor that the dryad had opened.

> Title Acquired: Dryad’s Victim

Now, there was a title I’d rather not have earned. I wished that I could reject it in protest.

◆

The next room looked like a laboratory.

The door was labeled Trazayuya’s Area.

Given the state of it, it hadn’t been used for a long time. A musty smell filled the air. Instead of stone, the floors and walls were made of a resin-like material.

I wondered if it might be made of sap, but it seemed more like linoleum.

The area was fully equipped with a dining room, a bedroom, and a bathroom. Judging by the dust that covered the floor, Zen had probably never been to this place.

The lab's library was full of books and written notes. I had no idea how many decades had passed since it had last been used, but the books had deteriorated considerably. Aside from a few magic tomes, most of them looked like they would crumble as soon as you touched them.

With no other choice, I put them into Storage so I could read them straight from the menu.

Plus, if I used the menu to read them, I'd be able to search their contents.

I knew this wasn't the time for reading, but I skimmed through them quickly, hoping to find some information about how to interfere with the forced teleportation function.

As I'd already expected based on the area name, the person who had created the Cradle was named Trazayuya. This Trazayuya seemed to be an elf like Mia, so my guess was that the dryad had been referring to him when she mentioned "Traya."

All the books were written in Elvish. If I hadn't gotten the "Elvish Language" skill during my conversation with Mia, I probably wouldn't have been able to read them at all.

The ink had faded in some places, but I was able to get a rough idea by skimming it.

Trazayuya had modeled this "Cradle" after a dungeon, aiming to develop a place where elves could train safely.

The notes described his struggles, and a consideration toward his race that bordered on overprotectiveness.

> *We elves have a very weak hold on life. Compared to other races, we fare alarmingly poorly in desperate situations. As a result, many of our youth have died in labyrinths. This Cradle must have features that will allow elves to safely escape when their lives are in danger.*

I read that the facility had a “Cradle Core” instead of a “Labyrinth Core,” so while it couldn’t grow on its own like a labyrinth, it would still suck up magic from the surrounding land to purify the core.

Then I found a sentence that concerned me.

> *…And so, I have completed a facility that can implant a core into an existing creature, allowing the creation of artificial monsters.*

Were monsters originally ordinary living things?

Thinking back, all the monsters I’d fought so far had been giant or otherwise malformed versions of normal animals.

…No, considering that I’ve seen moving skeletons and undead creatures, I guess I can’t make that generalization.

I tried to put my thoughts back on track. I could contemplate this kind of thing later.

Trazayuya had created three prototype facilities: one for cultivating monsters, one for producing golems for work, and one for producing servant puppets to wait on him hand and foot.

However, the last facility had been created with the cooperation of the neighboring gray ratmen, and it had been abandoned just before its completion.

According to the documents, the monsters fed on the sap and fruit produced by the giant tree that made up the body of the Cradle. There was no need for them to go out and hunt, so the monsters in the Cradle apparently never ventured outside.

However, after the Cradle was completed, no other elves came to visit it.

At the end of his memoirs, he wrote the following:

> *After a hundred years, still nobody has deigned to forget my failures. My long life is soon to be over. I will seal away the Cradle until my brethren need it in the future. I believe that one day, elves will return to their position as the leaders of the world. —Trazayuya Bolenan*

Since his family name was Bolenan, he must have been part of the same clan

as Mia and the store manager.

This was probably why Zen needed Mia. Still, I was surprised Zen was able to figure out how to lift the seal without reading these notes.

I'd gained a lot of information from this, but I didn't find any way to disable the forced teleportation.

I was a little concerned by the words *explosions add more excitement* scribbled in the margins, but I doubted anyone would be stupid enough to add a self-destruct mechanism to what was supposed to be a safe training facility.

It didn't seem like I could get to the upper floors from this area, so I decided to go back to the dryad for now.

◆

"Oh? Welcome back."

"Yeah, thanks."

Sprawled out on a bed made of ivy, the dryad rolled to the edge of the bed and draped her arms over languidly.

"That was fast. Did you wanna smooch some more?"

"No, I'll pass. I just want to get to the upper floors. Is there a portal or something, by chance?"

Looking bored, the dryad rolled over onto her back and nodded lazily, pointing at a corner of the room. "Right there."

The spot in question was a little flower bed in the center of a circle of mushrooms.

"Just stand in the middle of that fairy ring."

I followed the dryad's apathetic instructions and stepped into the circle.

"What floor do you wanna go to?"

"If possible, I'd like to get to where the master of the Cradle is."

"Oh, no, no. I can't do that."

A little irritated by the way the upside-down dryad shook her head, I asked

her to send me to the highest floor possible.



“That would be the 100th floor, in the Guardian Knight’s Area. The guardian there is strong, so be careful.”

“Sure, not a problem.”

She shrugged and muttered, “Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you” like some old lady, but she agreed anyway.

“Okay, here goes. ■■■ ***Activate*** *Kidou*. Target: Floor 100, Guardian Knight’s Area.”

When the dryad’s spell was complete, the fairy ring produced glowing green spores, and they blew around like a whirlwind, creating a cylinder of light.

When the light faded, I had arrived at the 100th floor.

It seemed a little cruel to suddenly be dropped into the boss room, though.

Before my eyes was a seated, motionless iron golem; next to him, three beautiful women sat at a round table, playing a game where they stacked woodblocks into a pyramid.

Startled by my arrival, the busty beauty who’d been about to place a woodblock accidentally knocked over the whole pile, then stared in shock.

Her expression was so distressed that I nearly apologized automatically. Instead, I just cleared my throat.

“Just a moment, I do declare.”

One of the women spoke up in an unusual manner, putting out her open hand to stop me, so I assented.

She had long, straight hair and the composed air of an honors student, but her weird way of speaking ruined it. “Beauty is only skin-deep,” as they say.

I wanted to just ignore them and keep moving ahead, but the only staircase went back down.

You could probably proceed to the top only if you had beaten the floor by legitimate means.

I hadn’t really minded when I played video games, but being forced to follow these rules in reality made me want to blast a hole in the ceiling and make my

own loophole.

But it would be pointless if I made them angry, got teleported again, and had to start all over, so I reluctantly waited for them to finish their preparations.

Each of the three women equipped a belt that held a rapier-like sword over her short, simple dress. The handles of the swords were carved with a fashionable relief designed to look like a rose.

They put on gauntlets and greaves, but for some reason no breastplates or helmets. Why wouldn't they protect their heads and hearts?

As I contemplated this question, two of the women who had finished putting on their equipment carried the table into a corner of the hall, while the third started up the golem.

According to their AR displays, the women were level-7 homunculi. Apparently, they had "Foundation"-type skills and abilities, and all three of them had the "Magic Manipulation" skill. They shared the title Zen's Puppet.

Strangely, although all three had the same rapier equipped, only one had the "One-Handed Sword" skill; the other two had "Polearm" and "Spear" instead.

All of them looked just like the woman who'd been tending to Mia in the main room.

As far as I could recall, a homunculus was an artificial life-form created with alchemy or some kind of sorcery.

Since they were basically clones, there must have been a lot of them with the same appearance. Judging by the facial features, could they have been based on Mia?

Fully booted up, the iron golem rose to its feet. It was huge, over ten feet tall. Its molding was peppered with random rivets, giving it a somewhat prewar aesthetic.

With their arrangements apparently complete, the women's leader drew her rapier and brandished it in my direction.

Clearing her throat with a cute little noise, the woman spoke.

"I am impressed that you made it this far, Sir Labyrinth Explorer."

Her voice was entirely too monotone.

I would otherwise have wanted to hear more of her pleasing voice despite the circumstances, but her flat tone put it to waste.

“I’m just a merchant.”

“A merchant?”

The women were taken aback and looked at one another uncertainly.

After exchanging glances silently for a while, they seemed to arrive at some kind of conclusion, and they turned back to me and continued.

“…Labyrinth Explorer! We are impressed, I do admit.”

So they’re just going to stick with Labyrinth Explorer, huh?

She had started using that strange phrasing now, too, but it was better than the monotone from before.

“You have earned the right to do battle with the guardian, I do declare. If you can defeat the guardian, you will be entitled to proceed, I do acknowledge. The winner will receive a reward from our master, I do promise.”

…It might be better than the monotone, but I also feel like I’m watching an elementary school play.

Paying no attention to my indifference, the woman continued her scripted monologue.

“Now you must fight. Iron golem, there is no need to hold back.” The beautiful woman finished her lengthy monologue and gave me a satisfied look. The smugness in her expression kind of annoyed me.

The golem certainly looked impressive as it thudded and clanked toward me, but its incredibly slow speed made it much less intimidating.

“Number 6, Number 7, use ‘Body Strengthening’ and station yourselves to the left and right. We’re using *Formation Z*.”

At first I ignored the words, assuming it was some kind of ancient language, but then I realized there was English mixed into the beauties’ conversation.

Trazayuya had abandoned the development of the homunculus

manufacturing facility, so they must have learned it from Zen, who was a reincarnation like Arisa.

The women dispersed to three sides of the room, and a light glowed on their foreheads. Looking closely, I saw that a little magic circle about the size of a five-hundred-yen coin had appeared on each of them, and in the next second their statuses changed to **Body Strengthening**. Was this Foundation Magic?

However, the effect was mild, as they were now only 30 to 40 percent stronger than an ordinary person.

I watched as they got into position.

…Are they not wearing bras? This is ridiculous.

My eyes were drawn irresistibly to the remarkably lively bouncing.

But I was shortly punished for the sin of forgetting about Mia and indulging in such stupid thoughts. While I was distracted, the golem had finished its approach and raised a fist into the air.

I could probably dodge easily if I crouched underneath the golem's crotch, but I didn't really want to do that.

Instead, I raised my Magic Gun with its power on the highest setting and shot out one of the symbols on its forehead.

It had the letters EMETH spelled out on its forehead in the Roman alphabet, so I destroyed the E, turning it into METH.

Technically, it should really have been written with three Hebrew letters, but it appeared to be the real thing nonetheless, as it stopped moving just like in the traditional folklore. That's right: the folklore of the world that we came from.

"Impossible! I do exclaim."

"This is why I said we should hide its weak point, I do remind you."

"For now, we must determine a course of action, I do insist."

The three women standing against the walls of the room clearly hadn't expected me to win so easily and were starting to panic.

I guess that made sense, since I'd destroyed the main force that was their level-30 golem without batting an eye, and the three of them were only level 7.

Still, they had lovely voices that carried quite well.

"Number 5, Number 6, leave this to me and proceed without me, I do declare!"

"Number 7! We will not forget you; I do withdraw!"

"Number 7, I believe you mean 'retreat without me,' not 'proceed without me,' I do jest!"

Although they all had the same face, there appeared to be subtle variations in their personalities.

I was a little concerned that Number 7 had raised a death flag for herself so willingly, but I had no intention of killing them anyway, so it didn't really matter.

The beautiful women swiveled their identical faces toward me, new magic circles of light appearing on their foreheads.

Above the magic circle, transparent Magic Arrows appeared.

"Fiiire!"

The women all shot their arrows at me on the command of Number 5. She was the leader, probably because she was the earliest model of the three. Without waiting to see whether they'd hit their target, Numbers 5 and 6 turned on their heels and started to flee.

They leaped onto ropes that were hanging from the back wall and jammed their feet into the knot at the bottom. Immediately, they were yanked upstairs.

The Magic Arrows zipping toward me didn't seem to have a tracking system, so I trusted my "Evasion" skill to guide me out of the way and avoided them easily.

