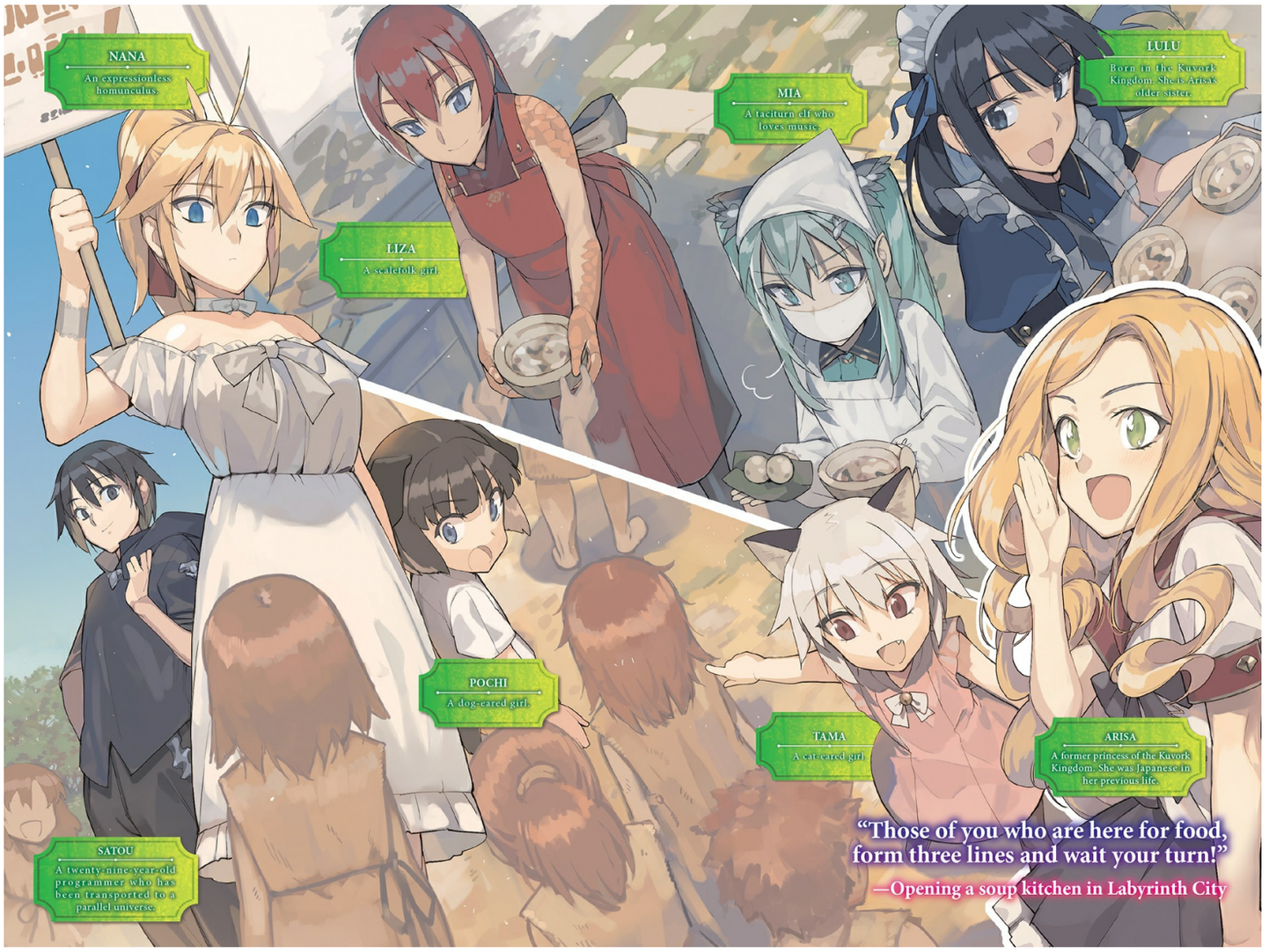
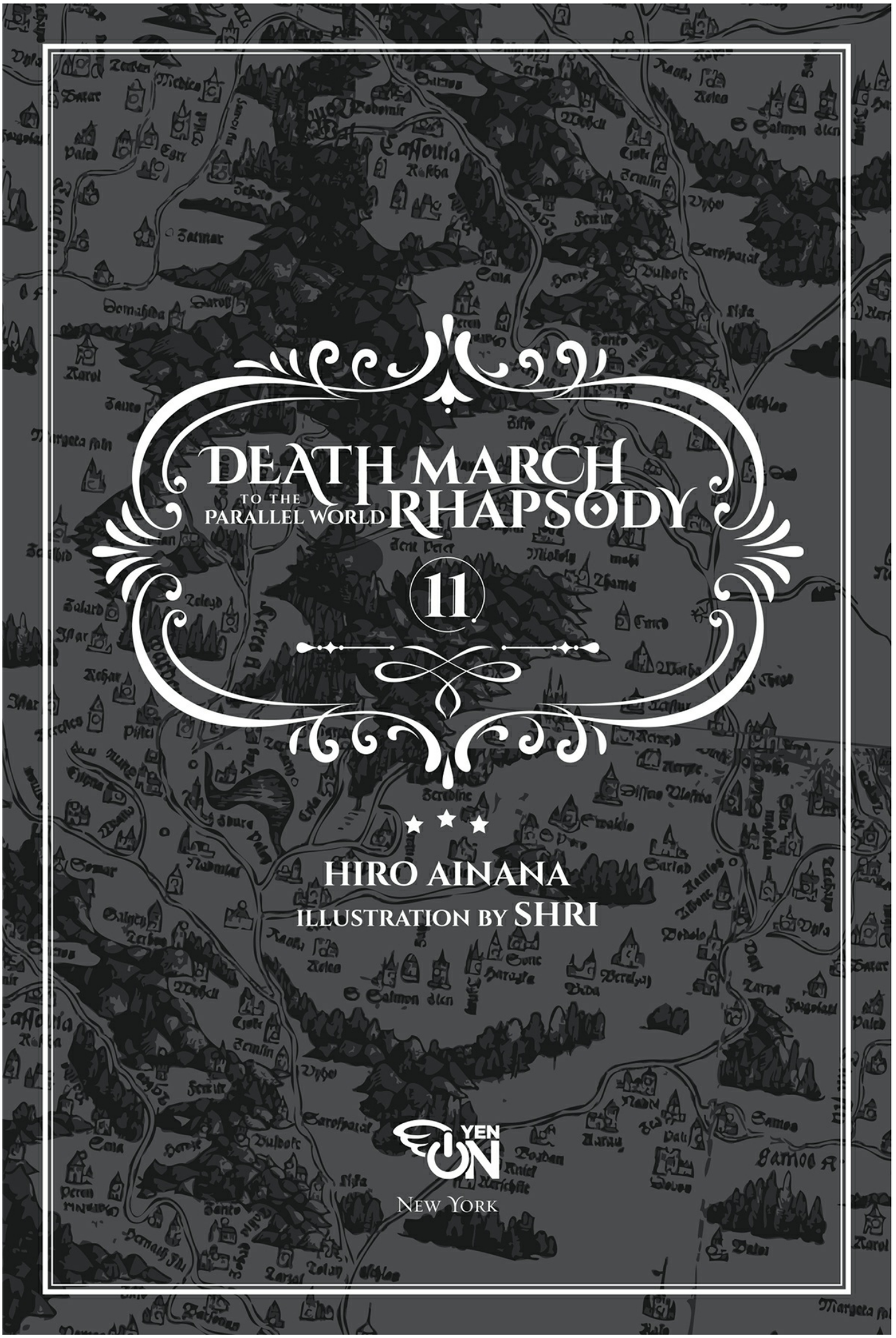

NANA
An expressionless homunculus.
LIZA
A scalefolk girl.
MIA
A taciturn elf who loves music.
LULU
Born in the Kuvork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.
POCHI
A dog-eared girl.
TAMA
A cat-eared girl.
ARISA
A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.
SATOU
A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.
"Those of you who are here for food, form three lines and wait your turn!"
—Opening a soup kitchen in Labyrinth City


"I received information about larvae production from the housewives, I report. It involves sharing a bed in the nude—"
"You mustn't do that before marriage!"
"Not a chance!"



DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

11

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 11

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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DEATH MARCH KARA HAJIMARU ISEKAI KYOSOKYOKU Vol. 11

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Ominous Footsteps

Satou here. Long ago, there were no fireproof buildings, so fires frequently broke out in towns and cities. There's a famous saying in Japan, "A single match can cause a fire," but since there are no matches in this parallel world…

"Those of you who are here for food, form three lines and wait your turn!"

Arisa's energetic shouting filled the air, the sunlight bouncing off the blond wig she wore to hide her ill-omened lilac hair.

We were in the plaza near the west explorers' guild in Labyrinth City Celivera, where the soup kitchen we'd set up had drawn a far bigger crowd than anticipated.

My target audience had been the starving children who couldn't find work, as well as the elderly, but young novice explorers who couldn't earn enough to feed themselves had also shown up.

"Line uuup?"

Weaving her way through the crowd to herd them into lines was Tama, with her cat ears, tail, and short white hair.

"No cutting, sirs! Newcomers to the back of the line, sirs!"

Pochi, who sported dog ears, a tail, and a short brown bob, seemed to have caught someone trying to cut ahead.

"Young larvae, if you wish to fill your bellies, the back of the line is here, I declare."

Like a cosplayer at a certain comic convention, the homunculus Nana was holding up a sign that read BACK OF THE LINE, her long blond ponytail swaying.

She was wearing a breezy summer dress instead of her usual armor, so I was a bit concerned about all her exposed skin.

“Master, the prep team is ready to distribute food at your command.”

This was the ever-serious Liza from the orangescale tribe. Small bony plates of skin decorated her neck, wrists, and so on.

Liza had been fighting remarkably well on the front lines of late, but wearing an apron over her civilian clothes like this gave her the added charm of a newlywed wife, which actually suited her quite well.

She was the one who had taught Lulu and me the basics of cooking, for one thing.

“My part of the cooking is finished, so I’ll help with the distribution, too.”

The beautiful Lulu’s sparkling smile would’ve sent any idol running for the hills.

When she turned around, her silky black hair fanned out like something from a shampoo commercial.

Honestly, the people of this world have no taste whatsoever. How could such an incredible beauty be considered homely by anyone’s standards?

“Ready.”

Decked out in the white coverall apron, mask, and kerchief of a Japanese elementary school child on lunch duty, Mia the elf looked considerably fired up.

Her pale blue-green hair was worn in two long pigtails as usual, with her slightly pointed elf ears peeking out below.

To her left and right, the young girls we had employed as maids back at the mansion were on standby wearing similar outfits.

Miss Miteruna, the head maid, was keeping an eye on the younger maids while maintaining the cooking fire for the soup.

“Let’s get started, then.”

Because I didn’t want to give a whole speech, I simply used my “Amplification” skill to announce to the entire plaza the beginning of the food handout.

The crowd gave a cheer as they stood ready to receive their food.

Today’s meal consisted of sweet dumplings served in a folded leaf and soup in bowls made from palm fruit halves.

Both vessels had been sold cheaply as throwaway items in Labyrinth City.

There weren’t any palm trees growing around here, so I was a little curious as to where they’d gotten their stock from.

“Whoa, looks good…”

“The soup smells great, too!”

“What’re these black things?”

“Ooh, dumplings!”

The kids waiting in line chatted excitedly.

Incidentally, the food we were giving out was relatively plain: The dumplings were made from beans and potatoes, while the soup’s ingredients were dried octopus bits and edible brown seaweed.

I had wanted to prepare something a bit more lavish, but Arisa and Miss Miteruna stopped me.

They said if the meal was any fancier, people who could provide for themselves would end up coming just to try it, which would inconvenience the folks who ran food carts for a living.

For the same reason, we had scheduled the handouts for a time that wouldn’t overlap with morning shift hours.

“You there! If you’ve already received your share, step to the side before you start eating, please!”

Arisa shouted at some children who’d started eating their food the second they’d received it.

“It’s yummy.”

“Yeah, the potatoes aren’t even bitter.”

“And the beans don’t make my mouth tingle!”

The kids gave rave reviews as they munched away.

Beans and potatoes, the staple foods of the less fortunate in Labyrinth City, were actually the remains of monsters called “hopping potatoes” and “walking beans.” If they weren’t prepared properly before cooking, they had a gross, bitter taste, and their dark-red sinews even had a light paralyzing effect.

We’d carefully removed the parts that caused the numbness, then chopped and mashed the beans and potatoes into round dumplings before frying them in beast fat.

“Ow-ow, that’s hot!”

“The soup is tasty, too.”

“Mm-hmm! The blackish-green stuff’s hard to scoop up, but it’s yummy.”

“The white stuff is nice and chewy, too.”

The octopus and seaweed soup seemed to be a hit as well.

I’d acquired the octopus meat in the labyrinth.

Normally, I would’ve used the dried cubes of meat from the huge number of octopus monsters we had encountered on the sugar route, but I held back due to the risk of someone analyzing it and growing suspicious.

At some point, I’d have to disguise myself as the mysterious merchant Akindoh and sell off some of the octopus monster and giant monster fish Tobkezerra meat to a Labyrinth City company so that I could use it without a problem.

Incidentally, I’d acquired the brown seaweed on the sugar route, too, but this was a much less suspicious product.

…Hmm?

Sensing someone’s eyes on me, I looked around and saw Counselor Poputema —who I’d privately nicknamed the “green-clad noble” due to his penchant for wearing all green—standing on the other side of the plaza and watching the goings-on of the soup kitchen.

For some reason, he wore a displeased frown instead of his usual mild-mannered smile.

“Young master?”

As I was debating whether to call out to the green-clad noble, the head maid, Miss Miteruna, quietly approached and whispered in my ear, pointing at an extravagant carriage that had stopped on the road across from the crowd—directly opposite where the green-clad noble was standing.

The window of the carriage opened, and the plump face of the viceroy’s wife peered out and smiled at us.

She had given us permission, and even financial support, to run this soup kitchen. I smiled back at her, giving her a noble-style bow of gratitude.

Though I was now on friendly terms with the woman at the top of Labyrinth City’s noble pecking order, I’d nearly run afoul of her before.

This outcome could be attributed to a young nobleman named Sokell, who’d decided I was his worst enemy. But he’d already met his downfall when he was exposed for producing and distributing an illegal drug called “demonic potion.”

I was actually the one who had discovered and reported that information, but that’s neither here nor there.

Now that all that drama had been dealt with, I’d received permission to start the soup kitchen and build a private orphanage, so I was well on my way to solving the problem of the hungry orphans in Labyrinth City so that I could finally enjoy some sightseeing.

My group’s level grinding was progressing nicely as well. Soon I might even have time to devote to my hobbies of invention and development.

By the time I finished thinking back on our experiences in Labyrinth City thus far and looked up again, the carriage transporting the viceroy’s wife was already gone.

She must have stopped by just to check on things while on her way to some other business.

“…He’s gone?”

Turning away from the road, I found that the green-clad noble was gone, too.

Looking at the dot on my map, I found that he was now heading toward the

downtown area.

Nobles normally used carriages to travel, but this one seemed to be fairly light on his feet, as he was strolling around quite a bit.

Oh well.

I was a little curious about his inscrutable actions, but since I now had the nobles, the army, and the explorers' guild of Labyrinth City on my side, there was probably nothing to worry about.

"'Mfull."

"That was tasty."

"Ahhh, so haaappy…"

The children sighed contentedly as they finished their food.

I didn't think the helpings had been enough to satisfy a growing young child, but many of them didn't seem to get enough food normally, so maybe it took less to fill their stomachs.

That said, some of them had turned their soup bowls upside down to get the last drops. There were even some licking the empty leaf wrappings for dumpling crumbs.

"I still think that instead of just one meal a day, we should—"

"You mustn't, master."

I started to suggest three meals a day, but Arisa interrupted me with a scolding tone.

"If you give them excessive aid, they won't be able to support themselves."

Arisa insisted that while people would appreciate the free food at first, they might start to take it for granted, and eventually they would begin to expect even more.

I didn't think it was that big a deal, but once the orphanage opened, there would be fewer starving children on the streets, and as for the elderly and the broke newbie explorers… Well, I'd just have to come up with some other way to help them.

It wasn't like me to meddle too much in the affairs of others anyway.

"Please dispose of your trash in the trash cans, I insist."

Nana scolded the kids who had started to throw their bowls or leaves on the ground.

A few of them ignored her, but when Liza shot them a threatening glare, they were quick to pick up their trash.

In my old world, it went without saying that you threw trash away only in a trash receptacle, but apparently, that wasn't so common here.

"Oh, looks like most of them are done eating now."

With an old-fashioned "upsy-daisy," Arisa clambered to stand on the empty box she'd been sitting on and shouted at the kids using an amplification magic tool.

"Those of you who are done eating, there's volunteer work to be done if you have the time! Those who participate will be rewarded with a little treat!"

It had been her idea to have the kids help out and get some practice working, instead of just giving them food.

"Volunteer?"

"What's that?"

"A job?"

The children gathered around curiously.