Dodging Number 7's rapier took little more than swaying to the side. I grabbed her outstretched arm and pulled her off balance, striking her in the abdomen with the palm of my other hand.

I made sure to remember to turn my fingers downward so as to avoid sexual

misconduct.

Number 7 lost consciousness, so I caught her in my arms.

She felt so soft that it nearly made me forget my purpose, but I had no choice, since I couldn't just let her fall to the ground like that. Yep, I definitely had no choice.

But I couldn't just go on carrying her around, so I spread a fur pelt on the floor in a corner of the room and laid her down on that.

When the women had been changing into their battle gear, I'd noticed that they had various kinds of weapons and magic potions. I was hoping to find magic scrolls, too, but there were none of those.

There were eleven magic potions in all. Three were intermediate, and six were lesser potions; the other two were Almighty Paralysis Removal and a Mana Potion.

All the weapons were engraved with stylish reliefs, and my "Estimation" skill told me they were worth a considerable amount of money.

They were all made of ordinary steel, but there were so many varieties—halberds, bhuj, long spears, short spears, greatswords, war hammers, and so on—that I decided to help myself to them anyway.

I had plenty of powerful weapons like Holy Swords and Sacred Blades in Storage, but unless I was fighting an opponent like a greater hell demon, it was annoying to have to change my title every time I wanted to use them.

I could beat most enemies with magic or my bare hands, but I wanted some disposable weapons that I could use in case I was surrounded by monsters I didn't want to touch directly, like cockroaches.

Hearing faint sounds behind me, I turned around to see a spiral staircase descending into the center of the room.

Seems, I'd successfully met the victory conditions.

Quickly stowing the weapons and potions in Storage, I headed toward the staircase.

Recovering the core of the golem lying on the floor would take too much time

and effort, so I just stuck the whole thing into Storage and started to ascend the spiral stairs.

The room on the far side of the fairy circle was made of ivy like the one the dryad had occupied, but it was a bit different.

This area had a cocoon, too, but the shoots forming it had withered and dried up, and all that lay in the cocoon's bed was a brown, mannequin-like husk.

Laying a dark cloth over the corpse, I poured out some water from the Well Bag in place of a memorial service.

Now it could rest a little easier—or so I had thought.

"Wateeer!"

"Huh?"

Small white hands shot out and grabbed mine as I tried to put away the water bag, pulling it up to a small mouth.

The little face, which had looked like it was made of clay, began to change as it drank the water. In a matter of minutes, the mannequin turned into the shape of a little girl. She looked just like the dryad I had seen on the lower floor.

"Okay, now gimme magic!"

Are these things really dryads, or are they succubi?

The dryad happily took a few hundred MP from me, then let out a contented sigh like a middle-aged man knocking back a cup of sake.

"Oh? You gave magic to the me downstairs, too."

"'The me downstairs'?" I asked Dryad Number 2, puzzled.

"We're all me! You humans are the ones who're weird, splitting into individuals like that. Trees and spirits and such are all connected, y'know. I just can't contact them unless I have magic."

Was this like a subset of the Gaia theory?

Maybe they were like a colony organism that used magic to create a network or something.

I didn’t care enough to keep delving into it with more questions, so I just asked Dryad Number 2 if she could teleport me to the top floor.

“Yeah, sure. Wait a sec— Hmm…it seems like something’s interrupting my connection. If I had an elf with Forest Magic, I could send you wherever, but right now it looks like I can only get you as far as floor 180.”

“That’ll work. Thanks.”

“Leave it to meee!” she declared, puffing out her chest confidently.

I stepped into the fairy ring and was teleported to the 180th floor.

◆

“An infestation?”

I muttered involuntarily. The trees and ivy that made up the floor and walls of the room I’d been teleported to on the 180th floor were all disastrously chewed up.

I was guessing this bug-eaten section was the reason that the dryad’s “connection” was interrupted.

Wielding a Magic Gun in each hand, I took out the insect monsters that blanketed the corridor one by one as they gnashed their teeth.

There were so many of them that I was afraid they’d crush me to death at this rate—probably impossible because of the difference in our levels, but I still didn’t want to be covered in bug guts.

I took a halberd out of Storage and held it in my right hand.

I thought it would be heavy, but since my STR stat was so high, I was easily able to swing it with one hand.

I didn’t have a “Halberd-Wielding” skill, but when I attacked a long-horned beetle–like monster that was charging at me, I at least gained the “Polearm” skill.

I nearly danced down the ten-foot-wide passageway, massacring monsters with my halberd.

It wasn’t that I was particularly enjoying the battle. Since my body was so

light, despite my more than sufficient strength, handling the halberd's heavy weight meant that I ended up turning my strikes into more of a dance.

I got sick of it halfway through, so I switched tactics: I pulled out a boulder from Storage and rolled it through the hall to crush the bug monsters, then took out any survivors with the Magic Gun.

I didn't collect the cores because I didn't want to get covered in bug guts, but I'd probably defeated at least a hundred of them by the time I reached the next grand staircase.

In the space in front of the staircase, even more monsters were waiting, oozing and wriggling on the floor.

…Gross.

My disgust must have influenced my next move, as I think I threw the boulder I used to crush them a little more violently than necessary.

I had assumed that after the boulder scattered the monsters, it would hit a wall and stop, but instead it pushed through the wall with a conspicuous groan, creating an enormous hole.

Bugs or corrosion must have weakened the outer walls.

The pressure difference created a sudden gust from the hole, so I grabbed on to some ivy growing from a nearby wall.

The draft quickly died down, so I headed over to the newly made hole, disposing of leftover monsters as I went.

"What a beautiful view."

It was the kind of scenery that I would have liked to gaze at for a while under different circumstances, but in this case it was a bit disturbing.

This room was on the opposite side from the entrance I'd first come in through; through the hole, I could see that so many of the leaves of the giant tree had fallen off or changed color.

I couldn't see the top through the clouds, but when I looked down, I saw that the bark of the trunk was in terrible condition from more bug infestations.

This was different from what I'd read in Trazayuya's notes. The monsters should have no reason to lay waste to the tree like this, in theory…

The bugs that had skittered away from the gust of air were starting to move toward me again, so I scattered them with the Magic Gun as I made my way to the grand staircase.

The guardian of the door to the 190th floor was a sea anemone–like monster that shot ice bullets from its tentacles, but I defeated it easily with the halberd, so it didn't leave much of an impression.

There were no insect monsters on the other side of this door; instead, manufactured wood golems were silently working to repair the holes made by the insects.

They didn't seem to have any interest in attacking me or slowing me down, so I ignored them and kept moving.

◆

After that, I managed to make it to the main room without any major hindrances. Not even thirty minutes had passed.

It seemed like there were traps about, but they were all deactivated—maybe to allow the wood golems to work—so I didn't know what kind.

In the back of the great hall, Zen was waiting for me.

Mia was on the throne, too, but she was still unconscious. About a third of her stamina had recovered, but her MP was depleted again.

"I didn't think you would make it up here so quickly."

"Oh really?"

Zen looked surprised, but I simply shrugged.

Trying to keep his guard down, I walked forward very slowly as I spoke.

"I don't suppose there's any way that you could return Mia to me without a fight?"

Zen cackled.

"No, certainly not. By defeating the iron golem, you've demonstrated that you

are qualified.”

He carried on his monologue.

“However, you do not have the right title to fight me. I’ll have to have you fight a formidable enemy that you cannot possibly defeat so that you might earn the Hero title. As a reward, I will grant you this Holy Sword, Gjallarhorn.”

Zen held out the sword in his hands, still in its scabbard. The scabbard was shaped like a long, narrow cone.

The AR display also gave its name as **Gjallarhorn**, so it must be the real thing.

I had heard of this sword before from Zena. If I remembered correctly, the king who’d founded the Shiga Kingdom had made it.

Although its stats weren’t very high when compared with the Holy Swords I already had, it was certainly leagues above any ordinary sword.

But I had to wonder how he had gotten his hands on such a national treasure.

“So is this supposed to motivate me?”

“Of course! If you return this lost sword Gjallahorn to its kingdom, you’ll have all the fame you could possibly desire. You could surely even become a noble if you wished.”

The words alone made it seem as if he was simply appealing to my greed, but he spat the second half of his statement with such contempt that the word *noble* sounded more like *filthy dog*.

Still, I couldn’t figure out his true motives. Did he really just want to be killed, as I’d inferred before he forcibly transported me out of the Cradle?

“Here are your opponents.”

After Zen spoke, his shadow spread out to the center of the room. Then, three iron golems appeared from inside. Unlike the golems I’d seen so far, these had no writing on their foreheads. They were probably in some hard-to-find location, then.

On top of that, seven beauties who had been hiding in the shadows of the pillars lined up behind the golems.

Among them, I saw the two who'd fled earlier, Number 5 and Number 6. They all had the same face, but their hair was different enough that I was able to tell them apart.

Since there were seven of them, I thought perhaps Number 7, whom I'd left behind in the Guardian Knight's Area, was there, too, but a woman called Number 8 was there in her place. Unlike the other girls, her chest was rather desolate.

"However, in your current position, you will surely be killed by these formidable enemies and attain the title of Hero only beyond the grave."

From Zen's perspective, I was level 10. He undoubtedly assumed that I couldn't win against three level-30 golems.

Zen spread both arms and spoke toward the heavens.

"Therefore, I will give the blessing of the gods to all of you: Limit Break."

◆

A violet aura radiated from Zen's body, engulfing the golems, the women, and even me.

Judging by his speech, it must have been some kind of strengthening magic, but I would prefer not to receive any charity from someone who was clearly my enemy.

As if sensing my feelings, the purple light around me faded.

My log informed me that I had resisted the effects of Limit Break.

I didn't receive any skill in the process, which made me wonder if this was one of Zen's Unique Skills.

"Now, I look forward to an excellent battle to the death."

With those words, Zen put his hands on the music stand–like Cradle Core and began to operate it with his fingertips.

In the next moment, a wall arose between the throne area and the rest of the room. Checking the map, I saw that in addition to the wall, the throne platform had risen to become a viewing area.

A magic arrow flew at my head as if to chastise me for being distracted by the map, but I dodged it by tilting my head to the side.

Then I zigzagged to avoid the arrows that followed.

Was this many really necessary?

When I looked in the direction they'd come from, I saw the women who'd fired them glaring at me with demonic anger.

But that wasn't the only thing strange about them.

Why in the world were they shedding red tears?

And why, instead of the strange speaking style I'd seen before, were they howling like wounded animals?

Maybe that spell literally broke their limits?

If you sacrificed the safety of your own body in order to become more powerful, you'd be destroyed either way, so what was the point?

Were these women nothing more than tools to Zen, then?

While I was occupied with these unhelpful thoughts, the golems and women had started to move. They were much faster than the ones I'd fought in the Guardian Knight's Area.

On closer inspection, I saw that glowing rings of magic were spinning around their arms and legs.

This was probably a visual indicator of Zen's Limit Break spell.

The golems had the same rings of light around their limbs, too.

However, the power boost must not have reached their control systems, because their movements were very clumsy. They were so unbalanced that it looked like they could fall at any moment.

I focused on the first golem to close the distance between us.

I wanted to use this as an opportunity to ascertain the effects of Zen's Unique Skill, but I didn't have any way to do so: the iron golem from before (which was the same model) or the wyvern I'd faced (which was the same level) might have been comparable, but I hadn't taken any damage from them.

The golem tried to strike me, and I took advantage of its lost balance to grab that arm and toss it judo-style. It was a very simple maneuver.

However, taking advantage of my carelessness, the seven women used the golem's giant body as a blind spot to fire arrows at me.

They fired three magic arrows each, for a total of twenty-one.

The arrows flew at me with the speed of bullets, and I moved as my "Evasion" skill instructed me, sidestepping one and then another.

At this point, I was pretty sure that even if someone fired on me at point-blank range with an automatic pistol, I could still dodge it.

But my opponents were prepared for this, and when I was still recovering my balance from evading all the arrows, the second golem charged.

Its arm swung at me with a powerful gust, but I avoided it with a side step.

Putting some distance between us, I fired magic bullets at the golem's leg with the Magic Gun's power on its highest setting. Three hits destroyed the golem's knee, and it immediately slid to a halt, carving a groove in the floor.

Before the third golem arrived, I took a short spear out from Storage by way of the Item Box and stabbed it into the second golem's leg as it tried to crawl across the floor.

> Skill Acquired: "Spear"

I quickly allocated some points to the new skill, then used my newfound talents with the spear to hurl it at the approaching third golem.

There was a loud noise of metal against metal, and the spear disappeared.

A hole opened up in the golem's chest, and it flew back as if struck by an invisible fist.

There was another huge hole in the wall behind it.

Did the spear I threw really do all that? Now, that's *insanely OP.*

The second golem stood; I waited until it was lined up with the first one, then took out my next spear and threw it. I needed no confirmation to tell me that my attack had worked.

I saw the golem's red dot disappear from my radar out of the corner of my eye as I turned my attention to the other points that were coming up behind me.

Three of the homunculi were attacking me side by side.

The way they were moving together looked a bit silly, but I could tell by their weapons that Zen wasn't playing around. The one in front had a large shield and a rapier, the second one had a bhuj, and the third had a poleax.

Most likely, the one in the front would block my attacks, while the other two would use their longer weapons to counterattack from either side.

Hidden entirely behind her giant shield, the first woman attacked me almost twice as fast as Number 7 had in the Guardian Knight's Area.

Once she came into my range, I aimed a kick at her slightly tilted shield.

She lost her balance and toppled back onto her rear, and just as I expected, the other two women charged around her and came at me from the left and right.

I had planned to knock out the woman with the shield first, but the other two backed her up faster than I'd expected.

The woman with the poleax charged at me with a yell, but I smacked her weapon away from me and into the bhuj approaching on the other side, canceling both attacks.

Next I yanked on the poleax and kneed the woman holding it as she was pulled toward me, knocking her out. There must have been too much force, though, because I heard her bones creaking on impact.

I'd have to be more careful or I might seriously injure one of them.

I grabbed the poleax from the unconscious woman and whacked the bhuj-wielder under the chin with the handle as she tried to change her stance, knocking her down. So that she wouldn't get right back up, I jabbed her lightly with the butt end of the poleax, knocking her unconscious.

Five to go.

The four who'd been hidden behind the wreckage of the golem were

approaching me now.

The woman with the large shield was standing up, so I decided to deal with her first. I smacked down her shield with the poleax, destroying her stance again— *Huh?*

Well, that plan didn't work.

I must have put too much strength into the slashing attack with the polehammer, because it sliced the top of the shield clean off, despite both being made of steel.

She lashed out at me with a short sword from behind the remains of the shield, so I quickly dodged.

Long-handled weapons might be too difficult to use at such close range.

I postponed the troublesome woman with the shield, focusing instead on the four women coming up behind her.

I couldn't see them, so I relied on the dots of light on my radar to track their movements.

Just then, one of the women leaped out from behind the shielded woman in a pose straight out of a beat-'em-up game, swinging a war hammer down toward me.

Since I'd been depending on the two-dimensional radar, I wasn't expecting her to come from above, so my reaction was a little slow.

As a result, there was a gap in my defense after I parried her with the poleax, and a woman with a greatsword came around the woman with the shield to attack me.

The whole "identical faces" thing was getting really confusing. The fact that they all had different weapons was my only salvation.

Raising the greatsword with both hands, the woman swung it sideways at me.

At this rate, my torso was going to take a direct hit from the giant blade.

Well, if I was normal, that is.

I dug my toes into the floor enough to make a hole in it, then swung my foot

up forcibly, flinging up flooring to use as cover.

It was meant to be only a diversion, but the area of my kick's effect was unexpectedly strong, and the woman was flung into the air along with the dirt.

Was this the parallel-world equivalent of flipping tatami floorboards?

But I had no time to entertain such superfluous thoughts, as the next attack was already on its way.

The woman with the short spear slid under the feet of the one with the shield, who'd also been launched into the air a bit, and stabbed up at me from below.

My posture was too unbalanced to evade it normally.

I pushed myself into the air with only the power of one ankle. It wasn't enough, but I compensated by grabbing the shield woman's shoulder and pulling myself up farther.

Once I was in the air, the beauty with the war hammer came at me with another powerful swing.

I used my grip on the other woman's shoulder to whirl myself around in midair, avoiding the attack by a hair's breadth. As I landed on the ceiling, the woman with the scimitar shot a magic arrow at me.

This is getting a little too hectic.

I kicked off the ceiling and avoided the incoming missile, landed on both my hands, and used a classic break-dance-like move to swing both feet and knock out the women who used the war hammer and the short spear.

The woman with the large shield parried my attack and rolled across the ground. Opponents with high defense were a real pain.

Three to go.

The beauty with the greatsword scrabbled back up from the floor, scowled at me, and gave a yell.

The red liquid was now flowing from her ears and nose as well as her red-stained eyes. This couldn't be good for her body. Her stamina gauge had already

been reduced almost by half.

A magic circle appeared on her forehead, glowing with a suspicious purple light, and then started to get bigger.

It expanded to the diameter of a basketball and created an absurd number of magic arrows—five times as many as before.

Her MP gauge was at zero, but for some reason the arrows didn't run out.

It was causing a considerable strain on her body, though; I could see blood vessels popping out all the way up to her fingertips as she stretched her arm toward me.

I ducked left, then right, to dodge the first arrow and sank my fingers into the leg of the fallen second golem, lifting it up to use it as a shield. Warding off the endless stream of arrows, I started to edge toward the woman with the greatsword.

Just before my improvised golem-shield could crash into her, the woman danced through the air and swung her blade down toward me.

I promptly released my hold on the leg and shifted the poleax in my other hand to deflect the sword.

…I have a bad feeling about this.

It might have been because of my "Polearm" skill or a different skill.

But in any case, thanks to this premonition, I was able to avoid becoming the victim of the greatsword, though my ax wasn't so lucky.

> Skill Acquired: "Sense Danger"

The polearm split in two, but I dodged backward, a piece in each hand.

The woman with the large shield had moved back to the front of the ranks and was getting closer.

I noticed that well enough, but I assumed she was going to attack with her rapier, so I failed to get away when she came at me with a shield bash instead.

I was flung into midair as if hit by a truck, and the swordswoman followed close behind with a stormy slashing attack. As a bonus, the woman with the

scimitar came at me from the side, using a bizarre technique where she spun like a top.

Normally, I'd have no way of avoiding all this, but if I gave up now, I'd be done for.

With my current position and potential moves, I could think of several possible ways to incapacitate the beauties without killing them.

The fact that I was able to consider all this in an instant was probably thanks to my obscenely high INT stat.

I used the broken halves of the poleax in each hand to strike the greatsword on both sides, ruining both our weapons, then used the splintered remains to pulverize the ground beneath the feet of the scimitar-wielder.

> Skill Acquired: "Weapon Destruction"

The scimitar-wielding woman fell to the floor like a top thrown off balance.

The swordswoman attacked me with the remains of her greatsword, so I parried with the splintered handle in my other hand. Then I used the momentum from my parry for a roundhouse kick, knocking out the greatsword-wielder.

Two to go.

Ignoring the fallen beauty with the scimitar for now, I turned my attention to the one with the large shield.

Her capillaries appeared to be in bad shape, too, as her skin and clothes were bright red.

Worse yet, her stamina gauge was way too low. If I took a swing at her, it looked like she would pass out before I even landed a blow.

I had no choice. I discarded the handle in my left hand and focused on the opponent's rapier.

I held still as it came toward me, aiming for the last possible second before catching the blade with two fingers, my absurdly high STR stat allowing me to easily snatch the weapon from her hands.

> Skill Acquired: “Sword Catching”

The woman was still taken aback at having her sword stolen away when I planted a hand on her shield, forcibly creating distance between the shield and the woman’s body.

She moved her free arm to block my attack, but she was too late.

A light jab with my fist was all it took to render the woman unconscious.

I turned around to defeat the woman with the scimitar, but she had apparently already self-destructed and passed out when she fell before.

Confirming that the battle was over, a corridor opened to the throne platform.

I was afraid that the women’s lives would be in danger if I left them like this, so I used all the stamina potions I’d found in the Guardian Knight’s Area to heal their wounds.

I had wanted to save at least one just in case Mia needed it, but I would have felt terrible if one of the women died because I’d held back, so I spared no expense.

Of course, it would be a waste to let a busty, beautiful woman die, but more importantly, I felt sympathy for the way their boss had used them.

Stepping into the corridor, I set my title to the one that Zen had desired.

◆

The sound of Zen’s applause echoed in the hall.

“Most wonderfully done. Welcome, new hero.”

He manipulated a shadow to carry the Holy Sword Gjallarhorn over to me.

“Is a hero what you were after?”

“Indeed.”

“Then why wouldn’t you just go to the Saga Empire instead of going to all this trouble?” I asked, my voice sharp.

The sight of the bloodied women had shocked me more than I’d realized, as

my heart seemed to be raging.

“Hmph, the hero of Parion? By the time I arrived, he had already been sent home.”

“Won’t there be another one?”

“Is it that season already? Such unfortunate timing.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Even if I explained, you wouldn’t understand.”

He didn’t seem to have any intent of answering me directly.

I tried to calm my heart and mind as we continued the exchange.

“Well, Sorceror…or should I call you Undead King? Do you really just want to die?”

“The answer to that is both yes and no.”

“I’m not looking for any Zen riddles here.”

Hearing my answer, Zen laughed like someone who’d lost his mind.

In the shadow of his hood, the two purple flames wavered madly.

“Ba-ha-ha-ha! Well, is that so? I see now. You are not the descendant of a hero but a fellow visitor from the land of the gods.”

“I don’t know any such place.”

Wait, I feel like maybe Japan used to be called that either before or during the war…

“Ah-ha-ha-ha, there’s no use trying to deceive me. What did you pray to the merciless god for? What did you wish? What did you desire?”

“I didn’t ask for anything.” Because I’d never met him. “I guess if I had to pick something, maybe I wanted a vacation?” I definitely spent plenty of time wishing for that.

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha, how very selfish. Certainly most befitting of a hero.”

“What did you wish for, then?”

And also, if you were reincarnated, why isn't your race human?

"Surely you know? Do you not see it at this very moment? I am the king of the night; undead, immortal. I prayed to the almighty god for a body that would not die, a life without hunger, and the power to strike back against wanton violence."

"So that's why you were reborn in such a body…"

His arms still spread wide, Zen ceased his loud laughter and slowly shook his head.

"You assume too much. No, the god allowed me to be reborn as a healthy baby. Under his watch, I was raised by good, respectable parents, and I was even destined to meet a brave and beautiful spouse of whom I was most undeserving."

Then why…?

"I became too accustomed to my new life. Despite the fact that my previous life had been stolen away so violently, I became convinced that this time would be different."

Zen removed his hood.

The two purple flames burned inside his hollow sockets, lighting his skeletal face.