"It's not a job. It's voluntary, sort of a goodwill… Ah, I guess you don't really have those terms here." Arisa furrowed her brow. "Let's see… Basically, I'm asking you to help clean up the plaza and the roads and stuff as thanks for the food."

The children looked confused, but many of them seemed willing to participate anyway.

Some of the elderly had kept their distance. About half of them stayed to help.

Most of the young explorer types wandered off to the area near the labyrinth

entrance.

“Looks like they’re only interested in cash.”

“That’s fine.”

We didn’t really need many people anyway.

Looking at the children who’d gathered around to volunteer, I stretched out contentedly.

Yep, nothing beat peace and tranquility.

◆

“…Mew?”

Sitting nearby, Tama suddenly flattened her ears and started looking around, quivering.

Next to her, Pochi opened her eyes and started sniffing the air quizzically.

Intrigued, I looked at my radar and found that a huge crowd of people was flocking away from the downtown area.

“So noisyyyy?”

“I smell something burning, sir.”

Tama and Pochi ran over to one side of the plaza, where a fence overlooked a somewhat-steep slope.

Beyond the slope, in the middle of the slightly lower downtown area, I could see black smoke rising.

“Uh-oh, is that a fire?”

“Mia, can you put it out with magic?”

“Mrrr, too far.”

It was some six hundred feet away from us, so her magic probably wouldn’t reach.

“I’ll head over and check it out.”

“Allow me to accompany you, master.”

Liza hiked up her long skirt, revealing her bare feet, ready to run.

The kids looked eager to help, too.

They weren't wearing their normal armor, but between Arisa's Enchant: Resist Fire and my Enchant: Physical Protection, we would probably be fine.



Just to be safe, I gave everyone damp cloths with which to cover their mouths.

“All right, let’s go!”

Leaving Miss Miteruna to take care of things in the plaza, we set off at a run.

In such a short span of time, the black smoke from downtown had already spread across a wide area.

It seemed to be moving far too quickly for a natural fire—there might be arson involved here.

“We’re taking a shortcut!”

Scooping up Mia and Arisa in my arms, I dashed directly down the steep slope instead of taking the long way down.

“Tallyhooo…”

“Lallyhooo, sir!”

“Easy, you two. You’ll bite your tongues if you try to talk.”

Since the vanguard team was accustomed to an acrobatic fighting style, they could talk through this sliding descent easily enough, but Arisa and Mia didn’t seem nearly as calm.

Lulu, who was hopping down with light steps alongside Nana, kept giving little shrieks of “eek!” in a tone that suggested she was almost enjoying herself.

Her self-defense training in the elf village and the physical enhancements of leveling up probably had something to do with that.

“Master, the black cloud is moving, I report.”

“Master! The fires are being caused by burning slimes.”

Investigating Nana’s report, Arisa discovered the cause using a chant-less Space Magic spell, Clairvoyance.

According to my map information, thirty or so oil slimes were rampaging through the city, their levels all in the single digits.

And their numbers were gradually decreasing.

I was going to use my Practical Magic spell Remote Arrow to wipe them out, but that didn't appear to be necessary.

My map showed the health gauges of the oil slimes rapidly decreasing. They were probably taking continuous damage from the flames.

One of the few surviving oil slimes was right up ahead, so I cast Enchant: Physical Protection on everyone; Arisa applied Enchant: Resist Fire on the group at the same time.

As we dodged the fleeing crowd and burst onto the ash-covered street, a roaring flame entered my vision.

It was pretty big for such a low-level slime—around the size of a full-grown cow.

Just as I was about to instruct Liza to destroy it, a black shadow cut in between us and the oil slime.

"Dozon… Buster!"

A bearded, bearlike explorer jumped from a dilapidated house nearby, bringing a giant war hammer down on the smoking oil slime.

The hammer crushed the oil slime easily, causing its body to explode in all directions.

"Ah, stupid—!"

"Aaaaagh! Water, water!"

The yellowish-brown remains of the oil slime scattered everywhere, sticking to the nearby houses and catching fire.

Since the roofs of the buildings were all made of woven dried plants, the flames spread in an instant.

Even the mortar holding the brick walls together seemed to be flammable, as the flame was moving downward as well.

The explorer who'd caused this disaster was now rolling around in flames on the ground, but his party members would probably take care of him.

"Mia, start the chant for a firefighting water spell."

“Mm. ■■ ***Water Ring*** *Sansui.*”

Mia used a Spirit Magic spell, since they had the briefest chants, and scattered water droplets around the area.

I knew it wasn’t wise to try to put out an oil fire with water, but the oil from these slimes seemed to be dependent on the composition of the slime, which meant it shouldn’t spread any farther.

Because Mia’s magic alone couldn’t put out the fire completely, I used my go-to Practical Magic spell Magic Hand to reach into the smoky black sky.

This magic created invisible, psychokinetic hands, but I could also use them as an extension of my own hands, so this spell allowed me to produce water from Storage.

While I was at it, I used Magic Hand to splash the water around, spraying a mist on the area of the fire.

> Title Acquired: Firefighter

> Title Acquired: Sprinkler

In the corner of my vision, I saw in the log screen that I’d gained two new titles.

The first one was all well and good, but that second one seemed a little off.

“Whoa!”

“That little girl’s a magic whiz!”

“Wish we could have her instead of our guy.”

The bearded explorer’s crew all gathered around, complimenting Mia.

“Mrrr… Satou.”

Mia clung to my side, hiding her face in embarrassment.

“The fire should go out soon, but I’d imagine there are some people with serious injuries.”

“Time for a rescue operation, then?”

“Right. But it’d be dangerous to go alone, so Pochi and Liza, Tama and Nana,

I'll have you work in pairs. The rest of you, stay here and heal the wounded as the rescue team brings them in."

I produced a bag full of burn-healing potions from Storage by way of the Garage Bag and handed it to Arisa.

"What about you, master?"

"I'll be on the rescue team, too, of course."

With that, I stepped into an alley shrouded in smoke and mist.

"Screams, sir!"

"Let's go, Pochi."

"Yes, sir."

Pochi and Liza dashed to a house that was still in flames.

"Over heeere?"

"Lead the way, I request."

Tama and Nana set off toward another nearby house.

Looks like they've got it under control.

If things got dicey, I planned to back them up, but Arisa's Enchant: Resist Fire appeared to be protecting their clothes and skin, so they were able to go about rescuing people safely.

Clearly, I had nothing to worry about.

"Liza! You're in charge!"

"Understood!"

As always, Liza responded with a reliable shout.

All right, then.

I opened the map to confirm a few things.

There were two areas where oil slimes were still alive and wreaking havoc.

There were some experienced garnet-badge explorers surrounding one area, so I decided to take care of the other.

I ran forward, using “Long-Distance Vision” and Magic Hand to assist the people fleeing as I went.

This is some serious smoke.

After I started choking from breathing it in, I supplied myself with oxygen directly from Storage.

There were no survivors to be found in this area, only corpses.

The last dot on my radar was the final oil slime—No, there were five survivors beneath that, in some kind of basement area.

All of them were severely wounded, and judging by their health bars, they didn’t have much longer to live.

Abandoning all restraint, I used “Warp” to bring myself there almost immediately.

First, I used Freeze Water to dispose of the oil slime attached to the brick house. Its core was an unusual pink color, but I had no time to worry about that right now.

Putting that information aside for later, I charged right into the smoky burning house.

The stairs to the basement had collapsed.

Clicking my tongue, I used “Spellblade” on my fingertips to open a hole in the floor.

Just as I did, there was an explosive sound like backfire, and flames burst up from the hole.

My courage wavered ever so slightly, but I ignored that and dove into the flames.

“I’m here to help!”

There came no response.

Frantic, I looked around the basement full of fire and smoke.

There!

On the other side of the rubble.

There were people there—burning alive.

Heaped on top of one another—presumably passed out from the smoke—not a single one of them stirred in the slightest.

I grabbed all of them with Magic Hand, then used the Return spell to escape with the victims in tow.

◆

“Waaaah! You scared the hell out of me, you damn whelp! Erm, sir.”

When the Return spell brought us to the Ivy Manor, the foul-mouthed house fairy Lelillil fell over in surprise.

She must have just so happened to be in the gazebo area where we’d arrived.

Ignoring Lelillil for the time being, I quickly operated the menu to use the intermediate Water Magic spell Healing: Water.

Once the AR displays of all five people showed that their health bars had fully recovered, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“They’re wounded. Can you get a room ready with some supplies?”

“Ahhh! Damn, this looks bad!”

Lelillil rushed into the mansion.

I hadn’t noticed in my rush to get them out before, but according to my AR, all five of the victims were female, with the title **Masterless Slave**.

Their master had most likely perished in that fire.

Not wanting to worry the rest of my group, I used Telephone to contact them and let them know I’d brought some severely wounded victims to the Ivy Manor.

“They’re all blackened with soot.”

I used Everyday Magic to clean the soot off them.

Unfortunately, the force of the cleaning sent their mostly burned clothes dissolving to the floor.

“Y-you filthy whelp! What the hell are you doing in the sacred home of the sage?!” Misunderstanding the sight of the exposed young women, Lelillil flew into a rage behind me. “If you want to get down and dirty, do it somewhere else!”

“This isn’t what it looks—”

I stopped in the middle of my response.

Three of the five were completely healed, but the brown-haired and red-haired girls still had burns.

Intermediate Healing Magic should be more than enough to fix up a burn… Confused, I started using the spell again.

“Why isn’t it working?”

“Magic can’t heal old wounds, dumbass… Sir.”

Lelillil’s words made some sense, but the burns seemed a little too intense to be old wounds.

The brown-haired girl named Tifaleeza was in particularly rough shape: She was terribly charred from her knees to her waist and on the right side of her torso. She also had nasty burns from the right shoulder to the side of her head.

The redhead, who was named Neru, wasn’t in as bad of shape as Tifaleeza overall, but the burns on the lower half of her body were just as severe.

Even aside from the most severe burns, both of them had smaller scars dotted along their bodies, as if flames had scorched them all over.

If these burns were old wounds, they probably would have died long before this fire.

“There’s something strange about these female whelps’ burns…,” Lelillil murmured, examining them.

Both their health bars had started going down again.

“Potions, maybe?”

I produced two intermediate burn healing potions from Storage and poured them over the girls’ injuries.

These special magic potions included freezing-flower powder, which was especially good for burns.

“Not a damn difference…sir.”

Sure enough, the potions didn’t have any effect.

That’s strange.

Even watered-down freezing-flower potions had been enough to heal the people in the town of Puta who’d been burned by the pyromaniac noble.

These potions were far stronger than those, so I had no idea why they wouldn’t work.

I checked their status in the AR display, but it said only **Burns: Severe**, with no strange illnesses or curses to be found.

“…Whelp.”

Lelillil was giving me an unusually serious look.

“Don’t get any funny ideas!” She put her hand on her hip. “Even the great sage Lord Trazayuya couldn’t heal everyone’s damn wounds and illnesses, sir. Don’t think you can do better when you haven’t even lived half as long as I have!”

The sage! That’s right: This is the sage’s manor!

“Lelillil! I’m going to use the lab in the basement!”

“It’s only natural that there’ll be some people you can’t—”

Careful to avoid the two girls’ wounds, I lifted them gently with Magic Hand and ran out of the room.

Lelillil was giving me some kind of soft lecture, but it would have to wait.

“Whelp! I’m not done talking to—”

“Take care of the other three, please.”

Leaving Lelillil hopping mad, I opened the gate to the basement and ran inside.

“The equipment down here might be able to pick something up.”

In the basement laboratory, I quickly activated the cultivation tanks' control unit and tried to fill them with liquid medicine.

"Geh, I don't even have enough for one…"

With a frantic search, I quickly found a recipe in Trazayuya's documents in Storage.

Let's see here. For ingredients, I'll need… Good. I can work with this.

While I was supplying the machines with magic, I produced an Elvish Transmutation Tablet and materials and started creating the medicine.

"Wh-whelp?"

Prioritizing speed above all else and wasting a good deal of magic and ingredients in the process, I started creating an optimal medicine for healing burns in a short period of time.

"You're moving way too damn fast. You won't be able to make anything like…"

Lelillil had come into the lab and started saying something, but I ignored her and focused solely on my work.

Once the liquid medicine was finished, I filled two cultivation tanks and gently lowered the two remaining burn victims into each.

They looked a bit anguished when the breathable liquid entered their lungs, but neither of them woke up.

"All right, I'll start with a full-body scan."

I entered the commands and took a deep breath.

Before long, the control unit's display panels lit up with information.

"…All normal?"

No, not quite.

Specifically, it said there was nothing wrong "within the scope of necessary healing."

Opening my map, I searched for any commonalities shared by these two girls

that the three upstairs didn't have.

"Found something."

These two, and not the other three, had the crime **Treason** listed in their bounties.

I tapped on the entry for **Treason** to view the details. I read on the display **Punishment**.

"Branding… Continuous…?"

Looking at the two of them floating in the tanks, I realized that there was a palm-size brand on each of their backs.

According to the AR, they were **Treachery Brands**.

Searching through the materials in my Storage, I found information about it in some documents I'd bought in the old capital.

"Seriously…?"

In order to prevent Treachery Brands from being removed by magic or potions, the power of a City Core was used to perpetually prevent them from healing.

The fact that I couldn't heal the other burns seemed to be a side effect of this.

"Well, now what?"

I sank into deep deliberation.

Of course, I couldn't just leave them unhealed.

I didn't know what they had done to be literally branded as traitors, but that had nothing to do with letting them die of their burn wounds.

Once I healed them, I could have them make up for their crimes as criminal slaves.

Besides, I wasn't the kind of person who enjoyed watching young girls suffer from serious burns.

"…Hmm?"

I looked more closely at Tifaleeza's back.

It was covered in burns, yet the brand mark stood out clearly.

Looking at the materials again, I discovered that even if one attempted to cover up the brand by burning the skin around it, it would automatically heal the outline of the mark alone.

And if one tried to cut the skin away, the brand would reappear on the newly healed skin.

“This is awfully thorough…”

I pressed a hand to my forehead, deep in thought.

In modern Japan, they could remove burned skin and graft on new, healthy skin.

This parallel world had magic and potions, but those wouldn’t heal this burn. Even if I grafted on new skin, the brand would just restore itself.

“There’s no way… No, wait.”

That’s it.

The brand would restore itself.

In other words, the rest of the area around it would stay as unburned skin.

All I wanted was to heal their burns, not necessarily to remove the brand.

“I don’t really want to cut their skin off with a knife, though…”

“Wh-what? Have you lost your damn mind?!” Alarmed by my admittedly strange muttering, Lelillil turned pale.

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t do that.”

I searched through the elfin documents in Storage with a few key words.

Homunculi… If their technology could cultivate an artificial life-form, then surely it could regenerate or replace a bit of skin.

I scrolled down the long list of matches.

Creating homunculi and fresh golems… Nope.

Disguise masks… I was intrigued, but for now, next.

Organic artificial arms… Close.

Organ cultivation, skin cultivation, skin regeneration—

“Got it.”

I started reading the logs of an elf from several thousand years ago.

This looks like it could work.

“This might be a bit harsh, but try to bear it.”

Murmuring to the girls floating in the tanks, I went about the work as fast as I could without breaking the machinery.

Anesthesia applied.

“I never thought I’d use the map’s 3-D function like this…”

Operating the map like a 3-D scanner, I traced around the girls’ bodies, then input the settings into the control unit.

Carefully, accurately, and quickly… *All right, activate!*

“Oh no, oh no! Look, whelp! They’re all bloody! If you can’t use the machines, I’m going to put them into emergency shutdown—”

“Don’t touch anything, Lelillil!”

Lelillil was about to press the shutdown button in a panic, but I used “Coercion” to stop her in place.

“This is how it has to be.”

I looked over the girls again.

I’d used the cultivation tanks to dissolve the burned skin, which naturally caused the exposed tissue to start bleeding.

The two girls looked like they were in pain; maybe the anesthesia wasn’t enough.

“I’m sorry. Hang in there just a little longer.”

I added more anesthesia as I spoke.

Then I selected the Magic Hand spell from the magic menu, since it was good

for delicate tasks, and used it to press down on the girls' veins and prevent the blood from spreading into the liquid medicine.

Judging from the control unit, Neru's burns should be treatable with intermediate magic potions, but Tifaleeza would need an advanced potion to restore the function of her right eye.

I searched through my inventory.

Aha!

There was a lesser elixir in my Keep folder.

I'd found this in the crazy dendrobium's treasure chest on our first trip into the Celivera labyrinth.

But I'd been saving it in case anything happened to any of my party…

I hesitated for a moment.

"They'd probably be angry with me if I *didn't* use it for this."

Making up my mind, I poured the elixir into the tube of Tifaleeza's cultivation tank.

I still had a cure-all, and I could always make more potions and medicines for my group before we next went into the labyrinth.

Then I put an intermediate health potion into Neru's tube.

Then, once I adjusted the settings on the control unit, all I had to do was keep Magic Hand in place until the new skin was done generating.

Breathing a small sigh of relief, I turned to Lelillil.