"I was imprisoned by a noble who had become smitten with my wife and executed for a crime that I didn't commit. When I was resurrected in this form by the god's blessing, the first thing I saw was the heads of my parents, lined up along with those of the rest of my family. And underneath them, the body of my wife, thrown away like a broken doll…"

There wasn't a single tear on his white cheek.

Instead, the purple flames in his sockets burned with rage.

"I have no need for your pity. I revived the bodies of my family as undead monsters, as well as those of many others who'd died under similar circumstances, and I turned my fangs on the nobles who held all the power at that time, destroying everything."

There was no way that he could shed tears, of course. He was a skeleton, after all.

“After I obtained my revenge, I had intended to journey to the afterlife, where my wife awaits me. But the god’s blessing will not allow it. Even the Turn Undead spells of priests, even the Holy Sword I worked so hard to obtain, cannot bring me death.” This time he said his feelings out loud. “Truly, I have been cursed.

“Hero, verily, you are strong. Strong enough that you might well lose yourself in your desire for more power. But do not forget this. Man is weak. If you hold dear the girl who was with you, then be wary that you do not abuse the power the gods have given you.”

I felt as if I’d been given similar advice back in the general store.

“This power is too much for any human. Do not meet with a fate like mine…”

“…Thank you for your advice.”

I etched his words onto my heart.

“Now then, hero. I have said all that needed to be said. Deliver the final blow! Destroy me, before I am completely transformed into a demon lord!”

So stated the sorcerer Zen, or rather, the Undead King Zen.

I drew the blade Gjallarhorn, as if possessed by his madness.



It was a curious sword, with a blade twisted like a drill.

I held the blade up once as if in prayer, then thrust it into the Undead King Zen with all my might.

“Gah…ha-ha. Ena, my angel Liltiena. I will be with you again at last…”

Zen’s body crumbled away like sand.

A moment later, his empty robe fell to the floor.

As the dust settled, I heard the words *I thank you…* echo faintly on the wind.

> Title Acquired: Undead King Slayer

> Title Acquired: Cradle Explorer

◆

“Heh-heh-heh… Well, that was a failure.”

“Yeah, that’s a failure, all right.”

Two small violet lights rose from Zen’s collapsed remains.

“So long, hero.”

“You win this time.”

I sensed so much evil from the lights that I reflexively slashed at them with Gjallarhorn. However, they scattered for only a moment before re-forming and floating up to the sky.

“Let’s meet again, yeah?”

“See you later.”

Before long, the two lights seeped through the ceiling and disappeared.

◆

Were those angels? They felt really evil to me.

But I had no time to contemplate that now. Because…

“The following is a system message. The Cradle’s self-destruct sequence has been activated. Staff and trainees, please escape the premises immediately. I repeat…”

…I heard this announcement.

I rushed over to Mia. She was still unconscious, so I put the mana potion to her lips. Since I'd never used this potion before, I gave it to her one third at a time; luckily, she woke up just as the bottle was finished.

"Mia, do you know who I am?"

"…Big brother?"

Uh, no.

Mia's blurred eyes came back into focus.

Her stamina hadn't recovered enough yet, so there was no awareness in her eyes.

"Where am I?"

"The throne room in the Cradle of Trazayuya."

At my words, Mia forced her unresponsive body to move so that she could look around for Zen.

"It's okay; he's not here anymore. He'll never bother you again."

"Really?"

"Really."

This was no time for a carefree chat.

"The Cradle's self-destruct sequence has been activated. Staff and trainees, please escape…"

I had to stop it, and fast.

"Mia, can you stop the self-destruct sequence?"

"I'll try."

Mia's body was still weak, so I lifted her up and brought her to the operating panel.

After attempting several different operations, Mia shook her head.

"Can't."

You sure give up fast.

I understood what Trazayuya was complaining about now.

I took over for Mia and tried some operations myself. It was all in Elvish, but that was fine.

I used the touch panel–like interface to find what I was looking for.

There it is.

I checked the details and clicked my tongue.

“Satou?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t worry. I’ll get you out of here.”

It seemed that Zen had never planned on sacrificing Mia, either: There was an escape teleportation setting specifically for her.

However, all the other features were locked.

If I stayed close to Mia, I could probably be transported out with her, but then I couldn’t even save the women below this platform, never mind Number 7, who was still back in the Guardian Knight’s Area.

I went to all that trouble to keep them alive before, so it would be a real shame to let them die now.

It seemed that I could change the timer on the teleportation setting, so I set it back by a minute, then carried Mia down the stairs.

I adjusted the countdown timer in my menu to match.

This convenient feature was probably meant for timing when to recast support magic buffs. It was a simple feature, but it had gotten a great deal of support from the users in the last game I’d worked on.

“Mia, listen carefully.”

“Mm.”

Having gathered the women together, I gave their hands to Mia. To make sure she wouldn’t let go, I secured all their hands together with a leather strap.

“There’s still one more I have to help.”

“Satou!”

Mia’s movements were terribly weak, but she still tried desperately to stop me.

Keeping an eye on the countdown timer, I patted Mia’s head.

“Don’t worry; I’m not going to die.”

Fifteen seconds left.

“I promise.”

“Promise— Promise, okay? You have to protect me! You have to!”

Mia forced her trembling lips to shape the words as fast as she could manage.

Three seconds left.

“Yeah, I will. I’ll come out alive.”

I nodded reassuringly at Mia as she disappeared, spirited away by the teleportation system.

I had no interest in committing suicide. So I’d definitely get out alive.

◆

With the Holy Sword Gjallarhorn in hand, I leaped out into the great hall.

Mia’s escape was probably the trigger. As soon as she and the women had been teleported out, the Cradle’s self-destruct system started going into operation.

The walls and ivy that made up the corridors had turned brittle and white.

Luckily, my “Trap Detection” skill alerted me of any areas that might collapse underfoot, so I avoided them easily as I bounded down the hallway.

As I was racing down the first grand staircase, the ceiling started to flake and crumble.

One big chunk started to fall in my path, but I gave it a flying kick to send it out of the way.

“Ugh, salty!”

Is this white stuff salt?

I spat out a chunk that had flown into my mouth.

It wasn't the classiest move, but nobody was around to see it anyway.

Using the stairs normally would take too much time. I jumped down along the thick pillar that supported the spiral staircase instead.

Normally I wouldn't be able to do that, but my "Fear Resistance" skill kept my cowardly heart in check. Partway down, I stabbed the Holy Sword into the pillar to slow my descent.

The sword served its purpose well without breaking, so my shortcut past the last eight floors of stairs succeeded.

I rushed toward the giant hole in the outer wall, stepping all the way to the edge.

At this point, I had to admit that I experienced a bit, just the tiniest amount, of hesitation.

I took a single deep breath, pushing down the fear. It wasn't easy, even with the help of my "Fear Resistance" skill.

I steadied my resolve and stepped forward.

I was just doing a jump down, same as before.

If anyone had been watching from outside, I was sure it would have looked like I was jumping to my death, but it was actually a calculated action.

I used the cracks and bumps in the tree's bark as footholds, hurrying downward.

If I fell too far away from the tree trunk, I was keenly aware that I would tumble head over heels straight to the bottom, but there was no use worrying about that.

The difference in scale was enough to override that fear.

The bumps and cracks were the same size as they'd be on a cliff or a rock face. Even if they were a little far apart, I wouldn't fall more than three hundred feet before finding another protrusion to grab on to.

Normally, the height alone would've been too much for me, but I'd dealt with a similar height before I arrived in Seiryuu City, so I was fine.

Experiencing a thrill not unlike skydiving or riding a roller coaster, I descended to the Guardian Knight's Area on the 100th floor.

"Seriously?"

Since I had been descending at nearly the same speed as a free fall, I should've had plenty of time before the crumbling white salt swallowed up the whole area, but…

"…The roots collapsed?"

I hadn't noticed as I descended before, but now I felt the tremors as the giant tree's roots collapsed and sank into the ground. The dissolution into salt must have started down there, too.

At this rate, I might not be able to use the route I'd been planning on.

But, well, it'd probably work out somehow.

With a Holy Sword, I sliced an opening in the outer wall of the Guardian Knight's Area. This time, instead of Gjallarhorn, I used Excalibur. I'd switched them out because the odd shape of Gjallarhorn was ill suited to cutting.

The Divine Blade I'd used to defeat the greater hell demon before was powerful, but Excalibur was no slouch, either. It was terrifyingly sharp.

I cut through the outer wall without any resistance and made my way into the Guardian Knight's Area.

Number 7 was still unconscious, so I slung her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and broke into a run.

However, my destination wasn't downstairs.

"Are you here?!"

"Mm-hmm."

Dryad Number 2 responded lazily to my summons.

Her voice was quite calm, giving no indication that she was afraid of dying as the tree collapsed.

“Can you send us out of this tree?”

“Nope,” she replied smoothly.

That was okay; I figured that might be the case…

“But if you give me more magic and seeds for the catalyst, I could send you down a detour to the old trees in the basin.”

…but Dryad Number 2’s grinning face told me my other plan might not be necessary.

I had plenty of magic. But what about the “seeds”?

“Will any kind of seed do?”

“Yeah, I just need it as a means to forcibly link up with the interrupted connection, so any kind of seed is fine as long as it’s a plant.”

I should’ve grabbed some of the fruits that I saw on the way up before.

There were none in the Guardian Knight’s Area, but I’d probably find some if I went one floor up.

…Wait, I do have something that should work.

“If this is good enough for the seed, please do it.”

“Hey, now… This should be fine, but I need three times the magic you gave me before, y’know! Don’t come crying to me if you shrivel up.”

Three times that amount would be about 1,000 MP.

I had already recovered all the magic from before, so a third of my total amount should be fine.

“That’s fine. I’m counting on you.”

“’kaaay.”

I took out the handkerchief full of nuts and berries from Storage and handed it to Dryad Number 2. These were the gifts I’d received from those beastfolk kids before.

Dryad Number 2 chewed up the nuts and gulped them down, then reached her hands out toward me.

As soon as she planted her lips on mine, she started to suck up my magic with a vengeance.

As my magic was consumed, I felt a chill not unlike the kind that comes with blood loss. It was a similar sensation to when I'd used Meteor Shower.

With a wet smacking sound, Dryad Number 2 pulled her face away from mine.

"Mm'kay, I'm connected." Looking satisfied, the dryad took my hand and led me into the fairy ring. "Okay, let's go!"

When she gave the word, face glowing, a ring of shimmering green spores rose to create a gate.

After a slightly uncomfortable sensation, we were teleported to a hollow inside a thousand-year-old tree.

"Thanks for saving us, Dryad."

"Mm, no problem," Dryad Number 2 responded amiably. "I got a whole lotta magic out of it, too."

She giggled lightly, then gave me a puzzled look.

"By the way, aren't you going to run?"

"Run?"

Why…?

The rest of my question didn't make it out of my mouth. Looking in the direction that Dryad Number 2 was pointing, I felt the blood drain from my face.

To be quite honest, I was more terrified than when I'd faced the greater hell demon or dived from the tree with no lifeline.

I hefted Number 7 back onto my shoulders, then reached out my other hand to Dryad Number 2.

"I'll be fine. As long as there's still a forest, I'll never die."

She shook her head lightly, so I trusted her words and broke into a run, carrying Number 7.

With a deep rumble like a thundercloud, a tidal wave of salt was bearing

down on us.

If you got caught up in that, you'd definitely die of suffocation. Or maybe you'd be crushed to death first.

Based on my experience trapped in the shadow before, I had a feeling that I probably wouldn't die, but I still didn't want to get buried alive in salt and spend years suffering like a dried fish.

Pushing aside dead branches, I kicked up dirt as I fled wildly through the basin.

> Skill Acquired: "Off-Road Running"

My shaking field of vision was stressful, but I managed to add skill points to the new "Off-Road Running" skill as well as my previously acquired "Transport" skill and activate both of them.

Running suddenly became much easier.

Looking at the vegetation and the ground's highs and lows, I seemed to be able to tell which paths I should take and which should be avoided.

This definitely increased my speed, but I was still moving only as fast as an automobile, at best.

The devastating white waves behind me were still getting closer with each step, roaring all the while.

Damn—it was going to overtake me any second now.

Think.

I had to think.

What was this unnecessarily high INT stat good for?

I didn't have any active skills right now that could neutralize this situation.

Could I learn a new skill somehow?

I was already using my "Sprinting" skill to run faster.

So, what else was there?

…The air reeked of salt.

There was no more time.

I saw a flash of light up ahead of me.

Water? A pond or a swamp? Either one is fine. Let's not get caught up in useless details here.

What can I do to stop a tidal wave?

Breakwater… That's right, a wall.

…Wall?

Should I take out the rubble I have in Storage?

No, that'd just get swept up along with it and make things even more dangerous.

Like a volcanic bomb, a huge lump of salt soared over my head, interrupting my thoughts and raising a column of water as it splashed down into the pond in front of me.

Something about that sight lodged in my mind.

What?

Pochi's and Tama's tearful faces floated through my thoughts. *What is this memory?*

"The kettle's maaad!"

"Help us, sir! The kettle man is angry, sir!"

Now was not a good time for my life to flash before my eyes.

As the slightly salty water sprayed over me unpleasantly, I focused all my power on moving forward.

If I had Earth Magic instead of useless Fire Magic like my Fire Shot spell, I could make a wall right now…

…Useless?

No, wait. It wasn't useless at all.

The flashback to that moment with Pochi and Tama gave me an idea.

I opened the map in a small window so it wouldn't block my view of the path ahead, and I checked the direction I was traveling in.

Perfect. This would work.

Shifting my course diagonally a bit, I ran harder than ever.

The bottoms of my boots tore away, unable to withstand my running strength. I felt prickling pain in the soles of my feet.

Seconds before arriving at my goal, I opened the menu and made preparations.

Right, time to make that breakwater!

I operated the menu with my mind to use magic.

Of course, all I needed to select right now was Fire Shot.

A huge ball of fire flew through the air, sending off sparks of high heat.

As soon as it made impact, a huge column of water erupted with a roar, bearing all the heat the fire had emitted.

Of course, it wasn't just one. I followed it up with a second shot, then a third, dissolving the water column into steam.

Water's volume multiplies by one thousand when it vaporizes.

Arisa was the one who'd said that, right?

I fired one more shot, vaporizing what water was left of the column and propelling the cluster of steam forward.

The giant tidal wave of salt crashed into the explosively expanding wall of steam and stopped.

…But it stopped for only an instant. The mass was just too different.

White reinforcements arrived and broke through the wall of steam, creating a new wave crest.

More salt waves had crashed around the left and right of the steam wall, and they bore down upon me from either side, ready to engulf me.

Most people would see this as nothing but a hopeless situation.

I was sure that if Number 7 had been conscious on my shoulder, she would have been screaming nonstop, too.

…But I daresay, I was glad that was all hypothetical.

That tiny instant I'd created was all I needed.

In that fraction of a second, I got the chance I needed to follow up with part two of my plan.

Before my eyes was what appeared on first glance to be a grassy plain—but was really a swamp.

I moved one foot forward before the other could sink into the marshy ground. In this way, I skirted over the surface, running like a manga character.

When I got to an area with a sufficient amount of water, it was time for my next step.

With a speed that threatened to melt my brain, I sent out a barrage of Fire Shots with my magic menu.

My "Calculation" and "Fire Magic" skills showed me exactly where to aim.

This new, thick breakwater of steam suppressed the salt wave, and I was able to safely reach the foothills that surrounded the basin.

> Skill Acquired: "Water Striding"

> Title Acquired: Survivor

> Title Acquired: Pyromancer

> Title Acquired: Master of Hellfire

> Title Acquired: Conqueror of Despair

◆

After we'd climbed up the mountain, I put Number 7 down on some soft-looking ground.

As far as I could tell from the map, this area was the border between the Cradle and the Gray Rat Emirate.

Mia and the women who'd been teleported with her were at the summit of a

mountain on the other side of the basin. They all seemed to be safe.

I had wanted to get back as quickly as possible to make sure everyone was safe, but then I saw that the store manager and my kids were at Mia's location. *When did they get here?*

If only I had a cell phone, I could let them know I was safe, but there was no use in bemoaning something I didn't have. I figured I could see if there was anything with a similar function at the old capital or Labyrinth City.

Since we no longer needed to hurry, I stood on the edge of the cliff and watched the last moments of the Cradle of Trazayuya.

Apparently, the very tip of this cliff that protruded into the basin was in the Cradle's zone.

I watched as the top of the giant tree sank into the haze of salt.

The pillar of salt looked to me like a grave marker for Zen.

As the column mostly settled, I saw the last few monsters that were shown on my map disappear from the list.

And at the same time, my log began to fill up at a startling speed.

It was the first time since the Valley of Dragons.

When I used the scroll bar to page back through the log, I saw the line **Defeated all enemies on the map** just before the long list of acquired loot.

Just as I'd guessed in the labyrinth before, it looked like that was the condition for automatic loot recovery.

This time there was no "source" or anything mentioned.

I put all the new loot into a folder labeled **Cradle of Trazayuya** for now.

I could sort through all of it at a later date. Most of it was just monster corpses and broken equipment, anyway. There were also a large number of Zen's magic books and other written materials from Trazayuya's Area.

From beneath the haze of white salt, I felt the tremors of the giant tree's trunk and branches collapsing.

After a brief moment of silence, I turned away.

A New Journey

Satou here. For every meeting, there is a parting to follow; that's part of the charm of a journey. When letters were the primary form of contact, it didn't take long for people to lose touch, but I think more people continue to communicate now that e-mail is widely available.

Now, it was about time to head over to where everyone else was waiting.

Remembering that I'd become barefoot, I took the Winged Shoes out of Storage. The boots I'd ruined earlier were the ones I'd been wearing for everyday use, so I hadn't put these on in a while.

In order to move more easily, I used some scrap material from Storage to make a carrying rack to strap onto my back.

It came out pretty sturdy for something I'd just thrown together. To avoid any injuries to the unconscious Number 7 in the process, I wrapped her in a thick sheet before securing her in the carrying rack.

I got a running start to jump along the ridges of the bare mountain, making it back to the others much more quickly than expected.

The sun set partway through the journey, making it a bit more difficult, but I was able to keep running with the help of my "Night Vision" and "Off-Road Running" skills.

Despite the fact that it was the dead of night now, everyone was still awake.

They were camping out around a very bright bonfire. All around them were the corpses of crimson needle bees, with little animals no larger than puppies gathering to devour the remains.

I leaped over a few boulders and arrived in the meadow where everyone was camping.

Hearing the sound of my footsteps, Pochi and Tama rolled away from the

bonfire and scrambled toward me.

But another shadow slipped between them and reached me first—surprisingly enough, it was Liza.

“Master!”

A flood of tears gushing from her eyes, Liza was choked with emotion as she rushed up to hug me tightly.

I lowered my center of gravity so that I wouldn’t be bowled over by her weight as I caught her. Liza was by no means heavy, but since I had the body of a young man again, I was a little light.

While I was still dazed by Liza’s uncharacteristic behavior, Tama and Pochi clambered into the fray to latch onto me on both sides.

“Welcome baaack!”

“Sir!”

The two didn’t seem to have the words to express their joy and relief, and instead they set about play-biting my head and shoulders before attempting to lick my face. Their enthusiasm matched that of any real dog or cat.

“Thanks. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“I’m so glad you’re all right…”

Liza had been hugging me and weeping for a while, but when I spoke she managed to choke out a few tearful words before crying again.

After a while, she appeared to realize what she was doing and let go of me with embarrassment.

Once she’d done so, I lowered Pochi and Tama to the ground, ruffling their hair.

“We were worried, sir!”

“Are you huuurt?”

The pair anxiously looked up at me.

Arisa and Lulu rushed over after the beastfolk girls. The store manager was

sitting behind them as well.

“Welcome back, sir,” Lulu said with a modest smile. Arisa hung back silently with her head hung low, so Lulu put her hands on her sister’s shoulders and pushed her forward.

Arisa took a deep breath and looked up, so I waited for her to speak.

Her wide eyes were filled with tears that threatened to spill over at any moment.

“…I—I was so worried! Promise you’ll never do anything so reckless again!!”

Her words were heartfelt and forceful enough that she was almost shouting at me.

I hugged her gently, apologizing and giving her a light pat on the back.

She gave way then and burst into tears, so I did my best to comfort her. Following her lead, Pochi and Tama started to cry, too.

I ended up apologizing over and over until everyone stopped crying. Seeing that everyone had worried about me to the point of shedding tears and scolding me warmed my somewhat stormy heart.

When I finally had a chance to speak to the store manager, I told him that it was all over. As usual, his reply was way too short.

Arisa still hadn’t stopped crying, so I carried her over to the bonfire and laid her next to Mia, the only person who hadn’t stirred since I’d arrived.

I put down the wooden rack that carried Number 7 in her bundle and went over to Mia.

“…Satou.”

“I’m back, Mia.”

“Kept your promise.”

“Yes, of course I did.”

Mia was trying to sit up, so I lent her a hand.

“Let me thank you again…”

Mia cleared her throat a little and spoke at length.

“I am the youngest elf of Bolenan Forest, Misanaria Bolenan, daughter of Lamisauya and Lilinatoa. Satou of the Shiga Kingdom, I give you my thanks.”

With those words, Mia pressed a kiss to my forehead.

Huh? So this “Aaze” person she’d mentioned before wasn’t her mother?

If it was her hot older sister, I hoped she’d introduce me.

> Title Acquired: Friend of the Elves

◆

“By the way, what’s in this carrier? Don’t tell me you swiped some treasure as you were escaping from that enormous tree?”

Rubbing her reddened eyes, Arisa looked at the wrapped-up Number 7.

She was pretty rude for a former princess.

“This is a person I rescued.”

“A person? Are you planning to add another member to the harem?!”

Yeah, right. How is this a harem when all the would-be members are children? They’d need to be at least twenty years old.

I took up the carrier and brought it to a large boulder nearby.

The women I’d sent to escape along with Mia were there, tied to the boulder with what looked like ivy. They’d probably guessed the women were enemies, because of the title Zen’s Puppet.

Near the beautiful women, the red-helmeted ratman was on guard keeping a sharp eye out for monsters.

“This is one of the sisters who I rescued along with Mia.”

“Oh, these kids? I thought there were seven, but I guess there are eight now.”

Can you really call them “kids” if they’re homunculi?

Tilting my head uncertainly at Arisa’s words, I took Number 7 out of the carrier and laid her down next to the other women.

She must have gotten jostled around a little too much, because her status still read **Fainted**. Both her stamina and HP were a little low, so I unwrapped the protective sheet to check her physical condition.

Sadly, Liza ended up being the one to do the checking.

I was about to do it, but Arisa's objections put a stop to that.

She was rather rude about it, but thinking about it rationally, it was true that there wouldn't be much point in my checking when I had no medical experience.

When Number 7's face peeked out from under the blanket, the other women gave a cry of joy.