"Lelillil, how are the other girls?"

"I brought them to the guest room and put them to sleep with the Sleeping Powder spell, as you requested, Lord Satou."

…Lord?

That was strange coming from Lelillil.

Maybe it was because I'd used the "Coercion" skill on her earlier?

"What's the matter, Lelillil?"

“Lord Satou! I was wrong about you!” Lelillil gazed up at me, her eyes shining. “I should have known—the holy high elves were right about you! Your operation of the machines was just as magnificent as the stories Grandfather told about the Great Sage himself! And that alchemy was unthinkably fast!”

She looked almost feverish as she pressed closer to me.

“I vow from the bottom of my heart to serve you from now on, so I beg you, please forgive how terribly rudely I treated you until now.”

With that, she held her breath and awaited my response.

“Um, sure. You’re forgiven.”

Feeling exhausted from the heat of her gaze, I simply nodded.

“Huzzah!”

Lelillil jumped for joy like a child, then seemed to remember herself and mumbled an apology.

It was all a bit much, but it was still better than her constantly needling me. I decided not to worry about it.

Glancing at my log, I found that I’d received all kinds of titles.

> Title Acquired: Fire Rescuer

> Title Acquired: Physician

> Title Acquired: Surgeon

> Title Acquired: Unlicensed Doctor

I wasn’t sure whether the profession of physician or medical licenses even existed in this world, but it was a little late to be questioning the weird, half-baked nature of the title system at this point, so I decided to refrain from commenting.

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“Now, then…”

Using “Item Box,” I produced the documents that had caught my eye while I was searching for a way to heal the two girls.

Using my “Parallel Thoughts” skill, I kept an eye on Tifaleeza and Neru while scanning over the documents.

The one that had intrigued me the most was “organic artificial arms.”

I might be able to use it to make an artificial leg for Mr. Kajiro, the samurai guarding our mansion.

“They’re not as responsive as the original limb, huh…”

Sadly, this was written right in the documents.

That must be why Cyriltoa the Songstress in the old capital had given up on her beloved musical instrument, since she was using an artificial arm made by the elves.

It would probably still be better than what Kajiro was using right now, which was essentially a peg leg, but it wouldn’t be enough to help him return to his calling as a samurai.

For now, I decided to put this technology aside in the Keep folder.

Next, I started to read the documents about the “disguise mask.”

“Lord Satou, Lord Satou!”

As I was reading, Lelillil started tugging politely on my sleeve.

“Hasn’t that girl’s hair gotten longer?”

Sure enough, beautiful silver hair about the length of a bob cut had grown back on the right side of Tifaleeza’s head, which had been charred bald before.

I thought her hair was brown before… Looking at her left side, I saw that the silver hair turned to white partway down. I assumed she had gone gray early due to stress.

It must have just looked brown because of all the soot.

The healing was already entering its final stages, too: The areas of exposed sinew on Tifaleeza’s face had healed over, revealing the pretty face of someone who would probably thrive as a cool-type idol.

She wasn’t quite as stunningly beautiful as Lulu, of course, but she was lovely enough that she would still look good standing next to her.

“It’s uneven now, so I’ll give her a trim.”

I produced scissors from Storage, sterilized them, and put them away again, reproducing them in a Magic Hand inside the cultivation tank. Then I cut the left side of her hair to match the right.

I didn’t want her hair to start floating around in the tank, so I put the white strands away in Storage.

Then I looked to the other tank.

“Neru seems normal.”

The plain Neru’s red hair hadn’t grown like Tifaleeza’s; it was still a very ordinary short cut.

It was probably because of the different medicines I’d given them.

There were hair-growing serums in the elves’ recipes, too—there was probably no need to research the difference in great detail.

Then, a few minutes later…

“Oh! It’s finished!”

Lelillil pointed enthusiastically at the cultivation tanks’ control unit, which displayed the word COMPLETE.

“Wow, it’s pretty much perfect.”

Once I’d confirmed that neither of them had a trace of burns left on their bodies, I took them out of the tanks and covered them with cloth.

The brands were still on their backs, but there was nothing I could do about that.

“They’ll probably be fatigued for a while, so let them sleep for two or three days, please.”

“Of course, Lord Satou! Your wish is my command!”

Leaving the rest to Lelillil, I went back to where my friends were waiting.

Because one of the girls had the “Analyze” skill, I asked Lelillil to call me Kuro in front of them.

For a while now, Nanashi the Hero had been appearing wherever Satou went, so I figured it would be best to use a different name once in a while.

Still, I had to wonder whether the appearance of the burning oil slimes had been accidental or deliberate.



The viceroy's men would undoubtedly be investigating; I decided to ask the viceroy's wife to tell me if they figured out the cause.

In the back of my mind, I remembered seeing the green-clad noble heading downtown.

…No, it can't be.

As a high-ranking noble, he wouldn't stand to gain anything from setting the city on fire.

I supposed some nobles hated poor people, but the green-clad noble was different.

Shaking off my doubts, I used Return to teleport back to my mansion.

The Tea Party

Satou here. Since convenience-store sweets are so high quality these days, you can pretty much eat cake whenever you feel like it. When I was a kid, though, you only really had cake on your birthday. Although I guess I can technically make it myself now, too…

“Is this the place?”

Once I got back to the mansion, I avoided the attention of our guards—Mr. Kajiro and Miss Ayaume—and headed back to where I’d left my companions.

According to my map, a nearby plaza in front of a water well was being used as a base to treat the wounded.

The dots indicated my party members were in that area, too.

“Master!”

“Welcome back, sir!”

Since they’d been rescuing people from a fire, Tama and Pochi were covered in sweat and soot when they ran up to meet me. I’d have to start a hot bath once we got back to the mansion.

“Did you leave the injured back at the manor, master?” Arisa asked quietly.

“Yeah, they still need to rest for a few days and heal.”

Liza approached me with a grave expression.

“I am terribly sorry, master. We’ve used up all the magic potions you left in my care.”

“It’s fine,” I assured her lightly. “That’s what they were for.”

“Master, the wartime provisions you provided have been exhausted as well, I report.”

Behind the ever-expressionless Nana was a gaggle of children I’d never seen

before.

Their clothes were in tatters and looked like they'd been burned away in places.

Most likely, these kids had been mortally wounded, and Nana had used her intermediate potions to save their lives.

"It's okay. You used them to save these kids, right?"

"Yes, master."

The children all sighed in relief.

Some of them were girls, so I produced a series of spare T-shirts from Storage by way of the Garage Bag and handed them out.

There didn't seem to be any more-serious injuries, and all the fires had been put out. I could withdraw for the time being.

Waving at the kids as they celebrated their new shirts, I turned away.

At that moment, a delinquent-looking man stepped in front of me.

"You the young nobleman who's been handing out high-quality magic potions like candy?"

A few fierce-looking thugs stood behind the man.

"Who are you?" Liza demanded, sensing a violent air about the men and stepping in front.

"Don't you worry, missy. I'm Skopi, a humble member of the Mud Scorpions who run this little neighborhood. I heard you lot took care of our guys and some of the other fellas around here, so I came to say thanks."

The man held up his palms to Liza to indicate that he meant no harm.

She stepped aside, and the man bowed his head to me and said "thank you."

"I'm glad to hear it. I'm Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight. I'll accept your gracious thanks."

"We ain't got any money, but if you ever need manpower, just gimme a shout. And if you're lookin' to get anything what can't be mentioned in public, I

can hook you up.”

I didn’t think the latter was going to be necessary, but maybe I would call on him next time I was gathering a workforce.

Saying farewell to Skopi of the Mud Scorpions, I headed back to the soup kitchen area, where Miss Miteruna and the others were waiting.

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“It’s certainly a lot cleaner around here.”

“Yes, those kids worked very hard.”

In addition to cleaning and sweeping the whole area, they’d even helped clean up from the food distribution earlier.

Now the group of children stared at me with expectant eyes.

“Master.”

Arisa’s light nudge jogged my memory.

The snacks.

I produced some hard-baked biscuits and bags of dried meat from the soup kitchen supplies.

“Arisa, can you gather the kids so I can hand out snacks?”

“Okey-dokey…”

Arisa and the other girls started rounding the kids up into lines.

“Thanks for the help.”

I thanked each child as I handed out the snacks.

“Ooh, meat!”

“Wow! This jerky smells so good!”

“You’re right! It’s not even super salty or sour!”

“This hard bread stuff smells good, too.”

Some of the comments made me a little concerned about what these kids were eating normally, but all of them were jumping up and down with glee.

A few sneaky kids who hadn't helped clean tried to line up for snacks anyway, but the hardworking children chased them off.

Good. It doesn't pay to be dishonest.

But I felt bad for them as they slouched away, so I gave them a few pieces of leftover biscuits, telling them to be sure to help next time.

Because they got far less than the kids who had actually helped, they would probably be motivated to volunteer next time.

"Master…"

"What is it?"

Arisa prodded me, pointing at one of the young maids.

She and the others were watching enviously as the kids enjoyed their snacks.

Even Tama and Pochi had joined them. They must be hungry, too.

"Do you mind, Miteruna?"

I produced some more hard biscuits, indicating the young maids with my eyes.

The head maid, Miss Miteruna, thought for a moment, then nodded.

"You young ladies worked hard, too, so here's your reward."

I handed out the biscuits to the girls.

"Yaaay!"

"Smells good."

"Hee-hee, they look yummy…"

"Crunchyyy?"

"Mr. Biscuit is hard and strong, sir."

The biscuits went over surprisingly well.

The young maids' jaws weren't as strong as the beastfolk girls', so they filled their cheeks with biscuits like squirrels.

"Here you go, Arisa."

“Huh?”

Arisa looked surprised that she got to have one, too.

“…Thanks.”

After hesitating for a moment, she accepted the biscuit and munched on it happily.

As I watched the kids eat, and Arisa licked her biscuit like candy for some reason, she turned to ask me a question.

“Hey, master, do you know how to make fish-oil drops?”

“Fish-oil drops?”

“You know, like in kindergartens and stuff, those soft gummy things they hand out during snack time.”

This sounded vaguely familiar.

They probably used some kind of oil derived from fish liver.

Checking the ingredients I had on hand just for kicks, I was surprised to find a match: There was a simple recipe in the Japanese writings I’d acquired at a dark auction in the old capital.

The notes in the margins said it was a supplement for vitamins A, D, and so on.

“Arisa, looks like I have a recipe.”

“W-wait, really?”

Despite being the one who had asked in the first place, Arisa seemed surprised.

The recipe was a little time-consuming, though, and I suspected it would come out tasting and smelling very fishy if I followed it to the letter.

“But I’ll have to revise it a bit first, so we won’t be able to start giving them out right away.”

“That’s fine, of course. I simply wanted something for those kids, since some of them seem to have really dry skin or weak stomachs.”

So that was why Arisa had requested the fish-oil drops.

Deep down, Arisa was very caring and attentive. She'd probably make a great mother someday.

"Young master, is it all right if we start breaking things down?"

"Yes, please do."

Once the young maids finished eating their biscuits, Miss Miteruna directed them to break down the soup kitchen equipment and load it up in a cart.

I'd had Miss Miteruna order the cart yesterday. Having her around to do things in my place was a big help.

So on the way home, I posed a question.

"Miteruna, should we hire some more maids for the mansion?"

Raising the little maids, taking care of things around the house, and tackling odd jobs like this was probably pretty difficult.

The suspension-less cart was painful to sit in. In the end, everyone but Lulu, the driver, was walking.

"Young master, I couldn't possibly increase your costs in such a—"

"Master wouldn't offer if he didn't want to, so if you need the extra help, you should just say so."

Miss Miteruna tried to decline at first, but Arisa cut her off.

Hired help was very cheap here, and I was making money faster than I could spend it, so I had no problem increasing our workforce.

"Well, if at all possible, I could use someone a bit older than the other girls, perhaps someone who already knows how to cook…"

"How about Rosie and Annie, then?"

Lulu made a surprise suggestion from the coachman's seat.

"Who?"

"The girls who always take charge and help with the soup kitchen preparations."

Searching the map, I looked at the pair in question with the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance as they walked down the street.

They were around the same age as Lulu: One was very skinny, with dark skin and black hair, and the other was a brown-haired girl with a plain, honest face.

The two of them did look familiar.

“The girls who helped with the washing and vegetable peeling the day we moved into the mansion?”

“Yes, that’s them.”

I certainly appreciated anyone who took the initiative to help out.

“What do you think, Miteruna?”

“If Young Mistress Lulu recommends them, then…”

“But they’ll be working for you, so I’d like to prioritize your opinion.”

Miss Miteruna looked somehow surprised at this, but she agreed to interview Rosie and Annie before making a decision.

Once we got back to the manor, I prepared some maid outfits in the event that the two girls passed their interview.

Instead of Miss Miteruna’s long skirt, these were knee-length maid outfits to match Lulu’s.

The little girls who worked as the maid staff wore simple one-piece dresses and plain aprons until Miss Miteruna deemed them ready for a full maid outfit.

“Don’t you have a tea party soon, master?”

“Right, I should probably get going.”

I checked the time in the AR display of my menu.

“Sorry, Lulu, would you mind giving me a ride to the viceroy’s castle?”

“Of course, sir. I just finished baking the pastries for your gift.”

Lulu had been making various *castellas* and honey pastries to bring to the viceroy’s tea party in the galley, but she was quick to agree to my request.

“Whenever Miss Miteruna’s free, we’ll go find Rosie and Annie to see about

hiring them.”

“Perfect, thank you.”

I nodded to Arisa, and we set out to the viceroy’s palace-like mansion.

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“““Welcome, Master Pendragon.”””

When I stepped out of the carriage at the viceroy’s castle’s main entrance, a big crowd of smiling staff greeted me in unison.

Considering that on my first visit, I’d used the merchants’ parking lot and had been guided through a back entrance by a single curt servant, this was a considerable upgrade.

“I’ll see you later, Lulu.”

“Yes, master.”

Lulu smiled and waved, and the servants bowed their heads and stepped into the entrance.

“Allow me to guide you.”

“Great, thanks.”

An attendant with Western-style beauty guided me down a hallway with an expensive-looking rug toward the tea party, where the viceroy’s wife and company were waiting.

The attendant wore coral earrings on proud display.

Judging by the information in my AR display, this was from the large set of gifts I’d given the viceroy’s wife. She must have bequeathed some of them onto her staff.

Back where the coral accessories were made, I’d bought the earrings in bulk for a single copper coin each. But since there was no coral on the Shiga Kingdom coasts, their value had skyrocketed, and my “Estimation” skill told me that their market value was now anywhere between several silver to gold coins.

“This way, please.”

The friendly attendant opened the door, and I was greeted by a good deal more noblewomen than I'd expected. There were men, too, but not very many.

All of the women were wearing extravagant dresses and dazzling jewelry.

Blue gems seemed to be particularly in fashion; sapphires and blue-tinted Heaven's Teardrops were quite popular.

Our hostess, the viceroy's wife, was wearing a heavy-looking sapphire necklace and sparkling Heaven's Teardrop rings and earrings.

"Welcome, Sir Pendragon."

"I truly appreciate your invitation today."

I gave an exaggerated noble bow to the extra-dressed-up viceroy's wife.

"Sir Satou! It's been so long since I have seen thee, no?"

Princess Meetia ran up to me with a bright greeting, wearing a very exotic dress.

That said, it had been only a few days since we had rescued her from the hands of the evil plunderers.

"Greetings, Princess Meetia."

I gave a small bow and greeted the lovely young woman behind her as well.

"S-Sir Pendragon! P-please forgive my rudeness for not yet thanking you for saving me!"

"Oh, no, I didn't do anything."

This was Mary-Ann, Baronet Dyukeli's daughter.

She was only about middle school age, so seeing her all dressed up gave her the charm of a preteen girl trying to seem older.

"You most certainly did!" Mary-Ann's voice cracked. "The attack that drove off those soldier mantises came from the top of the cliff! It was you who rescued us, was it not, Sir Knight?"

Oh, I guess I sorta remember doing that.

"That was merely incidental. I was able to make it in time only because Sir

Gerits was protecting you. If you must thank anyone, please thank him instead.”

“…Gerits did that for me?”

If I remembered right, the viceroy’s chubby third son, Gerits, had stayed behind to protect Miss Mary-Ann. That was probably what prompted me to chase the soldier mantis off with a pebble.

Gerits seemed to care a lot about Miss Mary-Ann, so I didn’t want to get between them.

Far be it from me to interfere in a budding young romance.

“Mary-Ann, you mustn’t bother Sir Knight before he’s been introduced properly to everyone.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mother.”

Her mother was young enough that she could have passed for an older sister.

She was in her thirties but carried herself like a sad young girl.

According to my prior investigations, Miss Mary-Ann had an elder brother who was in poor health.

“Apologize to Sir Knight and Lady Reythel, not to me.”

Obediently, Mary-Ann bowed apologetically to the viceroy’s wife and me.

So Baronet Dyukeli’s wife was close enough with the viceroy’s wife to call her by name, then.

“Shall we, Sir Pendragon?”

The viceroy’s wife led me to the platform in the center of the hall, and the eyes of the nobles all gathered on us.

“Allow me to introduce my friend here. This young man is Sir Pendragon, a *very dear guest* of our family.”

She emphasized this last part most.

“He is a great man who saved the Muno Barony from an army of goblins being led by a demon, defeated several lesser demons in the Ougoch Duchy, and worked with the Hero of the Saga Empire to drive a black dragon out of the

Lumork Kingdom.”

Damn, word travels fast.

It might have been Counselor Poputema (the “green-clad noble”) who investigated all this information, not the viceroy’s wife, but either way, I was amazed that they’d found out so much in just a few days.

“A demon?” “So he’s a dragon slayer?” “But he’s so young!”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up surprised murmurs from the nobles.

“Most of all, he saved the life of my son Rayleigh, who was adrift at sea on the sugar route.”

At that, there were more mutters in the crowd: “Is Sir Rayleigh okay?” “Let me care for him!”

Rayleigh seemed to be quite popular among the young ladies.

Incidentally, he had spent one night in Labyrinth City, then headed out for the royal capital.

According to the man himself, he had come only to get a letter of introduction from his mother, the viceroy’s wife, so that he could sell Heaven’s Teardrops in the royal capital for large sums of money.

“He has become an explorer here in Labyrinth City and in a short time has already earned a garnet badge, proof of a first-class explorer. And only a few days ago, he saved Her Highness Princess Meetia and some young noble children from grave peril in the labyrinth.”

With that, she gave me the formal curtsy of a noblewoman.

She had already thanked me before, so this was probably a performance for the other nobles.

I bowed to her in return, then introduced myself to the rest of the tea party.

“Thank you for the introduction. As you heard, I am Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight of the Muno Barony.”

Honestly, my instinct was to downplay the exaggerated praise she’d just heaped on me, but it would be an insult to the viceroy’s wife to follow her

words with an immediate denial, so I decided to save that for individual conversations.

As the introduction ended, butlers and maids entered the room, pushing tea trolleys.

The trolleys were loaded with the pastries I'd brought for the tea party: In addition to plain and sugar-coated *castellas*, I'd prepared some Western-style variations with whipped cream and dried fruits on top.

I'd planned to bring only the standard kind originally, but Lulu made a rare error in the oven temperature that led to the sugar coating getting slightly darker than intended, which inspired the toppings.

As it turned out, this error worked out in my favor:

"My, are these *castellas*?"

"They're even tastier than the pancakes I had in the royal capital."

"This white topping is quite delicious."

"These dried orange fruits are positively to die for. What are they, I wonder?"

"Mother, might I have a little more?"

The ladies of Labyrinth City were even more taken with them than the normal *castellas*.

"Oh my, everyone seems quite captivated by your pastries, Sir Pendragon."

"I'm relieved that they're to everyone's liking."

The young noblewomen probably dined on gourmet food all the time, so it was a pleasure to see them enjoying my pastries so wholeheartedly. I couldn't help feeling a boost to my ego, even if I knew it was only because of my maxed-out skills.

Somehow, the viceroy's wife seemed even prouder than I was, as if she was a foremost authority on *castellas*.

Once things had settled down a bit, I went around to greet people at each table.

Most of them were quite friendly and often inquired about how I'd

befriended the viceroy's wife in between praising my *castellas*.

There were a few barbed remarks among them, but I found that the hostility tended to come from fans of the handsome Sokell, a noble who had fallen from grace when I revealed his wrongdoings.

However, from what the friendlier noblewomen told me later, these were largely people whose families had financial ties to Sokell, so there wasn't much steamy romance afoot.

I offered some gifts to try to make amends. I didn't want them resenting me, after all.

Because most of the families in question were low-ranking nobility, I was sure the viceroy's wife could take care of them for me, but it was better to befriend people than crush them underfoot.

"Sir Pendragon, it seems you have a penchant for helping the less fortunate, hmm?"

The women at one table brought up the soup kitchen, which had only started today.

"Yes, it's my hope to reduce the number of the hungry so that they might be of some help to Labyrinth City's workforce."

"My, it wasn't simply out of compassion?"

"That, too, of course, but I also wish to ensure that every citizen can be of use to the Shiga Kingdom."

This came out a little cold, but I was concerned that if I came across as too compassionate, people might try to take advantage of me.

"That reminds me," said one of the noblewomen. "Wasn't there some sort of fire in the commoners' district?"

"Oh dear, how very frightening."

"Yes, I saw the black smoke from my mansion."

"I'm told the cause was people raising monsters known as 'oil slimes' within the city."

Huh, really? …Wait, it hasn't even been a day. How did word spread so quickly?

Maybe they just investigated because they were able to see the smoke, but still.

"It's impressive that you heard about it so soon."

"Well, my husband is a supervisor with the guard, you see…"

According to this woman, the guard received word that some people were attempting to illegally breed and raise oil slimes within the city, so they had been planning on tracking them down and arresting them within the next few days.

Maybe that investigation was why I had seen the green-clad noble heading downtown during the soup kitchen.

"I sent one of my servants to investigate, and he saw some pink slimes get defeated by garnet-badge explorers, only to regenerate and attack again."

"My, how frightening! I suppose slimes do have that trait."

…"Regenerate"?

"They must not have aimed for the cores when they defeated them."

"Cores?"

"Yes, a core is a slime's weak point. If you pierce the core, it'll self-destruct and turn into ordinary liquid."

I shared the information Liza had told me way back in the Seiryuu City labyrinth.

Maybe there were some slimes that could actually regenerate, but the oil slimes I saw in the upper stratum of the Celivera labyrinth didn't have any such ability, so my hunch about the cores was probably right.

"I would have thee come here, Sir Satou."

As I was finishing up my greetings to the tea party nobles, Princess Meetia waved me over to a table that was primarily populated by children.

Besides the princess herself, the rest of the group I'd rescued in the labyrinth

were there, too, including Miss Mary-Ann of Baronet Dyukeli's family; the viceroy's third son, Gerits; and his friends.

There were also some kids I'd never formally met, like the viceroy's third and fourth daughters, Miss Gohna and Miss Shina.

"Sit thee here!"

"All right. Thank you."

Princess Meetia patted a free space next to her on the sofa, so I sat down.

This put Gohna and Shina next to me on my other side and Gerits across from me.

The viceroy's fourth daughter, Shina, had once had the status conditions **Goblin Disease: Chronic** and **Miasma Poisoning: Chronic**, but now the latter had changed to **Miasma Poisoning: Mild**.

This was probably thanks to Princess Meetia's Breath of Purification.

According to some of my documents, Goblin Disease was a lifestyle disease brought on by vitamin deficiency, so it would be better treated by a change in diet than a cure-all from my Storage.

"Sir Pendragon, there are no words sufficient enough to express my gratitude to you for saving us the other day."

With that, the handsome young boy sitting next to Gerits stood and gave me a high-class noble's bow, prompting Gerits and the others to thank me one by one.

Normally, being children from upper-class noble families, they wouldn't need to be this polite to a lower-ranking noble like myself. A brief *Thanks for saving us* would have been more than enough.

It's possible that their parents put them up to it, but I decided to take this as a sign that they had simply been raised very well.

"You brought the pastries today, didn't you?"

"Yes, that's right."

Miss Gohna, who looked a good deal like her mother, requested more

pastries from one of the maids before turning a rather haughty gaze on me.

“They were rather delicious…”

A lady-in-waiting wiped away some crumbs from the corner of her lips, but she swatted the woman away impatiently and continued speaking.

“…so I’ll have your chef, thanks.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Goodness, you’re slow! I’m saying my family will employ your chef!”

What’s this kid’s problem?

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m afraid I cannot fulfill your request.”

“And why not?”

“Because I baked these *castellas* myself.”

Lulu had made half of them, but I didn’t want to mention that, lest it complicate the situation any further.

“H-how dare you lie t—”

“Lady Gohna.”

Gohna’s lady-in-waiting leaned in and whispered in her ear; I caught phrases like “Miracle Chef” and “your mother’s orders.”

“…I apologize for my rudeness. Please do me the great honor of forgetting what I just said.”

I was a little concerned about why Gohna had turned so pale, but it was clearly because of whatever her chaperone had said, so I simply nodded.

Her elder sister seemed to be a light eater, as she had finished only about half her pastry.

Still, she was focused on it intently as she lifted her fork. It must have been to her liking. Her manners reminded me of a cute, little animal.

“Sir Pendragon, did you bring that famous sword of yours today?” Gerits inquired.

“No, I…”

I was going to say that it seemed improper to bring a weapon to a tea party, but I swallowed those words when I noticed that he and his friends had put their swords on a side table next to the sofa.

“Awww. I was hoping to see it, since Princess Meetia said the mithril was ever so pretty…”

Mary-Ann looked disappointed, as did the boys.

“I promise to bring it to the next tea party, then.”

I made an empty promise in the hopes of cheering up the disappointed children.

On that subject, the kids convinced me to tell them tales of my labyrinth exploration.

“Are areamasters really that big?!”

“A-and you defeated one?!”

“Level thirty? I wouldn’t even be able to defeat its spawn.”

I stuck to the truth as much as I could but omitted certain details like the fact that I’d defeated several areamasters by now.

“Someday, I want to try to beat an areamaster and even a floormaster, too, like a real hero!” Gerits said dreamily.

“Don’t say you ‘want to,’ Gerits. Say you will!”

“C’mon—we’re not cut out for that…”

“Shut up, Luram! Don’t ruin our hopes and dreams!”

The young boys’ dreams for the future were so bright that I could barely look at them.

Since they were near the back of the inheritance line, they probably wanted to make names for themselves as explorers instead.

That said, they didn’t appear to have done much physical training, and only one of them had any magical abilities to speak of.

Just then, a piercing shriek rose from a table near the entrance.

“Sir Jelil!”

“You aren’t wearing your shining armor today, hmm?”

“Have you lost a bit of weight, good sir?”

It was Baronet Jelil, the garnet-badge explorer.

“I apologize for my lateness, Marchioness Ashinen.”

I guess he called the viceroy’s wife by her family name.

“It’s quite all right. How goes your conquest of the areamaster?”

“Thanks in no small part to your support, madam, we were able to defeat it just last night.”

Huh? Didn’t I see you getting ready to fight that thing more than a week ago?

But I appeared to be the only one with any such doubts.

“Already? That’s the Red Dragon’s Roar for you!”

“To think you were able to defeat it in less than a month!”

“Thank goodness he managed it without a scratch to that handsome face.”

The noblewomen chattered away.

“Sir Jelil is something, no? Let us go congratulate him, Sir Satou.”

Princess Meetia tugged my hand, leading me into the throng of young women.

Fortunately, the viceroy’s wife called me over, parting the crowd so that I didn’t suffer any incidents.

“Oh, hello again. Damn, it’s pretty impressive that you’ve already been invited to one of the marchioness’s famous tea parties.”

Mr. Jelil seemed to remember me and beckoned me over to sit next to him.

“Sir Jelil, hast thou brought thy mithril sword today?”

“A pleasure to see you again, Princess Meetia. Alas, it seems my swordsmanship was insufficient, as it broke in the battle against the areamaster.”

“What?! Even with thy skills, Sir Jelil? This areamaster must have had tough armor indeed, no?”

“Yes, even a sturdy mithril alloy war hammer was unable to dent it.”

That made sense for a beetle monster of around level 50.

High-level monsters also sometimes had multiple magic barriers around them, so they could easily be tougher than their appearances let on.

“But surely thou will challenge a floormaster next, no? Will thy new weapon be ready in time?”

“I will ask all my contacts, but it isn’t easy to come by a sword like…”

Jelil trailed off mid-sentence, looking at me.

You can’t have my fairy sword, okay?

I didn’t think he heard my thoughts, but he shook his head briefly and turned toward the viceroy’s wife.

“Marchioness, might I beg your assistance in procuring a new blade?”

“Yes, but of course. I believe Emma is in contact with some weapon merchants in the old capital, so I shall ask her whether she might be able to acquire a mithril or Magic Sword.”

She was referring to Emma Ritton, Count Ritton’s wife, who I’d heard was well-known among the high-class nobles of the old capital.

“Sir Satou, could thou not lend Sir Jelil that Flame Sword that Ravna is currently borrowing?” Meetia asked me quietly.

Come to think of it, the stern knight Lady Ravna still had the Magic Sword prototype I’d lent to her.

That was from my third round of Magic Sword–making, so I probably couldn’t give it away so easily.

“…A Flame Sword? I—I would love to see it!”

Somehow, the sharp-eared Mr. Jelil overheard her whisper and leaned in close.

“Is that all right with thee?”

I nodded, and Princess Meetia beckoned to her knight, who was standing by the wall.

The princess explained the situation, and the knight promptly handed me the sword, wrapped in cloth.

“I apologize for not returning it sooner, Sir Pendragon.”

“Will you be all right without a sword, though?”

“This may be but an iron sword, but it is still a treasured heirloom of my family.”

The knight showed me a one-handed sword hanging from her waist. Because of her sturdy build, I’d assumed it was just a dagger.

“A wonderful sword. I can tell it has a noble history.”

“Indeed. It may be a bit short, but four hundred years ago in the demi-human war, it once…”

I was certainly interested in the history of the sword, but this wasn’t the best time.

Mr. Jelil had been staring at the cloth-wrapped Magic Sword since the moment it appeared.

“Later, Ravna.”

“Ah! I do apologize.” She closed her mouth and took a step back.

“You’ll have to tell me all about it next time,” I reassured her. Then I unwrapped the sword and handed it to Mr. Jelil. “Please do take a look.”

“Bronze, is it…?” Unsheathing the sword, Jelil looked a little crestfallen.

Since it wasn’t coated in mithril, its cutting edge and physical attack were a tiny bit lacking.

“Do not let its appearance fool you,” Ravna the knight offered. “Try putting some magic into it.”

“Magic? …Good heavens!”

When Mr. Jelil passed magic through the sword, a faint light surrounded it, and then it began to produce flames.

“Kyaaaaah!”

“A flaming sword!”

The women around us shrieked in surprise.

“What incredible magic conduction…”

Mr. Jelil was so taken with the Magic Sword that he didn’t even seem to hear their cries.

As he muttered to himself, intensely shining “Spellblade” appeared around the sword.

“And it produces ‘Spellblade’ so easily…”

“You’ve noticed, then?” asked the knight.

“Yes, I feel power coursing through my body.” Jelil nodded.

This Magic Sword had several features besides the flame, like “Body Strengthening,” “Sharpblade,” and even the ability to provide the user with energy and stamina recovery.

“To think that the ancient Flue Empire made such an incredible sword!”

The handsome Mr. Jelil was monologuing like a hot-blooded protagonist.

The copper sword from the labyrinth that I’d used as a base certainly was from the Flue Empire era, but the rest of it was all my personal handiwork… But I couldn’t say that out loud, of course.

“Sir Pendragon! Could I persuade you to bequeath me this sword? I will gladly pay any price if you—”

“I’m terribly sorry, but I can’t part with that sword.”

I felt bad for not going with the flow here, but this sword was loaded with secret technology, so I couldn’t just sell it to someone else.

But Mr. Jelil evidently wasn’t going to give up that easily.

“Please, I beg you to reconsider!”

Well, this is a pickle.

“Sir Pendragon, could thou not simply lend it to him for the battle against the floormaster?”

Princess Meetia intervened with a compromise.

“Good idea. That would be all right with me. How about you, Sir Jelil?”

“B-but the floormaster will be terribly dangerous. Since I’m fighting on the front lines, there’s no guarantee that I’ll be able to return the sword intact…”

I didn’t really care if it broke or melted or whatever. I just didn’t want anyone to take it apart and try to figure out its secrets.

“That’s okay. Such is the nature of a sword.”

“But isn’t this sword important to you?”

“It is. Enough that I cannot think to sell it for money, at least.”

“Then why?”

Mr. Jelil didn’t seem to understand my values, so I used the “Fabrication” skill to come up with an explanation.

“If a sword breaks in battle, then that is its fate. Though I would hate to see it mishandled, if it was to break in the hands of a skilled swordsman such as yourself, then neither I nor the sword would complain. Please fight with it to the best of your ability and show the blade’s true worth.”

“Sir Pendragon, your appreciation for swords has truly moved me. I shall show you a battle worthy of this blade.”

…Wait, what?

“Please participate in our battle against the floormaster.”

“Ohhh! That would be amazing, no?”

Princess Meetia and the others all cheered at Jelil’s utterly insane proposal.

“Generally, we wouldn’t include a party that didn’t already participate in the battle against the areamaster, but allow me to invite you along this time as a temporary member of Red Dragon’s Roar.”

Hang on—don't look at me like you're treating me to some lavish feast.

Sure, it sounded fun to get front-row seats to a big battle, but if someone's life was in danger during the fight, I'd probably end up saving them and risk exposing myself in the process.

If somebody died far away, I could say *Must have been a difficult battle*, but I wasn't cold enough to just watch someone die in front of me.

Princess Meetia was gazing up at me with sparkling eyes, but I would have to decline.

"An incredibly tempting offer, but I would hate to cause any dissent in your group by receiving such special treatment. If you'll tell me the tale of the battle afterward, that would be more than enough."