It was very noisy, so once their excitement at the reunion had calmed a little, I shushed them.

As their representative, Number 1 thanked me.

"Sir Satou, not only did you spare our lives when we were your opponents, but you also saved Number 7 from certain death. There are no words to convey our gratitude."

The other sisters followed up with a few words of thanks each. Apparently, the lower the number, the more fluent the speech of the homunculus.

They seemed to have gathered from the collapse of the Cradle that Zen had died. When they asked for my confirmation, I figured I should tell them the truth.

Before doing so, I had Arisa use the Psychic Magic spell Wake Up to bring Number 7 back to consciousness. I didn't want to tell the same story twice.

"So, our master…"

"Yes, he's passed on now."

I wasn't sure if they would understand this concept, but they seemed to accept it readily enough. Apparently, they used the term *ascension* for that sort of thing in this country.

The sisters talked quietly among themselves for a moment, then they all

turned toward me at once.

What now?

“Master Satou. From now on, we shall obey you as our new master.”

I would certainly be happy to be waited on by a group of busty beauties, but this seemed like a few too many people.

And more importantly, I could feel Arisa and the others staring at me with bated breath.

I felt a little bad turning them down, but I wasn’t really looking to create a harem, either, so I searched for the appropriate words.

“However, before we serve by your side, we would like to request a brief period of leave. I know that this is far beyond a servant’s place to ask, but we would like to deliver something belonging to our previous master to the graveyard where his wife is laid to rest. Please, we beg of you most respectfully, forgive us this transgression.”

So they wanted to bring Zen’s effects to his wife’s grave? I had no reason to refuse, so I readily agreed.

Just out of curiosity, I asked what it might be…

“We plan to search the remains of the Cradle for it right away.”

…was the unfortunate answer.

They explained that what they were hoping to find was his wedding ring. Sure enough, when I checked my Storage, I found it in the spoils from the Cradle.

I reached into Storage via my pocket, pulled out the ring, and handed it to Number 1.

“This is…!”

“Zen entrusted it to me. Please make sure that it reaches his wife’s grave safely.”

“Even if it costs me my life, I shall!”

Number 1 pressed her hand to her chest and promised with a deathly serious expression.

Yikes, you don't need to be that determined about it.

"With that being the case, we would like for you to please designate one of our number as a representative to be your personal attendant."

I wouldn't have a problem choosing a hostess at a hostess bar or something, but it was pretty difficult to choose from a group of eight beautiful women with identical faces.

"It's all right if you all go to the graveyard together."

"No, we can do no such thing."

"Then I'll let you choose among yourselves."

Since my first suggestion was immediately rejected, I decided to just leave the decision to them. We already had five people in our group, not including me, so it shouldn't be a big deal if we gained one more member.

The women were apparently deciding who would stay behind with a rock-paper-scissors tournament. The group of beautiful, chesty women playing rock-paper-scissors with very serious expressions was a pretty surreal sight.

In the end, Number 7 was the one who was chosen.

"Master, I look forward to serving you from now on, I do declare."

"Sure, thanks."

The seven women behind her gritted their teeth in vexation.

Apparently, Number 7 had won the right to be my attendant in the rock-paper-scissors game.

This surprised me, since I'd assumed that the loser would be the one who would stay behind with us.

It would be a pain to keep calling her Number 7, so I asked her to let me give her a nickname. It was meant to be only a temporary alias, but it actually changed her name in her status window.

"Okay. Let's get along well, Nana."

"Yes, master."

The other women wanted me to give them all names, too, but it would be difficult to think of that many on the spot, so I put it off by saying I would give them names when they returned.

When Arisa heard the name I'd given her (which was really just *seven* in Japanese), she shot me a scolding look, but I couldn't help that I didn't have a good sense for naming.

Once I'd given Nana a name, her title changed from Zen's Puppet to Satou's Servant. Then, the other seven women's titles all changed in the same way, as if responding.

In the end, Nana became part of our group as a sort of first payment in an installment plan.

I had no problem welcoming a large-chested beauty into the fold, but the problem was that her real age was technically…zero years old. Since Number 1 had been two years old, maybe Nana's eccentric manner of speech would improve within two years?

Arisa and the others looked at us with expressions of thinly veiled dissatisfaction.

It would be hard to persuade them about this.

◆

While we waited for the sun to rise, I tried suggesting to the store manager that we could take Mia to the elves' village.

Mia herself wanted us to as well, so he gave permission more easily than I'd expected.

Their conversation went something like this.

"Yuya."

"What."

"Going home."

"I'll take you."

"It's fine."

“You’ll be okay?”

“With Satou.”

“I see.”

I really wished they’d communicate in more complete sentences.

The store manager called out to me and clasped my hand. Arisa raised what sounded like a shriek of excitement.

“Will you?”

“Take Mia home, you mean? Yes, of course. I was already planning to go to the old capital, so that should be right nearby.”

“I see…”

Still holding on to my hand with both of his, the store manager looked at me steadily.

Um, please tell me this isn’t actually a boys’ love situation?

“I, Yusaratoya of Bolenan Forest, implore you, Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. Please take Misanaria, the child of Bolenan Forest, back to our hometown.”

“Sure, leave it to me.”

Whoa, that was the first long sentence I’ve heard from him.

I was going to suggest this plan anyway, so I readily agreed to his request.

Now after we went sightseeing in the old capital, we’d get to visit the elfin village, which was hidden by a secret veil.

Zen had said an earlier hero had been sent back home to the world he came from, so I could go sightseeing free of concern. Just as I’d planned, it looked like my itinerary of going to the Saga Empire after I finished my tour of the Shiga Kingdom would be a good way to go.

Once the sun rose, the store manager used his magic to transport us to a forest near Seiryuu City.

It would have been a fun fantasy scene to make our way through an overgrown forest while pushing aside branches, but all we actually had to do

was walk along an “Elf Road” for ten minutes or so before we came out near the city.

I’d love to learn this kind of magic.

As usual, I got the “Forest Magic” skill the instant I stepped onto the Elf Road, but apparently, the incantation for using it was an elfin secret, so the store manager wouldn’t teach me.

We’d parted ways with the ratman before leaving the Cradle. The store manager had offered to transport him with Forest Magic, but he insisted on walking back to his village on foot. Of course, I remembered to return the magic hatchet I’d been holding on to for him.

Nana’s sisters came with us as far as the forest near Seiryuu City, then went off on their own.

Their simple miniskirt dresses had been a sight for sore eyes, but they were hardly suited to a long journey, so I gave them some of my and Liza’s spare clothes and overcoats. There were plenty of things in my most recent spoils that they might need for a journey, so I gave them as much as they could carry without too much trouble.

The girls’ race seemed like it might be a problem on their journey, but luckily there was a proper countermeasure to be found. Among the new loot I’d gotten was an item called the Amulet of Humanity, which could disguise the user’s race as “human” and even hide their race-specific abilities. This talisman was apparently what Zen had used to infiltrate the city and such.

It wouldn’t fool the original Yamato stone, but the replica Yamato stones like the ones placed at city entrances and general skills like “Status Check” couldn’t see through it.

There were plenty of them in my Storage, so I saved one for Nana and gave the rest to Number 1.

Now that we were back in Seiryuu City, there was still one thing we had to do before we could rest at the inn.

“…I see, so it was the spirit of an unknown sorcerer with a grudge against the Shiga Kingdom?”

“Yes, that’s what the six warriors who rescued us said.”

I described the situation to the knight Sir Thorne in the guardhouse by the gate. I gave the excuse that I’d been mistaken for the store manager and kidnapped.

Of course, this was a fabrication that I’d thought up with Arisa and the others the night before. The so-called “six warriors” were based on an organization of heroes from the Saga Empire that Arisa knew.

They clearly had some sort of reputation, though, because Sir Thorne declared that it must have been that brave group of heroes who’d helped us.

I also added that the tower the sorcerer had been using as a base had been destroyed and was now a pile of rubble.

Apparently, a Sorcerer’s Tower without a master was a hot spot for treasure hunting, so mentioning its destruction would discourage the count’s army from aggressively invading the gray ratmen’s territory.

I wasn’t going to give them the exact location, so I just said it was on the border between the Gray Rat Emirate and the Longhaired Rat Emirate.

“Wait, Zenacchi!”

“Yeah, slow down!”

“Let go of me—I have to help him!”

I heard a familiar voice from outside the station.

“Is the knight Sir Thorne here?”

I locked eyes with Iona as she entered the station, so I gave her a nod. She returned the nod and immediately turned on her heel to go back outside. Had I done something to make her hate me?

Anyway, if she was here, then the people making a fuss outside the station must be Zena, Lilio, and the other female escort whose name I couldn’t remember.

“S-Satou! You’re safe!”

Iona returned with Zena in tow, who seemed relieved that I’d returned safely.

“I apologize for worrying y—”

Zena’s sudden weeping drowned out the end of my sentence; she had sat down on the spot and burst into childlike wails.

I frantically tried to pacify her, apologizing up and down for causing her concern.

Lilio and the other woman tried to calm her, too, but Iona stopped them. That kind of concern wasn’t really necessary…

Thanks to Sir Thorne’s discretion, we were able to occupy one of the rooms at the station until Zena could settle down.

After a while, Zena calmed herself, looking small as she sat on a stool.

“I’m sorry, that was very childish…”

“No, no, I should apologize for worrying you.”

Turns out that after Zena returned to the barracks from her night shift and was changing clothes to go see me, Lilio and company informed her that I’d been kidnapped.

At that, she had immediately tried to borrow one of the army’s horses and rush out of the city to search for me, but Lilio and her friends had stopped her.

If I’d taken any longer, we might have just missed each other.

I’m grateful that you were worried about me, but you have to rein it in a little, Zena.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot to give you this the other day after the whole ordeal with the monsters…”

“What…?”

I handed over the earrings that I’d bought for her back at the flea market.

We’d be leaving Seiryuu City in the next few days, so I thought it best to give them to her while I had the chance, since I didn’t know when we’d meet again. Right. It would be difficult to say it to Zena as she gazed happily at the earrings, but I should tell her that, too.

To leave without saying anything would do a disservice to her as a friend.

“Zena…”

“Y-yes?”

I looked into her eyes as I spoke, and I could see my face reflected there.

…It was hard to broach the subject with her staring at me like that.

“You see, I was asked to take the elf child who was kidnapped along with me back to her hometown. And since my kids are so talented, I can’t really take time off from being a peddler forever.”

Zena’s smile faded, and the light started to fade from her eyes.

I suddenly felt incredibly guilty somehow.

“Her hometown…?”

“It’s apparently south of the old capital.”

“A-are you not going to come back to Seiryuu City anymore?!”

Zena half leaped out of her seat.

Feeling overpowered by the desperate situation, I quickly responded.

“Of course I’ll come back.”

“…Thank goodness.”

Zena collapsed back into the chair as if drained of all her strength.

Once I’d seen the old capital and the royal capital and helped Arisa and the girls train in Labyrinth City, it might be good to come back to the west and Seiryuu City.

Then, once I’d made the rounds in the Shiga Kingdom and returned to my starting place of Seiryuu City, I could explore some other countries.

I’ve got big dreams now, huh?

“It might be a little while, since I’m going to have my kids train in Labyrinth City, but once we come back to Seiryuu City, I’ll be sure to tell you plenty of stories from my travels.”

“…Okay, it’s a promise.”

Just as I had with Arisa before, I made a pinkie promise with Zena. Seems it was a custom established by the ancestral king Yamato.