"I—I see…"

Mr. Jelil looked let down, as if he hadn't expected me to refuse his offer.

I decided to throw him a bone. "For the time being, perhaps you could share the story of your battle against the areamaster?"

"If that is what you wish, I'd be happy to oblige."

With that, Mr. Jelil detailed their fight against the areamaster, starting with their preparations.

"Such a wonderful voice."

"It is as if we are on the battlefield with thee, no?"

Jelil was a natural storyteller; the tea party went wild for his tale as he artfully painted the scenes and emotions.

According to his story, they had fought a flying areamaster called an elder hard beetle by luring it into a passageway too small for it to spread its wings, then using Earth Magic to tip the floor in the passage so they could attack the weak point on its stomach.

They'd accomplished this by having a group of Earth Magic users construct the trap while the rest of them whittled down the other monsters.

It was a very plain strategy that never would have worked in a game, but it

was still much better than just attacking head-on and incurring a bunch of losses.

“I never knew you could defeat hard beetles like that!”

“I shall have to reassess my opinion of Earth Magic, no?”

Thanks to the expert spinning of the tale, Gerits, Princess Meetia, and the others all seemed very satisfied.

Gerits spent the rest of the tea party boasting, but it was still fun overall. Once the tea party was over, the viceroy’s wife invited me into a private living room.

“Are you quite tired?”

“No, I enjoyed myself very much. Thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear you had fun, then.”

The only people in the room were the viceroy’s wife, Baronet Dyukeli’s wife, a few other noblewomen, and me.

The viceroy appeared to be inspecting the site of the fire with the green-clad noble.

According to my map, he was actually in a high-class brothel of mostly male prostitutes, but I was sure I was just imagining that.

“Oh my, is that gelato?”

“And it’s grape flavored this time!”

The women were thrilled over the frozen dessert.

It had been hot lately, so I was glad to see it, too.

The viceroy’s wife encouraged me to take a bite, and the cool, elegantly sweet taste melted in my mouth.

“Frozen treats are the perfect thing for a hot day like this.”

After saying that, I felt a little self-conscious about my own choice of pastries.

Next time, I would have to bring ice cream or something instead.

“Oh-ho, even gelato is no great surprise to you, Sir Pendragon.”

The viceroy's wife smiled, though she looked faintly vexed.

Her expression reminded me of the time I'd eaten malt syrup candy with Zena, the magic soldier, in Seiryuu City.

I haven't grown at all. I was supposed to act all surprised here, wasn't I?

"Sir Pendragon, do you have a refrigerating magic tool at your mansion, too?"

"I expected no less of the Miracle Chef."

Though some of the nobles in Labyrinth City had cold storage, few seemed to have a refrigerating magic tool.

Ice stones were very valuable, so it was probably considered too wasteful.

In my case, we were able to simply use my Freeze Water spell, reducing the amount of waste.

"Incidentally, how goes your welfare work?"

"Quite well, thank you. A great deal of people came to the soup kitchen, and we've begun remodeling the private orphanage. I plan to interview some caretakers very soon."

I appreciated the viceroy's wife's concern, and I gave her a full report.

"I see… If you were short on hands, I would gladly provide some of my servants, but it seems that won't be necessary."

Again, she looked a little disappointed.

She'd already given me permission for these things right away and even provided supplies for the soup kitchen. I felt like asking for anything more would be imposing too much.

At the moment, my companions and I were the ones acquiring the potatoes and beans, but if we could outsource that work, then I could probably entrust the rest to our maids, hire some local housewives as part-timers, and so on.

Hopefully, that would mean that the girls and I could go back to exploring the labyrinth and doing as we pleased.

"You've already given us more than enough support."

“Well, if you need anything else, do let me know.”

“Thank you. I will.”

I bowed my head, grateful to have such a dependable backer.

After that, I enjoyed chatting with the viceroy’s wife and her friends for a while before taking my leave.

An attendant guided me to the room where Lulu was waiting.

“Master!”

Lulu and the maids of the house all greeted me brightly.

“I’ll prepare the carriage right away.”

“Great, thanks. Want to say good-bye to these ladies before we go?”

“Thank you, sir!”

Judging by Lulu’s expression, she and the maids had become quite friendly.

“Sir Knight, thank you for the wonderful pastries.”

“They were delicious, sir!”

“The honey was so pretty, it felt a shame to eat it.”

The maids all smiled as they shared their thoughts.

The honey pastries Lulu had been making before we left were specifically for the maids.

Like in the old capital, the servant network here seemed to be pretty extensive, so we loaded these honey pastries with high-quality sugar and honey as a sort of prior investment.

We’d done this instead of *castellas* because Arisa advised that there should be a difference between the employees and the employers.

“I’m glad you liked them. Should your paths ever cross, I hope you’ll treat our maids well.”

“Yes, of course!”

I would have to bring them another round of tasty sweets next time we came.

I waved to the maids as they gathered to see us off, and we left the viceroy’s mansion behind.

Peaceful Daily Life

Satou here. I've had part-time and full-time jobs before, but I didn't have any experience employing others. Hiring just a few people is one thing, but the bigger the staff, the more complicated it gets.

"I'm Rosie."

"I'm Annie."

"Together, they're Rosannie!"

The two new maids introduced themselves nervously, and Arisa threw in an old-timey joke.

"A-Arisa, stop!"

"Don't be mean, Arisa!"

"Tee-hee, sorry, I just thought I'd lighten the mood…"

The two girls flailed at Arisa tearfully, so I bopped her lightly on the head with a fist.

"Gyaaaah!"

Arisa fell to the floor dramatically, but I ignored her display. "Sorry about her," I said to the maids.

"Oh, there's no need for you to apologize for her, mister."

"Yes, of course not, sir."

"Good heavens. Remember your place, you two." Miss Miteruna rapped the girls on the head with her knuckles. "You are to call her 'Lady Arisa' or 'Mistress Arisa' and call Sir Knight 'young master.'"

"Yes, Miss Miteruna."

This response earned them another rap on the head.

“And you are to call me ‘madam.’”

“Yes, madam!”

Miss Miteruna seemed to be a pretty tough boss.

Peering through the doorway, the other young maids looked at Rosie and Annie sympathetically.

“Well anyway, I look forward to working with you,” I said lightly.

“Yes, young master! We’ll learn to cook delicious food with Lulu—I mean, with Lady Lulu teaching us!”

“Yes, I’ll become a chef almost as good as Lady Lulu!”

The new maids clenched their fists passionately.

“Great. I’m looking forward to eating your food. Lulu, take good care of them, okay?”

“Yes, master.”

I felt bad delegating the work to Lulu, but she seemed excited, too.

◆

“What have you been doing since this afternoon?”

As we ate dinner, I asked the girls about their day.

“Trainiiiing?”

“We practiced swinging and rock dodging in a field, sir.”

Tama and Pochi waved their forks and tails excitedly as they responded.

“Do not worry, master. I ensured that they concealed their rare skills such as ‘Spellblade’ and ‘Blink.’”

With that amendment, Liza scolded the two gently for their manners.

Glancing back at them, I saw that Tama and Pochi were looking at me expectantly, so I complimented them on a job well done.

“We’ll work even harder tomorrow, sir!”

“Aye!”

They looked like they were raring to go, but I wished they would play once in a while, too.

“After we went to pick up Rosannie, I designed a uniform for the orphanage kids. Shorts!” Arisa added proudly.

Why are you looking at me like you did the hardest job of all?

“Mia and I went to select instruments for use at the orphanage, I report.”

“Mm. Harps and xylophones.”

“They didn’t have any pianos?”

I felt like an orphanage should have a piano or organ, like a kindergarten or grade school music class.

“Mrrr?”

Mia tilted her head.

“Maybe there are no pianos in this world?” Arisa suggested.

Sure enough, I didn’t find anything like it in my Storage.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen any piano-like instruments in any of the nobles’ homes during my old capital tea party marathon, either.

Hmm?

For some reason, the word *organ* did bring up a match.

A pipe organ, no less.

It was mentioned in the notes I’d picked up at the dark auction in the old capital. However, it only vaguely outlined the mechanics and didn’t include any detailed schematics.

Unfortunately, it would be impossible to make one with such little information. *I wish they’d included a guide to making a regular piano.*

“Wow, so you made friends with the maids at the viceroy’s castle, Lulu?”

“Uh-huh. They were all very nice.”

Lulu was normally very proper, but she took on a relaxed older-sister persona when she conversed with Arisa.

“What were their uniforms like?”

“Normal dresses with an apron, I think…”

Arisa’s eyes glittered. “We’ll have to spread the good word of maid outfits here, too, then! Don’t you agree, master?” “I suppose so.”

“While we’re at it, I’ll start some new bra and underwear trends, too.”

“Just don’t go crazy.”

I didn’t want Arisa to go causing some cultural revolution.

Although I’d admit that I’d prefer some more modern undies to the rather unsexy kind worn here, too.

◆

“Are you quite certain it’s all right for me to choose the staff myself?”

“Yes, of course.”

The next day, once the morning’s soup kitchen was finished, I was in the parlor of the mansion meeting with an elderly lady Miss Miteruna had introduced me to.

She was interviewing for the position of director at our new private orphanage.

Our conversation showed that she was composed and cultured and seemed free of prejudice, since she showed no reaction to the demi-humans Tama and Pochi, so I hired her on the spot.

Now I was dumping on her the task of hiring the rest of the orphanage staff.

“That’s a serious responsibility…”

“It’s all right. I’m sure you can do it.” I tried to ease the concerns of the new director, who looked a little overwhelmed.

“But to allow me to determine the budget as well as the hiring practices is so…”

“Don’t worry. You’ll keep obligatory records in a ledger, there will be audits, and we’ll come for observation a few times a year.”

Arisa chimed in next to me, like a competent secretary.

For some reason, she was wearing triangular glasses on a little chain and carrying a binder full of files, looking sort of like a cosplayer.

“Audits and observations?”

“Yes, it’s standard practice where I come from.”

The director looked uncomfortable.

“Please do not misunderstand. We are not taking these actions out of any distrust or doubts.”

“Then what are they for?”

“We trust you, you see, Director.” Arisa looked serious. “But others who do not know you may not. Thus, we take these actions so that we can prove to those outside the orphanage that no wrongdoings are going on within.”

“I see.”

She had really only rephrased the same information, but the director seemed to accept Arisa’s explanation.

“Well then, until the construction is complete, I shall seek some permanent employees and a few subordinate workers.”

“Thank you. Please do.”

I gave her some money to cover her preparatory costs, and the interview ended.

On the way back to town, I showed her the construction site and introduced her to the head carpenters, so I could probably entrust those meetings to her in the future, too.

◆

“There weren’t that many children today.”

As we headed home from the morning soup kitchen the next day, Arisa made this comment.

“It was probably because of him.”

“You think so, too, master?”

For some reason, the green-clad noble had come to help with the soup kitchen today.

All he actually did was stand around in the staff area and smile at people, but some of the children had looked repulsed and gone home when they saw him.

His creepy smile and makeup had probably scared them off.

“Are you on close terms with that fellow, master?” Lulu asked.

“No, if anything, I think I’d rather avoid him…”

“We should chase him off, then!”

“I agree with Arisa, I declare. That individual’s presence causes the larvae to shrivel, reducing their cuteness points, I report.”

Even Nana was in favor of getting rid of the green-clad noble.

“All right. I’ll figure something out.”

Of course, the counselor was a higher-ranking noble than I was, so I couldn’t just flat-out reject him.

Besides, I was kind of curious what had motivated him to come in the first place.

“The viceroy’s wife is having another tea party two days from now, so I’ll see if she can mediate for me then,” I said.

Arisa and Nana looked relieved at that.

Oh right…

“I have a request for you two, as well, if you don’t mind.”

“Night services?”

“No.”

I’m not interested in receiving those from a little girl.

“I was hoping you could talk to some of the housewives in the neighborhood and see if they’d be interested in taking on a bit of part-time work at the soup kitchen.”

“Okey-dokey!”

“Yes, master.”

The green-clad noble’s supposed reason for coming to help was that we seemed short-staffed; I figured it would help to remove that excuse.

“How many should we hire?”

“Let’s see. We can probably pay about three copper coins per person per day, so maybe five… No, enough to fill the staff area to bursting would be even better.”

“Oh yeah? I’d say we could go up to fifteen, then.”

With that, Arisa and Nana left the mansion.

“Plans?”

“Let me think…”

Since Mia wanted to help out, I thought for a moment.

“Could you take Tama and Pochi out to explore around the mansion, then?”

“Mm.”

If I left the beastfolk girls to their own devices, they’d just start training again, so I decided to send them out to play under the pretense of guarding Mia.

“Liza and Lulu, I’ll have you run some errands in town, please.”

“Of course, sir.”

“What would you like us to buy?”

“As many varieties of leafy and root vegetables as you can find. If you could investigate some market prices, too, I’d appreciate it.”

I wanted to gather information about food supplies for the orphanage and the soup kitchen.

I handed Liza a pouch filled with copper coins.

“You can buy something to eat for yourselves, too, if you like.”

“What? But…”

“Just to research different flavors. If you want to be a better chef, you’ve got to investigate local cuisine and spices.”

With that arbitrary excuse, I gave Lulu a gentle prod.

If I didn’t give them a good reason, the modest Lulu and Liza would never spend money on themselves.

If it was up to me, I’d let them go out shopping and dining as much as they wanted.

“Oh, I know. Could you investigate some meat dishes as well as vegetables?”

“As you wish, sir.”

Liza’s expression was serious, but her voice was a little higher than usual. I pretended not to notice that her orange-scaled tail was beating against the floor with excitement.

Once the two of them had happily set out, I headed into the study to teleport to the Ivy Manor.

◆

“Lelillil, how is everyone doing?”

I’d come to the Ivy Manor to check on the girls who had been mortally wounded in the fire.

“They’re still sleeping, sir.”

“Still?”

Lelillil led me to the guest room, where the five girls had the **Sleep** condition.

“Yes, I’ve used the House Magic spell Sleeping Powder so that outside noise won’t wake them.”

Now, there’s a spell straight out of a fairy tale.

“Shall I wake them, sir?”

“No, I’ve got some business to take care of first.”

Lelillil and I headed into the basement laboratory.

I wanted to make a mask for my Kuro identity.

Of course, it wouldn't be a literal mask. There would be no point in hiding my face with a similar mask to Nanashi the Hero's when I was going under a different fake name, so I thought I would make a magical Disguise mask with the information I'd found while I was healing Tifaleeza and Neru.

"Lelillil, fill a cultivation tank with liquid, please."

"Of course, sir!"

Lelillil briskly set about preparing while I readied the equipment to match the instructions in Storage.

"Lord Satou, would you mind terribly if I was to inquire what you might be making today?"

Lelillil was being weirdly polite these days.

"A living mask for a disguise."

It was the kind of mask you could peel off, like the ones often seen in mystery stories.

The elves also had a recipe for a magic tool called a Face Disguise, but it looked like a pain to make, and my Light Magic spell Illusion could accomplish the same thing, so I'd chosen the simpler option this time.

A clichéd disguise like this had a certain appeal, too.

Today, I planned to make a disguise for Kuro and another one to wear under Nanashi's mask. The latter was intended to mislead anyone who suspected that I might be Nanashi by giving him different facial features.

"Lord Satou, there's been a change in the cultivation tank."

A white film had formed inside the tank to serve as the base for the Disguise mask.

"Hmm, this is tough. It's like trying to make a face texture in a 3-D CG program…"

As I muttered to myself, I realized that I didn't necessarily have to use the machine's settings.

Instead, I used Magic Hand to shape the mask into a face as if sculpting with

clay.

“Maybe I should give Nanashi a woman’s face?”

I automatically started thinking of my friends and acquaintances, but I shouldn’t use a real person’s face as the base for this.

It’d cause trouble for that person if I was out there wearing their face as Nanashi the Hero.

No, I should use the face of someone who definitely didn’t exist in this world.

So I based Nanashi’s face on that of someone I knew in my old world—someone I knew well enough to picture even if I hadn’t seen their face in a long time.

“…Oops. I may have made her a bit too pretty.”

I’d used the face of my childhood friend, but it came out probably around three times cuter than the real thing.

Well, that would probably be fine for Nanashi’s face.

“I’ll give Kuro a man’s face.”

Since it was supposed to be a disguise and all, maybe I should make a super-macho face that was nothing like my own?

I pictured a Hollywood action star as I made the second mask.

Important characters have to have distinguishing features!

That’s what Mr. Tubs, the director-planner at my job in my original world, was always shouting at the designers.

He’d said it was easier for actors to remember characters if they had noticeable traits to associate with them.

“Distinguishing features, huh…?”

I decided to fall back on some old clichés, like heterochromia and a scar on one cheek.

“Maybe I’ll make his hair and eyebrows an unusual color, too?”

Muttering aloud as I worked, I came up with a pretty good disguise, no less

unnatural than special-effects makeup from a movie.

While I was at it, I used the hair I'd cut off Tifaleeza to make a white wig.

Then I made red and blue contacts out of colored glass, resulting in a look akin to old-school 3-D glasses.

"All right. That's pretty distinguishing."

Trying it on, I thought the end result looked pretty good.

Then I made a masquerade-style mask to cover the top half of my face, ensuring that the cheek scar was still visible below.

This way, instead of showing the whole face from the get-go, just allowing glimpses under the mask would already give the impression that I was someone other than Satou. Then people would already be imagining a different face when they saw it.

However, when I looked at the result in the mirror, something felt off.

"It's rather different-looking from the people of this nation, isn't it?" Lelillil inquired.

"Yes, it's based on someone from my homeland." I frowned, trying to figure out the cause of the strangeness. "Maybe I need more height and broader shoulders?"

I was pretty slender for a man, so my body didn't match up with the face of a foreign actor.

Well, some shoulder pads and six-inch platform shoes oughtta cover for that.

With that, I'd settled on Kuro's default style.

When I was disguised as Kuro, I figured I would model my voice and personality after an assassin the actor in question had played. If I remembered right, he was a brusque, arrogant character.

That was a little more basic than I intended, but I could always get some pointers from the expert cosplayer Arisa later.

Checking my log, I found that I'd acquired some new skills and titles.

> Skill Acquired: "Masquerade"

> Title Acquired: Mystery Man

> Title Acquired: Master of Disguise

It seemed a little late for the “Masquerade” skill at this point, but making the masks must have been what satisfied the requirements.

Regardless, it’d probably come in handy, so I put the max amount of skill points into it and activated it right away.

◆

“Now, Lelillil.”

Once I’d finished getting dressed up as Kuro, I decided to see how the burn victims were doing, since that was why I had come to the Ivy Manor.

“Right away, sir. ■ ***Wake Up*** *Kakusei.*”

Lelillil broke the House Magic spell, and the girls awoke at once.

“Wh-where are we?”

“What happened?”

“There was…a fire…wasn’t there?”

The girls patted their faces and peered under their clothes, checking their skin for burns.

Only the redheaded Neru and the silver-haired beauty Tifaleeza remained motionless, staring blankly at the ceiling without bothering to check on their bodies, since they’d had serious burns to begin with.

Their eyes looked glazed over, as if they’d given up on life.

“I can…see?”

Finally, Tifaleeza slowly reached up and put a hand over her right eye.

The light slowly began to return to her face.

“What’s going on?”

“See for yourself.”

I placed a hand mirror in front of them. They looked reluctant for a moment,

then their eyes widened as they saw their reflections.

Once they'd patted their hair and faces, they quickly threw aside the blankets that covered them and pulled off their clothes.

Beautiful.

Even though I was accustomed to seeing the peerless beauty known as Lulu, I was enraptured by their immaculate bare skin.

My heart already belonged to Miss Aaze in Bolenan Forest, but if this had been before I'd met her, and Tifaleeza were a bit older, I might have fallen for her in a second.

"Tifa?"

Neru stared at Tifaleeza in shock, so I handed her another mirror.

"N-n-n-n-n-no way! You're tellin' me those burns of yours healed *just like that*?!"

The young redhead, Neru, spoke surprisingly like a street thug.

Part of her hair stuck straight up, as if to express her surprise.

On an anime character (usually a slow-witted one), you'd call it an *ahoge*. At any rate, it suited her alarmingly well.

"Whooooooooa, you gotta be kidding me! My body's healed up, too, y'know!"

Casting off her clothes, she exclaimed in shock as she looked at her own skin.

Why do you need to take all *of it off?*

As the buck naked Neru set about checking every square inch of her body for burns, I turned around and looked away.

Unfortunately, that put the equally naked Tifaleeza back in view.

There was bare flesh every which way I looked, so I decided to wait in the hallway until they relaxed.

"Calm down already, damn it! …If you please."

After a while, I heard Lelillil shouting inside the room.

She must have gotten tired of waiting.

“How long are you going to make Lord Kuro wait? After he used all those valuable potions to heal your sorry asses! Erm, young ladies.”

Fortunately, she seemed to have remembered to refer to me as Kuro in front of these young women.

Once Lelillil called for me, I came back into the room.

…Huh?

For some reason, the girls were all prostrate on the floor.

“““Thank you so much, Lord Kuro!”””

Well, I guess Lelillil had mentioned that I’d healed everyone.

“Are you ladies feeling okay?”

The girls all raised their heads and nodded frantically.

“Your master seems to have died. If you have somewhere to go home to, I’ll take you there.”

At this, they looked at one another but didn’t respond.

Technically, since slaves were considered property here, their master’s next of kin might have the right to inherit them, but after their narrow brush with death, I doubted there would be any punishment for setting them free.

Of course, if someone did come forward to claim them, I would just pay them off myself.

“What’s wrong?”

Touching their own skin and the beds around them as if checking for something, the young ladies continued to exchange glances silently.

Finally, one of them worked up the courage to throw herself back on the floor and shout.

“I—I have the ‘Analyze’ skill, sir. Please allow me to be your slave—I promise to be of use to you.”

“I—I only have the ‘Sewing’ skill, but I’ll do anything you want. Please make me your slave.”

“I can read and write! I can do math, too! So please allow me to serve you, master.”

The other two girls followed suit, asking me to make them my slaves.

“They’re all desperate to impose on your goodwill, sir.”

At Lelillil’s scornful comment, I understood their reasoning.

I sympathized with the girls’ plight, and I would be happy to help them get back on their feet as commoners, but I certainly didn’t need any more slaves.

“““P-please, master!”””

“I don’t need slaves.”

At that, the three girls all hung their heads.

“You two aren’t going to beg, whelp—erm, young ladies?”

“Slave or not, Lord Kuro, I swear I’ll pay ya back for healin’ me.”

Judging by her dramatic reaction to her burns being healed, my guess that Neru’s burns predated the recent fire must have been correct.

“I know my face and body ain’t all that, so I dunno if I could satisfy ya as far as services of the night go, but I can do Everyday Magic, y’know! I swear I’ll be useful to ya!”

Everyday Magic certainly is handy.

Neru’s level was in the single digits, which meant she probably didn’t have much magic capacity, but surely she could eke out a living without having to become anyone’s slave.

“Me too. I was a secretary at the castle in Lessau County. My only skills are ‘Heraldry’ and ‘Name Order,’ so that might not be of much use, but I’ll gladly take care of any filing and accounting. I promise to work three times harder than anyone else.”

Tifaleeza sounded like a bit of a workaholic.

More importantly, though—the “Name Order” skill?

Perfect timing. She could help me out with a few things.

“Tifaleeza, was it? I do have a bit of work for you, actually. I’ll send Lelillil to fetch you and bring you to my private room later.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Tifaleeza nodded nervously.

“It’s the face, isn’t it?” Neru grumbled quietly.

She was off the mark, though. My interest was solely in having Tifaleeza use her “Name Order” skill to put some pseudonyms on things.

“I’ll let you girls stay here awhile. If you don’t have any leads for jobs, tell Lelillil what you’re interested in doing later. I’ll see what I can find for you.”

It wouldn’t sit well with my conscience to send them out into the world only to have them end up selling themselves, so I didn’t mind helping them find new work.

“Wait a minute, Lord Kuro, if ya don’t mind.” Neru held up a hand. “Me and Tifa are criminal slaves. Unless we get the king’s pardon or something, we can’t be set free. If ya send us away, we’ll probably hafta serve as coal miner slaves day and night, y’know.”

Tears filled Neru’s eyes; Tifaleeza looked pale, too.

“Criminal slaves? What did you young whelps do?” Lelillil asked.

“We just rejected a lord who got a little too handsy, that’s all.”

“I wouldn’t call a man who barged into the baths, used drugs to incapacitate girls, and forced them to do things they didn’t want to do ‘a little too handsy.’”

According to the two of them, they had rejected Count Lessau’s sexual harassment, which resulted in them receiving Treachery Brands on their backs and becoming slaves.

“That pervy bastard burned my and Tifa’s bodies while he was branding us, too,” Neru said distantly.

The idea that a feudal lord would burn young girls just for rejecting his advances was horrifying.

If that was the sort of thing that went on in Lessau County, we’d have to stay

far away.

“Sounds like you had it pretty rough…”

I remembered the burn scars that had covered Tifaleeza’s body.

At times like this, I was ashamed that I didn’t have the vocabulary to produce better words of comfort.

Noticing my gaze, Tifaleeza clarified with cold eyes.

“No, I already had burns before that happened. When I was a child, my stepmother said she didn’t like the vacant look on my face, and she burned me.”

Tifaleeza seemed to be a deeply unlucky young woman.

“I see. Well, I hope you find happiness from now on to make up for all that misfortune.”

Now that I had healed her, she would have no shortage of suitors, so surely she’d be able to find a suitable person to marry.

“…Thank you.”

I patted Tifaleeza’s head gently, then left the room.

I’d intended to have her use the “Name Order” skill for me immediately, but I didn’t want to put her to work right after forcing her to recall her difficult past. It could wait until that night.

For now, I decided to consult with a man-about-town in the downtown area and see if I could find someone to take the girls in.

If they did, I’d have to bargain with them to make sure the young women were legally freed.

“Take care of them for me, please.”

“Yes, Lord Kuro.”

With that, I went into town disguised as Kuro.

◆

Now, how exactly do you find a man-about-town?

I'd made it to downtown, at least, but I probably should have gone into this with more of a plan.

"Yo, fella with the white hair, never seen you round these parts before. Got some business here?"

The punk who came up to me looked familiar.

It was the man who'd claimed to be in charge of things around here during that fire incident.

"Skopi of the Mud Scorpions, was it? I've got a question for you."

"Hunh? Don't just go throwing my name around! I've never met you in my life, asshole!"

Oops, that's right. I wasn't wearing this disguise when I met him.

Producing a pouch of coins from my breast pocket, I tossed it to the man.

"That's a fat chunk of change… Whaddaya want?"

"I need information."

"Information?"

"Yeah. I'm looking for someone."

I asked about the girls' former master, using the details they'd shared with me.

"Sorry. That guy's dead."

"Do you know if he had any family?"

"What, he owe you money or somethin'?"

"No, the opposite. I owe him a debt. If he has family, I'd like to pay them instead."

I went with this story so that he wouldn't try to protect their information.

"If I'm not wrong, he didn't even have any friends or lovers, never mind family."

"I see…"

If there was no one to inherit his former slaves, then my work here was done.

I started to turn to leave, but then Skopi said something that caught my attention.

“’Sides, even if he did have family, they’d never show their faces.”

“What do you mean?”

“’Cause he’s the one who started that fire.”

Well, that was unexpected.

“I thought he was a slave trader?”

“Technically, he ran a general store. But really, he was just a dumbass who only had eyes for money.”

According to Skopi, Mr. Dumbass had come up with a new money-making scheme: raising oil slimes on garbage scraps, only to accidentally cause a fire with them.

The theory behind the scheme was sound enough, but attempting it in a downtown area full of easily flammable buildings showed something of a lack of foresight.

“Well, this is for his funeral. Give the rest to the families of the other fire victims, yeah?”

I produced a bag of around fifty gold coins from the Item Box and tossed it to Skopi.

Technically there was no reason for me to give money in place of Mr. Dumbass, but I sort of felt as if I’d stolen the slave girls from him, so I gave an amount to match their value.

Because I was doing it only for my own satisfaction, I didn’t really intend to investigate whether Skopi actually distributed the money as I’d asked.

Peering inside the bag, Skopi let out a low whistle.

“Good-bye.”

Without further ado, I left the area.

◆

“We explored lots and lots today, sir!”

“And drew pictuuures?”

As we ate our dinner of meat and potatoes, Tama, Pochi, and Mia told me about their exploration of the land near the house.

Tama had even produced a sort of sightseeing map of the area.

Her art had gotten even better than before, easily on par with a professional.

“This is very good. Great job, Tama.”

“Nee-hee-hee…?”

Seeing Tama get patted on the head seemed to spark Pochi’s competitive side; she started rummaging through the Fairy Pack hanging off her chair.

“I got you this, and this, and this, sir.”

She pulled out an assortment of unusual acorns, pretty rocks, and so on, lining them up on the table.

“Pochi, we’re in the middle of a meal. You can give out gifts after we’ve finished eating.”

“…Yes, sir.” At Liza’s gentle admonition, Pochi reluctantly put the items back in her bag. “Food is important, sir.”

“Oui, oui!”

With their beloved forks and spoons in hand, Pochi and Tama dug into the meal.

There was an incredible variety of meat-and-potato dishes lined up on the table, probably as part of Rosie and Annie’s training.

Aside from the konjak variation, they had all been made using ingredients straight from Labyrinth City.

This included plenty of Celivera beef purchased from the ranch next door, so there was enough to satisfy even the carnivorous beastfolk girls.

“Yummy.”

Once the beastfolk girls had eaten all the meat for her, Mia munched away

happily on the potatoes, carrots, and konjak.

She seemed to be hungrier than usual today, perhaps because of all the exploring with Pochi and Tama.

“Did you have fun, too, Mia?”

“Mm. Concert.”

“Mia played music next to a lake, and a bunch of grannies and grampies came to listen, sir.”

“Gave us snaaacks?”

Checking the map, I found that there was a small reservoir near the farmland, which was probably the place in question.

It sounded like they’d befriended some locals in addition to their exploring.

“What about you, Lulu? Did you find any interesting ingredients?”

“Oh yes!” Lulu nodded with a sparkling smile. “I tried using it for our dessert.”

“Dessert” turned out to be yogurt topped with something that resembled raisins.

“Are these dates?”

Arisa was able to identify them with a single bite.

“They’re called dates? The merchant called them *natsumeyashi*…”

“Either way is correct. Dates are the fruit of the *natsumeyashi* tree.”

The sweetness of the dates paired well with the faintly sour yogurt. They would probably be tasty raw, too, or as a snack with alcohol.

Evidently, dates were hard to come by here, as explorers tended to buy them up despite their high price.

What’s more, they were delivered only by “desert people” who came through a desert west of Labyrinth City to sell them, so they were on the market only a few times a month.

After we’d enjoyed our dessert, I went to the storehouse to check out the spoils of Lulu’s and Liza’s hard work.

“There were many unusual vegetables, as well.”

Lulu had bought things like white carrots and purple lotus roots.

“There were many restaurants selling stir-fried vegetables cooked with garlic sprouts and chives.”

“And many meat dishes, as well.”

Next, they showed me the meat they’d purchased.

“This certainly is a lot of variety.”

“We didn’t even buy all the options available!”

Lulu wore an expression of disbelief. Apparently, there was quite a wide array of meat in Labyrinth City.

“Satou, miasma.” Mia tugged on my sleeve.

“…You’re right.”

Sure enough, there was miasma clinging to the meat Lulu and Liza had purchased.

I’d seen it on the snacks being sold at stalls around the city, too; it seemed like the butchers in Labyrinth City weren’t particularly wary of miasma.

“What? Oh no, did we buy something that’s not safe to eat?”

“I am terribly sorry, master. We selected only the most delicious products from our taste testing, so I never suspected such a thing…”

“No, no, it’s not a big deal.” I reassured the panicked Lulu and apologetic Liza. “It might have had some side effects if we continued eating it for a long time, but generally, it’s only a concern for the sick or feeble.”

Maybe the reason so many people in Labyrinth City had miasma poisoning was that the monster meat wasn’t purified properly.

It might be worth mentioning to the viceroy’s wife at the next tea party.

“Does miasma make it tasty, sir?”

“Reallyyy?”

Pochi and Tama looked at Liza questioningly.

Liza looked puzzled. “I’m not certain about that, but all these meats were certainly delicious.”

Hmm. I guess I never considered whether it affected the flavor.

“Let’s test it out, shall we?”

I cut off two slices each of five different kinds of meat, used a Holy Stone to remove the miasma from half of them, and grilled them up with a cooking magic tool.

They would’ve tasted better cooked over charcoal, but that would’ve been a pain to set up, so I decided to take the easy route.

“Smells gooood?”

“Meat is still the best, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were presumably still stuffed from dinner, but the smell of meat cooking made them drool anyway.

I could give them some miasma-free meat later, I decided.

“Wait! Sir.”

As I was about to put the meat in my mouth, Pochi stopped me.

Did she want to eat it that badly?

“Poisooon?”

“We have to make sure you’re safe, sir.”

Tama and Pochi nodded seriously.

Miasma isn’t really poison per se, but… Well, all right.

“I’ll have you two test it for me, then.”

“Aye-aaaye!”

“Yes, sir.”

Tama and Pochi grinned and chomped into the meat.

As they chewed, Pochi’s tail whipped back and forth rhythmically, and Tama’s cat tail undulated in the air.

They seemed to have completely forgotten about the poison testing. Noticing my amused expression, Pochi quickly cleared her throat and said, “I-it’s not like that, sir!”

“Well, we know it’s safe now, thanks to your noble sacrifice, so why don’t we all taste it together?”

I started grilling up enough meat for everyone else.

I could always just purify the miasma afterward. As long as I did it before the meat started digesting, it shouldn’t be a problem.

As far as the taste went…

“They pretty much seem the same to me.”