Zena smiled at me after our fingers parted, but…it wasn't a bright smile like I'd seen before, but a stiff and somewhat forced one.

◆

Since we were terribly sleep-deprived on the day we got back, we all ended up sleeping like logs until the next day.

Once we were rested, I gave everyone assignments to begin preparing for the journey.

We already had a carriage and horses, but we still needed a lot of goods to load onto the carriage. This included food and daily necessities for us, plus feed for the horses.

I asked Nadi to help with the arrangements, so she set us up with supplies.

Then we went around buying the belongings each of us would need.

I wanted to buy leather armor for Nana and the beastfolk girls, but the craftsmen all refused to make armor for demi-humans. For now, I was able to get armor and shields only for Nana and myself.

We didn't have enough time before our departure to get the armor custom-made, so I bought ready-made goods that could be adjusted with belts instead. Its defensive power wouldn't be quite as high, but this way Liza could also use mine.

I had the "Leather Crafting" skill, too, so if I bought the materials I could probably make armor for Pochi and Tama myself.

To serve as dummy trade goods, I purchased leather, a feltlike material, knitting wool, cotton, and other such supplies. Un-tanned skins were cheaper than leather, but I figured the process of tanning would probably produce a terrible smell, so I stuck with the processed type.

I didn't have a commerce permit for the Shiga Kingdom, but when I paid a gold coin at the merchants' guild, they were able to produce a membership card for me the same day, like a rental shop.

I had just gotten my visiting pass reissued at the government offices, so most of the formalities could be circumvented.

The permit I'd gotten was a low-level one that allowed me to buy and sell large amounts of goods at the merchants' guild, not a high-level one that involved tax breaks when going in and out of the city.

Of course, this sort of permit wasn't needed for small transactions, but it would be strange for someone to buy a lot of goods without having one, so I got it just in case.

In order to make good use of the materials I'd purchased, I also stopped at a bookstore to look for the appropriate manuals.

The saleswoman at the bookstore inside the wall was a woman almost as busty as Nana, so the visit was a huge success—I mean, there were at least seven large bookshelves with a wide variety of books, containing not only manuals but novels and even picture books.

They didn't have any maps, though. Those could purportedly be purchased at a government office, but there was a time-consuming investigation process involved in addition to the high price.

As a rule, there were stone markers every mile or so along the main roads, so as long as we didn't stray from those, we were unlikely to get lost.

I gave up on the map and asked the elderly manager to find a few manuals for me instead, then asked the saleswoman, Ms. Samone, to recommend some novels and picture books.

The manager offered me an intriguing and varied lineup, from practical books like *Edible Plants on Your Journey*, *Encyclopedia of Medicinal Herbs*, *Carriage Repair*, and so on, to guides for the more adventurous, like *The Basics of Magic Items*.

To be honest, I would've liked to buy up everything in the store, but I had to be patient. It would be selfish to monopolize all the books for myself in a parallel world with little distribution of goods.

I narrowed down the selection to about thirty essential books.

The cost of the books added up to a very high price of more than ten gold coins. Since we weren't in a rush today, I managed to get the price down to ten on the dot with "Haggling" and "Negotiation."

The book about magic items was particularly costly, but it was a necessary expense.

How could I resist the idea of making magic items of my own?

There was a magic shop next to the bookstore, so I stopped in there as well.

Unfortunately, noncitizens could purchase only the most basic spell books.

As for magic scrolls, one had to have permission from the count himself to purchase them, no matter what kind.

I guess I could understand that. Since all you needed for using a magic scroll was MP, it was basically a weapon. But still…

…there didn't seem to be any such limitations on the buying and selling of swords, so it still seemed a little overly strict.

But there was no helping it, so I just bought one of the basic spell books. The price was pretty high, but it was in line with the market price my "Estimation" skill showed me, so I didn't complain.

The shopkeeper here seemed uninterested in haggling, since he offered me the market price right away, so I bought it without trying to bargain with him.

The store also sold magic potions, so I purchased several intermediate healing potions and a few lesser mana potions.

Finally, I bought long staffs for Arisa and Mia and a short one for myself.

I thought it would be convenient to be able to make magic potions myself, so I asked if there were any tools or manuals for that, but I was informed rather rudely that I could buy those at an alchemy shop.

The proprietor of the alchemy shop must have thought I looked like an easy mark, because the beginner's set he sold me was incredibly expensive.

That alone would have been fine, but I was nonplussed to see that the status of the all-important Transmutation Tablet read **Broken**.

Since its appearance gave no indication it was anything but a first-rate tablet, I couldn't suddenly say it was defective and ask him to exchange it, so I just said I didn't like the design so that he would give me a new one.

But the next Transmutation Tablet he brought out had the same problem, so I had to keep repeating the same technique until I finally got a working one.

However, my judgment must have been a little too precise, because the old gnome figured out that I had the "Analyze" skill, which admittedly made the rest of the transaction go more smoothly.

After that, though, I got taken in by his flattery and let him talk me into buying a large quantity of an antidote-making material called Dragon Stone. I would have to keep this waste a secret from Arisa and the others.

I'd have to be more careful of the honeyed words of gnomes from now on…

Incidentally, the fact that the other Transmutation Tablets had been bad was apparently the old shopkeeper's way of testing his customers; he generally made them go through several exchanges so that they could learn better "Analysis" and "Negotiation" skills, he explained.

Thus, between shopping, attending a lecture from a veteran coachman with Lulu, and other errands, the busy days flew by until the day of our departure finally arrived.

"Master, the loading is complete."

"All dooone!"

"It's perfect, sir!"

"Great, go ahead and board the carriage, then."

The beastfolk girls came back from checking on the state of the cargo to give me their report.

Pochi and Tama clambered into the coach seats, helped along by Liza, who pushed them up by their behinds.

"It's high, sir!"

"Nice viewww!"

Pochi and Tama rollicked about on the seats.

It's fine to stand on your tiptoes and look around, but don't fall, please.

"If you are quite satisfied, please climb inside the carriage. I cannot get up."

"'kay!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Liza chided the two, then hopped aboard with a light jump.

She then proceeded to look around from the coachman's seat in the same way she'd scolded the two girls for doing, but I pretended not to see it.

Lulu and Nana arrived with a freshly made box lunch from the proprietor of the Gatefront Inn, so they passed their things to Liza and got on board.

Half the carriage was full of luggage, so it seemed a little cramped.

Once we departed, we planned to relocate the items into my Garage Bag and Arisa's Item Box. The reason we didn't do this from the beginning was to keep the fact that we had those items and skills a secret from those around us.

There were at least ten people in the city who could use "Item Box," but judging by the usefulness of the skill, most of those were probably nobles and wealthy merchants, not to mention that it was probably in high demand in the military.

I didn't want someone to spot us using it and try to forcibly requisition Arisa or anything like that.

As for my kids, I could explain the Garage Bag to them after we departed.

"Satou."

Mia had returned with Nadi and the store manager.

"I'm terribly sorry that I wasn't able to find you a rental house in the end."

"No, don't be. It's thanks to you that we were able to get this horse-drawn carriage, after all."

Nadi had apparently come to apologize that she hadn't gotten us the rental house I'd asked for before.

To be honest, I'd forgotten that I asked about it in the first place.

"This is a parting gift from the store manager and me."

Nadi gave me a parcel of tea leaves and a simple hand-drawn map.

The map was something I'd asked Nadi for before; it showed the connected territories from Seiryuu County to the old capital and the names of major towns and cities in each.

Since I had my built-in map and my Search Entire Map spell, I had no fear of getting lost as long as I knew the connections of the territories.

"Take care of Mia."

"I will; don't worry."

The store manager grasped my hands and looked at me intensely.

That was a longer statement than usual from him. I guess he was probably worried about entrusting a child from his village to someone of a different race.

However, a gross shriek from Arisa behind us completely ruined the moment. I'd have to scold her later.

"Mr. Satou, please do stay with us again if you come back to Seiryuu City."

"Sure, I'll be counting on you when that time comes."

"Be careful on your way. We seldom have monsters or bandits thanks to the hard work of the count's army, but I hear there are lots of thieves in the other territories."

"Thank you for your concern. I'll be careful."

I bid farewell to Martha and her mother, then started to steer the carriage away.

Then a young voice interrupted me.

"Wait!"

"Yuniii?"

"It's Yuni, sir!"

I told Lulu to stop the carriage, and I waited for Yuni to arrive.

“This is for Pochi and Tama.”

Once she ran up to us as fast as her little legs would carry her, Yuni gave me two necklaces made with string and a few small nuts. It was a very cute and childlike parting gift.

“Yuni, thaaanks!”

“Thank you, ma’am. We’ll eat them with love, ma’am!”

Uh, no, I don’t think you’re supposed to eat them.

At Pochi’s words, Yuni’s expression became confused, crying and smiling at once.

“They’re necklaces made with stonebloom nuts, so you’ll hurt your tummy if you eat them!”

“Too baaad.”

“Then we’ll wear them with love, ma’am!”

“Yay!”

Martha whispered into my ear to explain that stonebloom nuts were given as a lucky talisman to children who were adopted from the orphanage.

The three of them tightly embraced one another, reluctant to part. After what seemed like a suitable amount of time, Liza and Martha called out to them, so they said their good-byes.

“I’m gonna learn my letters so I can write to you!”

“Tama, toooo!”

“I will, too, ma’am!”

Wow, exchanging letters? How nostalgic. I know, I’ll give Yuni those study cards as a present so she can learn to write more easily.

I had learned most of the cards’ contents by now, so I could probably just make a new set for my kids. I had all the necessary skills for making them anyway.

“Yuni, you can have these cards.”

“Really?! Are you sure?”

I handed the study cards to the surprised and grateful Yuni.

“Sure. We have two sets, so you should take one.”

“Thank you very much! Now I can learn them super fast, maybe even in one day!”

“It’s a raaace!”

“I’ll learn so many that I can write a picture book, ma’am!”

I feel bad for separating the three, but we should probably get going.

Waving to everyone as they gathered to see us off, I instructed Lulu, our current coachman, to get us started on our journey.

I took one last look down Center Street, where I could see the castle on the other side.

I had told Zena that we would be leaving this morning, but it looked like she wouldn’t be coming. As far as I could tell from the map, she was still in the castle barracks.

More than four hours had already passed since dawn, so there was probably no point in waiting any longer.

◆

After we passed through the gates of Seiryuu City, Arisa asked me a question.

“How far are we planning to travel today? I can’t imagine we’ll reach another city or major town leaving at this time of day, so will we be staying in a village near the highway?”

“We won’t be going to any villages. According to Nadi, discrimination against demi-humans is even worse in those places, so we’ll just camp out wherever we can find a good spot.”

As I answered Arisa, I expanded the range of the radar in the corner of my vision so that I could keep a cautious eye out.

Apparently, its max range went all the way up to one thousand feet.

“Campiiing?”

“We’ll make a bonfire in an open field somewhere, then set up cots around it and sleep.”

“Like in the labyrinth, sir?”

“That’s right.”

I nodded at Pochi and Tama, whose eyes started sparkling at my description.

“Yaaay!”

“Sir!”

For some reason, they were jumping up and down with excitement. The movement surprised the horses so much that they stopped moving.

As Liza scolded them, I asked the pair why they were so excited about camping.

“Being together is happyyy!”

“We get to sleep next to you, sir! We’re happy, sir!”

Both of them wore huge grins, so I patted their heads.

“Should we continue moving?”

“Yeah…”

I started to nod in response to Lulu’s question but stopped when I saw a dot of blue light appear on my radar.