“Really? The kind with miasma is a little tougher, and I detect a note of bitterness, almost.”

I couldn’t tell the difference, but our resident chef Lulu certainly could.

“Bitter but powerfuuul?”

“It’s a little tough, but it feels like it’s making me stronger, sir.”

“I don’t taste any bitterness, but I do sense some degree of power rising within me, as Pochi said.”

The beastfolk girls all had their own preferences, too.

“Wow, it actually is increasing my stats.”

Checking her own status, Arisa confirmed the beastfolk girls’ suspicions.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Not as much as ‘Body Strengthening’ from magic or a skill, but still, it’s there.”

Well, it didn’t taste any better, and the increase in power seemed to be only slight, so it probably wasn’t worth risking the danger of eating it.

When we had the deep-fried-whale festival in the old capital, I remembered Arisa saying that her strength and stamina had temporarily gone up by a full 10 percent for a while after she ate it.

As far as raising stats, whale meat might be the way to go.

I used a Holy Stone to purify the miasma from the rest of the meat, then put it away in the refrigerator to eat the following evening.

Of course, I also had everyone who'd eaten the miasma meat stand in the blue light of a Holy Stone afterward.

"Arisa, were you able to hire the part-timers?"

Once we reconvened with Mia and Nana and retired to the living room to relax, I asked Arisa how her employee hunt had gone.

"Yup, I hired plenty. Seventeen people for two copper coins each."

It was more people than I'd expected, but that was no problem.

"Our neighbor said she could make announcements and gather people into lines, so I figured we could pay her one large copper coin."

"All right, sounds good."

It would be nice to have someone else keeping things organized.

"Master." Nana trotted over to me. "I received information about larvae production from the housewives, I report."

I have a bad feeling about this.

"According to my findings, it involves sharing a bed in the nude—"

"Not a chance!"

"Mm, forbidden."

Nana started to lift the hem of her dress, but Arisa and Mia grabbed her arms in a flash.

Thanks to the iron-wall pair's efforts, all I saw was a glimpse of Nana's belly.

"Why do you intervene? I inquire."

"You mustn't do that before marriage! It's disgraceful, you know. You're not married to Satou, so you mustn't have children with him. Understood? You do understand, right? So no seducing, okay? You have to promise!"

Mia was in such a state that she went into one of her rare lengthy rants.

“Master, do you not want me to bear your child? I inquire.” Nana’s face was expressionless as always, but her voice had taken on a strangely sexy tone.

Now, that was a difficult question to answer.

I would never even think of her as someone to have children with, but even Nana’s feelings would be hurt if I said that so bluntly, so I had to come up with a better way to phrase it.

“I’ve got first dibs! And Lulu has dibs even before me!”

“O-oh, Arisa…”

“Mrrr. Fiancé. Parents approved.”

Arisa’s interference made Lulu turn bright red, and Mia narrowed her eyes in opposition.

“Tama, toooo?”

“Pochi, too, sir!”

Tama and Pochi joined in, too, but they probably didn’t really understand what was going on.

I decided to use this distraction to delicately change the subject.

“Nana, there’s no need for all that. There will be plenty of children at the orphanage soon enough.”

“Master! How many days is ‘soon enough’? I inquire!”

Nana took the bait.

“Well, the building will be done in about a trimoon—ten days—so I imagine we’ll start taking in children a few days after that.”

At that, Nana fell into a stunned silence.

Apparently, this was a longer wait than she’d expected.

“Don’t worry—they’ll be here before you know it.”

“Yes, master.”

I patted Nana’s shoulder comfortingly, then told everyone to take a bath.

“Oh? What about you, master?”

“I still have some business to attend to, so I’ll just clean up with Everyday Magic.”

“Awww…”

Ignoring Arisa’s disappointment, I headed to the study.

◆

“Hmm. It’s a little later than I had planned.”

Disguised as Kuro, I returned to the Ivy Manor and headed toward the private room-slash-study I’d had prepared for me.

On the way to the room, I asked Lelillil to get Tifaleeza for me.

“What’s this?”

For some reason, all the lights in the room were off except the footlights.

Between the light of the full moon from the window and my “Night Vision” skill, however, I could still see perfectly.

That said, it would probably frighten Tifaleeza if all the lights were off when she came to my room, so I opened my magic menu to activate Mana Light.

“…Lord Kuro.”

I paused mid-menu and looked to the door, where Tifaleeza had entered.

“Sorry it got so late. I know I said I’d call for you after—”

…Huh?

For some reason, Tifaleeza was clad in some skimpy negligee.

Worse, she didn’t seem to be wearing underwear.

As the door closed behind her, I heard Neru whisper, “You got this, Tifa!”

My vague phrasing appeared to have caused a serious misunderstanding.

Then I heard a soft rustling noise.

As I was still kicking myself for my carelessness, things were moving way too quickly.

The silky lingerie had fallen to the floor at Tifaleeza's feet, and the moonlight now fell on her beautiful bare skin, giving her a mystical allure.

Her head was tilted slightly downward, her expression hidden by her wavy hair.

Uh-oh, this is bad.

For just an instant, I was transfixed by her beauty.

"…Put this on."

I pulled a plain overcoat out of the Item Box and gave it to Tifaleeza.



Once she'd put it on, I used the Mana Light spell.

"…It seems I failed to explain myself properly. I didn't call you here to demand some love affair."

If I needed something like that, I'd pay a visit to the lovely ladies who specialized in that sort of thing in the red-light district.

"Th-then what…?"

"I need one of your skills."

At that, Tifaleeza's beet-red face went completely blank.

Somehow, I got the sense that I may have hurt her maidenly feelings, but I decided that was best left to her redheaded friend, Neru, to handle later.

"Tifaleeza, give me a new name."

"Very well. What sort of name would you like?"

Her cool eyes betrayed no emotion as I listed some random names of famous people from Earth.

"Lord Kuro, even if I give you multiple names, only the last one will matter. Is that all right?"

"Yes, that's fine."

Tifaleeza nodded and began the chant in a calm, clear voice.

"■■ ***Name Order*** *Meimei*: Trismegistus."

This was the name I'd spread around for the creator of the light-stone accessories I made in the old capital. If I remembered right, he was a famous alchemist in my old world.

Once Tifaleeza finished her chant, she tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Master, I'm terribly sorry. I believe that 'Name Order' may have failed."

I opened my menu to see what she meant.

My name in my social networking tab was indeed still **Kuro**. Checking the list of options in that tab and my status tab, I found that **Trismegistus** had indeed been added.

“I’ve never actually seen it happen before, but I have heard rumors that if one has received a name from someone particularly powerful, it may be impossible to overwrite it afterward.”

Not knowing that her skill had done what I needed anyway, Tifaleeza offered a reason why her “Name Order” might have failed.

In this case, it must be because the name Kuro had been given to me by the powerful black dragon Hei Long.

“It’s all right if it fails. Give me the next name, please.”

“V-very well, if that is your wish…”

She sounded as if she wanted to object, but her cool composure quickly returned, and she continued with “Name Order.”

Once she’d gotten through the third name, she was running low on magic, so I used the Practical Magic spell Mana Transfer to supply her with more until she’d given me ten or so different names.

In addition to major names like Aristotle and Hephaestus, I also included throwaway names like Akindoh and Kaja, adapted from the Japanese words for *merchant* and *blacksmith* respectively.

“Thank you.”

“I-I’m pleased I was able to be of some use to you.”

Despite her affirmative answer, Tifaleeza looked woozy.

“Tired?”

“N-no, I can keep going…”

The cycle of “Name Order” and receiving Mana Transfers had probably been exhausting.

I sent her back to her room to rest, warning her not to tell anyone else.

“T-Tifa, ya finished already?”

Neru must have been waiting for her outside the room; I heard her concerned voice.

Judging by the number of lights on my radar, the other girls were there as well.

“Whoa, ya look wiped! What kinda role-play were ya doing in there?!”

Clearly, Neru still had the wrong idea.

You really think we’d be done already if that was what we were doing?

Though I couldn’t help rolling my eyes at Neru, I had to admire her for waiting in the dark hallway to make sure her friend was all right.

However, that admiration quickly evaporated.

“Okay, my turn next!”

Neru charged into the room half-naked, so I spun her around at the door and sent her right back out.

“Huh? Oh, I get it. This is that ‘neglect play,’ right? I dunno. I’m still new to this. That kinda advanced stuff might be beyond me…”

Ignoring her, I headed toward the teleportation mirror.

“““““Lord Kuro, if one’s not enough for you, take all four of us!”””””

Neru and the other three girls all barged in without so much as a knock this time.

I was on the verge of slapping my forehead in frustration, but I managed to resist, since that wouldn’t fit Kuro’s image.

Oh, I know.

“As I already told Tifaleeza, I have no intention of demanding love affairs from any of you.”

“C’mon, man, I’m offering here—”

“More importantly, I have something to ask you all.” Neru started to say something ridiculous, so I quickly cut her off. “Put some clothes on and meet me in the living room.”

“““““…Y-yes, sir.”””””

The four girls looked oddly disappointed, but I edged around them and went

to the living room.

The girls gathered there before long, and I asked them about what had happened when the fire broke out.

“We were feeding the creatures in the basement when the oil slimes suddenly started going crazy.”

“Normally they were very calm, but then they suddenly started crashing around and escaped their buckets.”

This was the math girl and the sewing girl.

The oil slimes had gotten upstairs and caught fire, trapping the girls in the basement.

“Lord Kuro!” Neru shouted my name and hopped up. “Right before those two came running, I saw a weird pink-colored slime, y’know!”

“Oh right, you were all worked up over that.”

The “Analyze” girl nodded.

Come to think of it, the slime at the building I’d rescued them from had an unusual pink core.

According to the girls, oil slimes were normally an ocher color.

“Did you see any suspicious-looking people or anyone doing anything strange?”

The young women looked at one another.

“Everyone who hung around there was suspicious, y’know.”

The other girls all nodded in agreement with Neru.

“I’m not sure whether this is suspicious, but…,” Tifaleeza spoke up hesitantly. “A middle-aged man dressed all in green used to visit our master from time to time.”

“Oh yeah, the guy who was always going ‘indeed, indeed.’”

Well, that was unexpected… Mm, actually, I could believe that.

If this were a mystery show, though, I guarantee that character would be a

red herring.

“Do you know what he was doing there?”

The girls exchanged glances again.

As far as they could tell, they said, he just showed up and had friendly, meaningless conversations with their master.

From that information, it almost sounded like they were friends, but Tifaleeza and the others said it hadn’t seemed that way at all.

“And was he there on the day of the fire?”

“No, he didn’t show up once that—”

“I saw him.” Tifaleeza interrupted the “Analyze” girl. “He didn’t visit our master, but I saw him from the window, walking around near our building.”

“When was that?”

“Not long before Neru started shouting that she’d seen a pink slime.”

Mentally, I started sorting the girls’ testimonies into chronological order.

- The green-clad noble had sometimes visited and spoken with their master.
- Shortly after Tifaleeza had seen the green-clad noble, Neru discovered the pink slime.
- The normally docile oil slimes had gone wild and escaped.
- The oil slimes had caught aflame somehow, causing the massive fire.

That about summed it up.

My arbitrary logic would conclude “the green-clad noble somehow set the pink slime on the oil slimes to send them running wild and started the fire,” but…that probably wasn’t it.

I saw no reason for the green-clad noble to start a fire like that, and even if he had wanted to, he probably would’ve just sent an underling to do so.

If I were the protagonist of a mystery drama, I’d probably go interrogate him about why he was seen at the site of the fire, but I didn’t want to stick my nose

where it didn't belong.

Sure, if the chance arose, I'd ask him a question or two, but there was nothing to be gained except satisfying my own curiosity.

As always, it generally pays to let sleeping dogs lie.

◆

"…I-it's quite busy today, indeed."

Between the power of the housewives and the sheer size of our staff, the green-clad noble was unable to get into the staff area of the soup kitchen this time and had to stand off to the side and mutter.

"Good morning, Lord Poputema."

"Sir Pendragon. Good morning, indeed."

I made my way around behind him and greeted him with a smile.

"I'm on my way to investigate the scene of the fire. Would you like to come along, Lord Poputema?"

"Are you certain you should be leaving the soup kitchen, indeed?"

"Yes, with this much assistance, there's no need for a noble like me to help out."

I'd decided to tactfully imply that his help was also unnecessary and lure him away from the area by sacrificing myself instead.

At least now the kids would be able to come without fear.

"They're rebuilding faster than I expected."

Many of the houses had collapsed due to the flammable mortar, but more than half had retained their basic structures, at least.

We walked along the road, taking care not to prevent the soot-blackened workers from doing their jobs.

Seeing our noble attire, some people furrowed their brows or even spit on the ground; far from reprimanding them, however, the green-clad noble smiled as if he was enjoying every bit of it.

As usual, his mismatched expressions made him very difficult to read.

“Many of the roofs are still burned, indeed.”

Sure enough, most of the houses still lacked roofs—probably because it took time to dry the grass needed for thatching.

It didn’t usually rain in Labyrinth City, but winds from the west often carried sand from across the mountains, so a roof was certainly a necessity.

After observing like this for a while, the green-clad noble stopped and looked at one of the intact buildings.

“Many of the homes around here are burned, but this one appears to be fine, indeed.”

“Do you know the owner of the house, Lord Poputema?”

“Not at all, indeed. I don’t know anyone who would live in a place like this, indeed.”

He quickly denied my off-the-cuff inquiry.

It didn’t seem like he was lying, but considering that he’d been working for the Ashinen family’s intelligence agency for years now, it was probably no trouble at all to deceive me.

I didn’t want to keep poking the hornet’s nest, so I decided not to press him for more information.

I’m not a superhero or a detective or anything like that.

Once Arisa contacted me with Telephone to let me know that the soup kitchen and volunteer work was over, I ended my green-clad-noble diversion strategy and headed back toward the plaza.

“Done already, indeed?”

“Yes, I think I’ve seen enough.”

“Then I shall return to the viceroy’s estate, too, indeed.”

Parting ways with the green-clad noble was no small relief as I walked away.

“The thinner areas have gotten darker, too, indeed. That squishy pink sphere

was a wonderful thing, indeed.”

Hearing the green-clad noble talk to himself, I turned around, but he was nowhere to be seen among the other people walking downtown.

His words didn’t make any sense to me, but for some reason, they lingered unpleasantly in my mind.

◆

“All right, our work is done for the day. You’re all free to use the rest of your time however you please.”

I attempted to convince my group to go have fun.

Miss Miteruna and the others had already left with the soup kitchen supplies, so there wasn’t really anything else left to be done.

“Are you going exploring again today, Pochi and Tama?”

“Aaaye?”

“I’m going to draw a map, too, this time, sir.”

Pochi held up a little sketchbook from her Fairy Pack, evidently feeling competitive with Tama.

“It might be hard to draw with that. You should take a little board with you, too.”

I produced two boards from Storage by way of the Garage Bag, used the Multitool spell to make a few small holes, and attached a clamp for the paper and strings so they could wear them around their necks. Then I handed the completed portable drawing boards to Pochi and Tama.

“Yaaay!”

“Thank you, sir!”

“Thankeeee?”

Tama and Pochi did a little dance for joy.

“It’s a contest, sir!”

“I won’t looooose?”

With that, the pair ran off with the boards in hand.

They were probably going to have a map-drawing competition.

“If you run into any trouble, just yell for me!” I called after them.

“Aye-aaaye!”

“Yes, sir!”

Looking over their shoulders, Tama and Pochi waved as they dashed away.

“I’m going back to the mansion to give Rosie and Annie cooking lessons.”

“Mm, concert.”

Mia must be heading back to that pond to put on another show for the elderly.

“And you, Liza? More market research?”

“No, I would hate to squander your—”

“It’s not squandering. Finding out what products are sold in Labyrinth City is very important.”

With that, I handed her a bag of silver coins.

I would gladly give her an allowance of gold coins if she wanted, but I got the impression she’d be afraid to use them, so I was sticking with silver coins until she got used to shopping.

Once Liza set out, that left only Nana and Arisa.

“Master, I would like candy, I request.”

It seemed odd for Nana to ask that out of the blue, but I shrugged and handed her a piece of candy.

“Not just one. I would like a lot of candy, I request.”

“A lot?”

“Arisa has informed me that sweets are the best way to entice children to be fawned over, I report.”

I glanced at Arisa, who silently pressed her palms together in an apologetic

pose.

Since she seemed to regret her actions already, I probably didn't need to punish her this time.

"Here. I have a lot of leftover candy that I made from honey and ugi sugar a while back, so you can take a bunch of that."

"Thank you, master."

I gave Nana a bag of about a hundred candies, and she bounced away happily toward the guild.

"You sure? Isn't that candy expensive?"

"It's fine. I've still got plenty of both ingredients."

That might have been a big deal a while ago, but now that I had connections in Lalagi, the Kingdom of Sorcery, and could procure massive amounts of sugar easily, I didn't have to be so sparing with it.

I could go back to Lalagi at any time by using the Return spell repeatedly, and since I was buying it from the source, it was ten times cheaper than in the Shiga Kingdom.