Blue meant someone I’d previously marked on the map. In other words, someone I knew.

“Wait a minute.”

I was going to open the map to see who it was, but there was no need.

“Satooooooou!”

Looking back toward the main gate where someone was calling my name, I saw Zena riding toward us on a white horse.

Behind me, I heard Arisa mutter, “A counterattack from the local mistress?”

but I ignored the comment.

So as not to block the road for other travelers and carriages, I had Lulu bring us to the side of the road.

“Satou!”

Brushing her windswept hair out of her face, Zena brought up her horse next to our carriage. She was wearing a blue dress that seemed ill suited to riding a horse. She was even wearing makeup, like she had for our date.

“I’m so glad I caught you in time!”

“Yes, I’m happy to see you again before I leave, too.”

I didn’t think she was going to try to betray her family and run away to follow me like an eloping couple or anything, but her dress and makeup made it hard to say for sure.

“…I’ve been thinking very hard about this.”

Overpowered by Zena’s intense seriousness, I simply waited for her to continue.

“I cannot abandon my family and run away to my true love’s side, like Princess Liltiena.”

That seemed natural, since she was raised in a society with such an emphasis on the importance of family.

Arisa looked a bit dissatisfied, but it didn’t seem like she was going to say anything foolish, so I focused on listening to Zena.

“And so, I cannot ask you to take me with you, Satou.”

“Come, toooo!”

“You should come with us, ma’am!”

Pochi and Tama brushed off the serious mood, inviting Zena to come along.

“Thank you. But I cannot come with you right now.”

Zena thanked the pair, then turned her gaze back to me.

…Was it just me, or had she emphasized the “right now” part of that

sentence?

“In the spring, my brother will become an adult and take over as the head of our family. After that, I have his permission to do as I wish. So, when spring arrives…”

Zena paused for a moment, then continued as if shaking off a thought.

Her gaze was still locked on me.

“…I, too, will go to Labyrinth City!”

…Phew, I thought she was going to propose there for a second.

She seemed to have gotten embarrassed partway through, because her gaze shifted over to Arisa.

“Arisa, we’ll see who wins then!”

“Hee-hee! Do you really think you’ll stand a chance with such a late start? Don’t come crying to me if you arrive in Labyrinth City only to see my and my master’s children!”

…You know that’s not going to happen for a lot of reasons, right?

Arisa was getting carried away, cackling like an evil villain. I wished she would stop before the younger three started imitating her.

I promised Zena that I would send her a letter once we arrived in a big city.

Embarrassingly enough, I ended up having to make another pinkie promise with her. I hadn’t done this so many times since I was a child.

After we made the promise, Zena stared dreamily at our linked fingers for a moment before we said our farewells.

“Well, Zena, I look forward to the day that we meet again in the Labyrinth City Celivera.”

“Yes, Satou! Please wait for me until then!”

I was glad that this hadn’t turned into an unhappy parting.

Zena waved at me with a smile like the sun, and I waved back at her.

Now, that was a bright smile that suited this sunny day.

Trying not to notice the trickle of tears streaming down her cheeks, I kept on waving until she was out of sight.

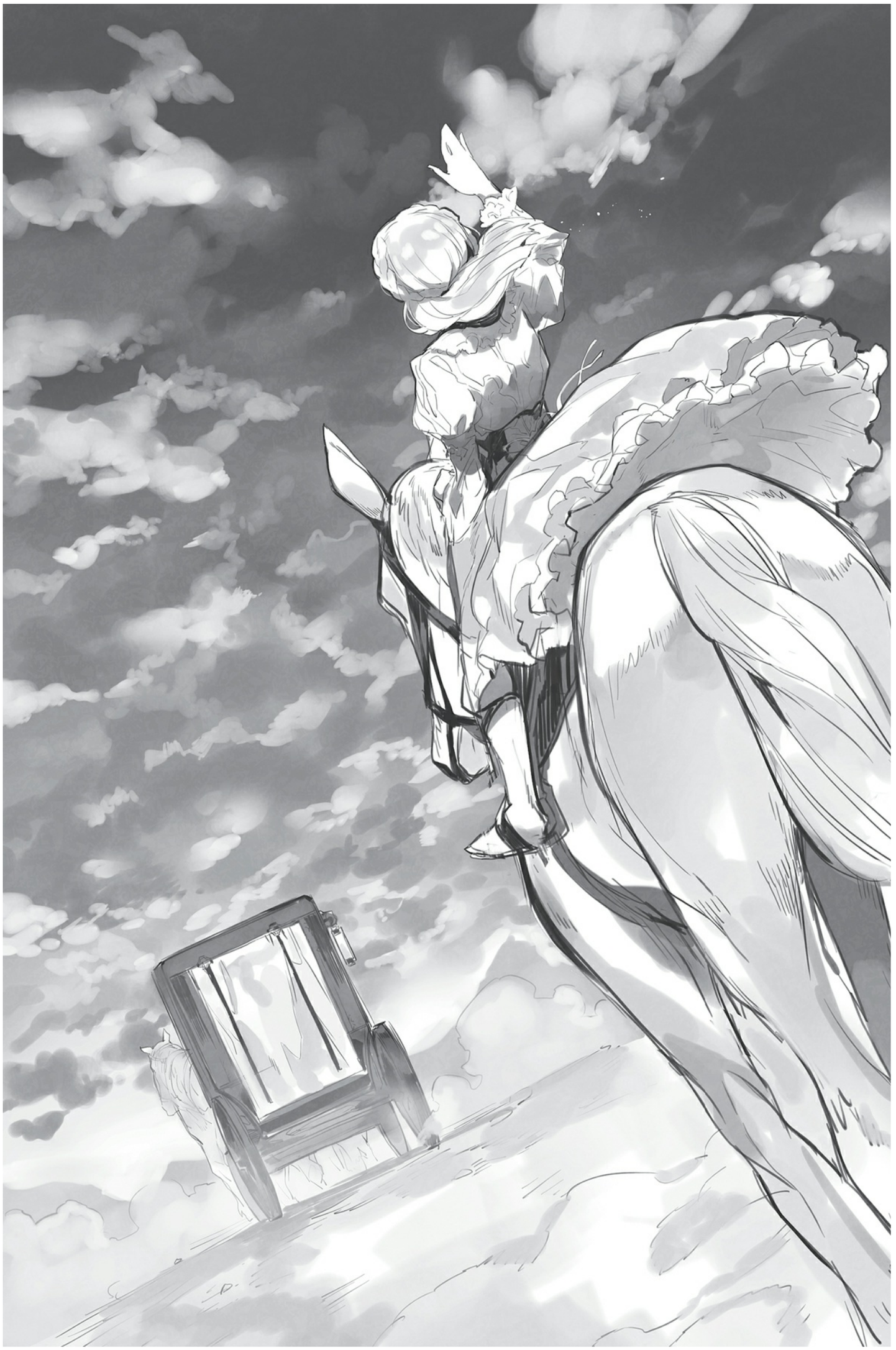
“Don’t make that face. We’ll be together from now on.”

Arisa reached over the back of the coachman’s seat and patted my head a few times.

“Tummy aaache?”

“Are you in pain, sir?”

“Satou?”



Brushing Arisa aside, the younger girls looked up at me with concern, so I smiled at them. “I’m fine.”

“Master, according to my behavior library, it is good to cry into a woman’s chest when lonely.”

Gently, Nana started to hug me to her chest.

The soft sensation and gentle fragrance certainly did heal the slight loneliness I felt.

“E-excuse you! That’s unfair! Lulu, don’t just watch; make them stop!”

“Sorry, Arisa, I can’t. I have to watch the road while I’m driving.”

Arisa was outraged, so I pulled myself away from Nana’s healing space.

Liza handed me a container of fruit-flavored water, so I drank it down, washing away the sadness of saying farewell to a friend along with it.

Rattling and rumbling along, the carriage continued down the road.

Putting Tama in my lap and letting Pochi ride on my shoulders, I faced forward.

Now, time to enjoy this journey through a parallel world!

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you for picking up this second volume of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

I hope to continue to bring you an interesting story in the third and fourth volumes and beyond!

So if you're still uncertain as to whether to buy them, I would be very happy if you would proceed to the cash register with them.

Now, this work has been published online, but to ensure that even those who have read it before would still enjoy the book version, I made very significant revisions to the original story.

First, let's talk about the highlights of this volume.

Those of you who read the online version probably noticed the big tree on the cover, right?

The giant tree hidden by the sunlight filtering through the leaves is actually the main setting of this adventure. I'd imagine that those of you who read the web version might have said, "Huh? Was there a scene like this?" or "Are they skipping right to the elf forest arc?!" It probably surprised some of you.

But don't worry—I wouldn't do anything ridiculous like that!

I thought it would be boring to have two books in a row set underground, so I came up with a new setting instead. As a result of this idea, Satou's last action scene became something completely different.

There was a character or two who got treated differently from the web version in the first volume, but the fate of even more of the characters in Volume 2 changed. Of course, the main character's treatment remains the same. If you're wondering what other fates were waiting for them, please take

a look at the original story.

In Volume 2, the purple-haired little girl who takes center stage on the front cover, Arisa, takes a very active role.

Yes, she's really very active indeed…

On the other hand, although the modest, black-haired Lulu appears on the cover, too, her role was a lot smaller; she still has more appearances and moments with Satou in this volume than in the web version, though. If I left it the way it was in the original version, she would basically be nothing but air until after the group left Seiryuu City.

But those two aren't the only characters who played a part in Volume 2.

Of course, the beastfolk trio of Pochi, Tama, and Liza held their own alongside the new members, and while they're not as prominent as in the first volume, Zena and her friends from the army, like Lilio, appear as well. The ever-cheerful Martha and Yuni made sure to show up, too.

And to you, the thirty-thousand nationwide fans of Nadi: Thank you for waiting! Zena stole all her parts in the first book, but I finally got to bring her out in Volume 2.

Oh, and the store manager was there, too, of course.

Unlike the end of the previous volume, the end of this one seems a lot more like the conclusion of a story, but don't worry, the story will still continue.

I'm planning to change things up in Volume 3 from Volumes 1 and 2 and go with more of a heartwarming craftsmanship and travel diary–type story.

Of course, since this is the world of *Death March*—where you can get dragged into a riot or a labyrinth while going on a date in the city—I'm not sure if that sort of story is actually going to happen…

But if I try to go in some weird direction, my talented editor will be sure to stop me, so it should be fine.

Well, I'm running out of things to say now, so I'd like to move on to the special thanks.

I can't thank my editor Mr. H enough for constantly providing me with

excellent direction. Whenever I turn in passages that I'm worried might be hard to understand, he always sends them back with comments on how to improve, so I have to stay on my toes.

Even though I kept asking for deadline extensions despite being a mere rookie, he was always kind enough to adjust my schedule. I'm sure I caused all kinds of other inconveniences, too, but I hope I can still depend on your guidance and encouragement in the future, Mr. H.

And of course, I'm always grateful to my illustrator, shri, for bringing the world of *Death March* so beautifully to life!

This volume's cover in particular is way too wonderful. I was only able to get through the proofreading process, my least favorite part, by setting this illustration as my wallpaper. I think that smile of Arisa's will help encourage me as I work on the plot of Volume 3, too.

Thank you also to everyone at Fujimi Shobo; to those who helped with proofreading, printing, binding, and distribution; and thanks, too, to all the bookstore employees everywhere!

This story would never have gotten out into the world without all your support.

And most of all, I want to thank you, the readers!

Thank you for reading this book all the way to the end!

I hope we meet again in the next volume!

Hiro Ainana