Now, what am I *going to do today?*

I had plenty of options, but I supposed I would probably just do some crafting with monster materials.

"Master, let's go on a date!"

Arisa grabbed my arm, rubbing her cheek against it like a cat.

She looked so innocent that I couldn't bring myself to refuse.

Oh well. I guess I can enjoy some crafting later tonight.

"Want to shop around Labyrinth City's magic tools or something, then?"

"Okey-dokey! Rosie told me about a side street where you can find some serious bargains, so let's go there!"

Led by the excited Arisa, I soon found myself on a twisting street populated by mid-ranking explorers.

“Huh. It’s got a sort of topsy-turvy charm, doesn’t it?”

The shops on this street were largely long and narrow buildings with small entrances.

“Right? I’m excited to sniff out some of those bargains Rosie was talking about!”

Arisa pointed at my eyes and grinned.

She was probably suggesting that I use my “Analyze” skill to scout out the best bargains.

It felt a bit like cheating, but it was probably all right in moderation.

“Hey, this ring looks pretty awesome, right?”

Arisa held up an ornately decorated bronze ring. It contained a semitransparent white stone engraved with a rune of strength.

“That there’s a real magic ring that makes yer weapons stronger simply by wearin’ it! Normally it’d be a hundred and twenty gold coins, but…”

Damn, that’s steep.

There was no way it should be that expensive. It was just a bronze ring with a single rune.

Even at a stretch, a few gold coins would already be a high-enough price.

According to my “Estimation” skill, its market price was more in the range of one to six silver coins.

“…You look like a promising young fellow, so I’ll sell it to ya special for only fifteen gold coins!”

“It only raises your strength stat by three points,” Arisa murmured to me.

She’d put on the ring at some point and must have analyzed herself.

For such a tiny bonus, you’d be better off just eating fried whale as you fought.

“I could maybe do three silver coins.”

“Tch! If ya don’t even know the value of a magic ring, get outta my store!”

Sensing that we wouldn’t be buying, the store owner kicked us out with a menacing look, as if he was going to toss salt after us.

In the next store, we found a curved blade that was pure black.

“Ooh, that sword looks strong!”

Arisa reached out her hand, but I grabbed her wrist to stop her.

“Don’t touch it, Arisa.”

“Huh? Is it dangerous?”

“Yeah. It’s cursed.”

I couldn’t tell what kind of curse exactly, but my “Miasma Vision” showed an ominous black cloud writhing around the sword.

There were a few other, more beat-up swords in a container resembling an umbrella stand. There was also a wooden crate full of mallets made from maze-ant fangs, in addition to claw daggers and all sorts of other low-budget weapons.

“Nothing’s really grabbing me in here.”

“Agreed.”

The shop next door sold armor.

“It stinks!”

“Yeah, I don’t think I could wear this…”

“That makes an apprentice’s used kendo uniform smell like roses.”

The leather armor made from wyvern hide seemed reasonably strong, but it stank of the previous owner’s body odor so much that just approaching it made me want to hurl.

“Fake elixirs; crappy, overpriced potions… I don’t know if there are any hidden gems in this junk pile at all.”

As Arisa grumbled, I handed her a veria water I’d bought from one of the stands.

“Hmm? This is actually pretty tasty and refreshing.”

“Maybe it’s something like watered-down aloe juice?”

This would be even tastier if it was cold, but that was probably asking too much of a fantasy world without refrigerators.

I discreetly produced some ice cubes from Storage for Arisa’s and my cups.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” I whispered back.

The veria juice, which was delicious now that it was cold, soothed our throats as we looked around the nearby shops.

“Oh, now, there’s a bargain.”

“Huh? Where, where?”

The sharp-eared Arisa picked up my muttered comment and looked at me with sparkling eyes.

“This one.”

“What, this rusty old broadsword?”

“Yeah. It might look like nothing more than a rusty copper broadsword, but it’s actually…*a Magic Sword*.”

I whispered this last part in Arisa’s ear, then turned to the shopkeeper.

“Is it all right if I pick this up?”

“Sure, but don’t complain if yer hand gets dirty, mister.”

With the shopkeeper’s permission, I picked up the rusty sword and put some magic into it.

“The magic conduction channels seem to be blocked, so it probably couldn’t be used as is yet…”

If I forced some magic through to clean it, it would probably clear up and work, but I didn’t want to risk doing that there in case the sword imploded or something.

“Shopkeep, how much is this sword?”

“Three gold coins. Just so you know, though, it’s brass, not gold. And it’d cost

more to turn it into ore, too.”

This shopkeeper was pretty friendly and honest.

The sword’s market price was between three silver coins and ten gold coins, so three gold coins seemed like a fair price.

Considering its weight, the raw brass was probably worth five gold coins at least, but it would take no small effort to get it into the right shape to be melted down and reused, which was probably why it was being sold as is.

“Couldn’t you do two gold coins?”

Instead of responding to Arisa’s bargaining, the shopkeeper turned to look at me.

I couldn’t read minds, but I guessed he was trying to figure out whether I’d actually buy it for that price.

I promptly produced the two gold coins from the wallet in my breast pocket.

“Sold!”

The man practically snatched the coins out of my hands, wrapped the broadsword in a tattered cloth, and handed it over to me.

Maybe he thought he’d gotten away with overcharging me for two gold coins.

“I’ll come again sometime.”

“Please do! You’re always welcome!”

The man grinned at us, and we smiled politely in return, maintaining serious faces as we left the store.

As soon as we turned the corner and made it to a small alleyway, we looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“Aah, that’s hilarious! That guy definitely thought he pulled one over on you.”

“That’s fine. It worked out for both of us, right?”

The owner was happy to have sold a rusty old sword for two gold coins, and we were happy to have bought a Magic Sword for two gold coins, so it was a win-win.

The equipment in the Ivy Manor could remove the rust in no time, and I could use Space Magic to clear the magic channels and have Arisa use it.

Looking at my log, I found I'd gotten titles like **Connoisseur** and **Antiques Dealer**.

"Oh man, that was too funny."

"All right. Let's head to the next store—"

But just as I was proposing this to Arisa…

"Masterrrrrrrrr!"

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up a faint voice calling for my help.

Pochi's voice.

"What's wrong, master?"

I held up one hand to silence Arisa for the moment.

Listening closely, I opened the map to display Pochi's location.

Found her.

She was in a part of the downtown area that had managed to survive the fire.

"Arisa, Pochi's in trouble. Wait for me in one of these shops, okay?"

"A-all right."

Arisa nodded.

Making sure there was no one else around, I slipped into the shadows, where I quickly donned a black overcoat and transformed into my Kuro disguise.

"…It's Pochi… Please help…"

Launching myself into the sky at full speed, I used "Flashrunning" to head in the direction of the voice as fast as I could.

I'm coming, Pochi!

Pendragon Orphanage

Satou here. I've heard that abuse and domestic violence only come to light if people around the situation notice it. Even in a place with social welfare like modern Japan, these things can still happen in the shadows. So in a parallel world like this one…

"There she is!"

Barely a second after launching myself into the air, I arrived directly above Pochi's location.

It was a bit dark in the shadow of the outer wall's tower, but she was fine.

Two men stood in front of her holding long rods, but the rods were tucked under their arms as they covered their ears with their palms.

Her life didn't seem to be in any immediate danger, at the very least.

I used "Warp" to land in an empty alleyway nearby, then used the skills "Invisibility" and "Spy" to head toward the area.

While there was no one around, I used the "Quick Change" skill to turn back into Satou.

"Masterrrrrr!"

As Pochi continued to scream toward the sky, I ran over to her, careful not to use "Blink."

"What's the matter, Pochi?"

"Master!"

Pochi looked up at me with glittering eyes.

"Are these men bothering you?"

"No, sir! They're policemen, sir."

Looking more closely, I realized that their well-worn clothes were those of

Celivera guards.

“Hey, where the hell did you c—?”

One of the guards reached out to grab my collar, but the other rapped him on the head with his rod.

It looked like only a light tap, but the man clutched his head and held back tears and whimpers, so it must have actually hurt quite a bit.

“I’m terribly sorry for my colleague’s rudeness, Sir Pendragon.”

“No, no, I’m the one who should apologize.”

The other guard seemed to have recognized me, which was why he stopped his colleague from saying anything rude to a noble.

It seemed a little violent, but he probably had his fellow guard’s best interests in mind.

“Master, come this way quickly, sir. There are little kids who’re dying, sir!”

Pochi grabbed my hand and tugged me toward a shadowy hiding place.

There were several children there who were even younger than Pochi.

“The hell was that about?”

“That’s my line. You didn’t realize who you were talking to?”

The guards argued among themselves behind me, but it didn’t seem particularly serious, so I ignored them.

Seeing me, one of the children opened his mouth, but he didn’t seem to have the strength to speak or move.

Two of the kids had broken legs; their wounds were red and swollen, with insects swarming around them.

According to my AR, the children had the status conditions **Bone Fracture**, **Starvation: Severe**, and **Dehydration**.

“Please save them, sir.”

“Don’t worry—I will.”

I nodded reassuringly at Pochi.

First, I used the Everyday Magic spell Bug Wiper from my magic menu to chase off the insects.

“Yuck, bugs!” exclaimed one of the guards behind me.

They seemed to be watching us from some distance away.

I produced a handful of vials from my Garage Bag, intending to give the kids nutrition supplements before the healing potions.

On my radar, I saw that the guards were coming closer.

“May I ask what you’re doing, Sir Knight? Euthanasia is technically against the law here, I’m afraid.”

“No, no. I’m just giving them nutritional supplement potions.”

I took a sip of one to demonstrate their safety, and the guard apologized and stepped back.

“All right, please drink these.”

Murmuring gently to the kids, I gave each of them a nutritional supplement potion sip by sip, followed by some water.

They seemed to be able to drink those without a problem, so next I gave them some watered-down magic potions to restore their health.

“They moved, sir!”

“Good. Let’s let Miteruna take care of the rest.” I turned to the guards. “I’m taking these children with me. Is there any paperwork involved?”

“No, it won’t be a problem. We can just let our superior know. In fact, would you like us to help you?”

It was pretty nice of them to offer.

The viceroy’s wife must have told the guards, or at least their superiors, to cooperate with our orphanage work.

“No, that won’t be necessary.”

As I said this, my eyes were on Liza and Tama, who were running toward us from the main street.

They must have heard Pochi's cry and come running, too.

"Pochiii!"

"Tama! And Liza, sir!"

"Pochi, are you hurt?"

While I waited for their fussing over Pochi to subside, I contacted Arisa using Telephone to explain the situation.

"…They were near death when Pochi found them, so we're taking them in."

"Oh, goodness gracious! I'll find a hidden alley to teleport home so I can help."

"Sorry about this, Arisa."

"Don't worry about it! If you want to make it up to me, you can always do so physically."

I could practically see her winking at me.

After that, the beastfolk girls and I carried the children to our mansion.

◆

"You picked up some kids, too, Nana?"

"Larvae protection is of the utmost importance, I declare."

When we arrived in front of the house, I saw Arisa talking to Nana.

The latter was accompanied by a bunch of small children.

"We're back."

"Welcome home, master. Are they the kids in question?" Arisa peered anxiously at the children we were carrying. "We've got beds ready for them, so hurry and get them inside for some rest, please."

Arisa led us into the house.

"It's him!"

"Yeah, I saw them together."

"…Larvae?"

Turning around, I saw Nana's group of kids running off somewhere.

I wasn't sure what had happened, but they were probably just following a random impulse, as kids do. The orphanage wouldn't be ready for a little while longer anyway, so we could assemble them again when the time came.

For now, I brought the children we'd rescued into the house, laying each of them down in their own bed.

"These are some nasty wounds…"

Arisa's brow furrowed as she saw the kids' broken bones and swollen joints.

"Yeah. I'm going to do some healing that I can't really have other people seeing. Make sure nobody else comes in, okay?"

"Yes, of course."

I had the beastfolk girls take turns watching the door while I used some careful magic manipulation to repair the children's bones via "Magic Heal."

I'd used similar techniques to patch up the kids we found collapsed in our barn—the same kids who were our current maid staff.

Wait a minute.

They'd had the same kinds of injuries back then as these children did now.

Who in the world was perpetrating such awful violence toward these little kids?

As I was lost in thought, my "Magic Heal" finished restoring the kids' limbs to their proper state.

"Amazing! Was that a spell?" Arisa asked.

"No, it's the 'Magic Heal' skill."

"Huh, maybe I should pick that up, too… *Geh!*"

Arisa was speechless for a moment after that.

Eventually, she told me that the "Magic Heal" skill required far more skill points to acquire than any normal magic skill.

"I don't think I've ever seen a single skill that costs so much. Master, if you keep picking up these specialized skills, you're going to regret it, you know."

“Thanks, I’ll take that warning to heart.”

I appreciated Arisa’s concern, but I was able to pick up any skill I wanted for only one skill point, so that wasn’t going to be a problem.

Not that I intended to waste my points, of course.

“A man in green clothing?”

Entrusting the care of the rescued children to Miss Miteruna, I went to the young maid girls whose legs had been broken when we found them and asked them what had happened.

“I was sleeping in the corner of an alley, and a weird, scary man stomped on me.”

From the sound of things, the green-clad noble—also known as Counselor Poputema—had been abusing homeless children in secret.

“Green Man kicked me, too.”

“Mr. Indeed. I hate him…”

The other young maids all had similar experiences.

“Green Man” and “Mr. Indeed” seemed to be the children’s nicknames for Poputema.

“Master, death to abusers!”

Nana was still expressionless, but she clenched her fists tightly in rage.

“Bullying’s baaad?”

“That’s right, sir! You can’t pick on little kids, sir!”

Tama and Pochi were livid, as well.

It seemed to come from a place of pure morality, even without projecting their own past experiences onto things.

“Master, is that man not a high-ranking noble? I am not sure it is wise to put yourself at risk in such a way, even for children…”

“Yeah. Liza is right.”

Arisa normally had a strong sense of justice, so that was a surprising

statement from her.

"…But you've got to use your power to protect the weak, no matter what!"

Arisa's eyes glinted, and the other kids around her all gazed at her admiringly and burst into applause.

Now, that's *the Arisa I know.*

"Master!"

As I smiled, Nana latched onto me pleadingly.

"All right. I'll take care of it somehow."

So stop pressing your breasts against me, please.

As it stood, I was going to the viceroy's wife's tea party the following afternoon. I could confront the green-clad noble about the truth of the matter then. If it really was him, I would deliver some justice.

A high-ranking noble like him was unlikely to listen to a much-lower-ranking noble like myself, so I'd probably end up having to lean on the viceroy's wife's authority, but that was exactly what friends in high places were for.

But of course, I did intend to try to negotiate with the green-clad noble first.

◆

Then, late that night…

"So the rumors are true. I didn't want to believe it."

I called out to the green-clad noble, who was raising his foot to stomp on a child sleeping in an alley.

I had intended to only investigate the truth today, but I couldn't just let a child get injured, so I acted without thinking.

"You are quite good at concealing your presence, indeed, Sir Pendragon."

With his skill makeup, he shouldn't have been able to detect me with my maxed-out stealth skills firing at full blast, but somehow he didn't seem surprised when I revealed myself.

"What…?"

Right before my eyes, the green-clad noble stepped on the child's leg without a flicker of emotion.

A dry *crack* filled the air, along with the child's scream.

"What are you doing?!"

I pushed the green-clad noble away, set the child's broken leg back in place, and forced her to drink a magic potion.

The girl's cry had woken the other children sleeping nearby, who scattered into the darkness like baby spiders.



“I should ask you the same, indeed. What sort of gentleman suddenly pushes another person, indeed?”

There wasn’t a trace of guilt in the green-clad noble’s voice.

What the hell is he talking about?

“You don’t feel any remorse about breaking the leg of a sleeping child?”

The question slipped out before I could stop myself, and the green-clad noble smirked.

“I was just on an evening stroll, indeed. I merely stepped on some garbage along the way by accident. That’s the fault of whoever left their garbage on the streets, indeed.”

The green-clad noble’s wicked grin widened as he looked at the child trembling in my arms.

His expression made my stomach churn, as if I were looking at a monster in human form.

Hoping against hope, I checked his detailed information in the AR, but unfortunately, he didn’t appear to be possessed by a demon or anything of the sort.

Hard as it was to believe, this was apparently his true personality.

“Horror, hatred, the fear of the unknown… All quite delicious, indeed.”

The green-clad noble looked up at the moon and cackled.

His words reminded me of something the lesser demon who made the Seiryuu City labyrinth had said.

“That’s something a demon might say.”

“And now you call me a demon, indeed? Sir Pendragon, you are in dire need of further education as a noble, indeed.”

He spoke like a wise elder advising an inexperienced youth.

Admittedly, I shouldn’t have said that out loud. It was probably an insult of the highest order to accuse a noble ranking far higher than myself of

wrongdoing. I could very well lose my position as an honorary noble for that.

“Well, that’s all right, indeed. It’s a lovely evening. The perfect weather for a stroll, indeed.”

“Lord Poputema—”

I called out to stop the man from continuing his rampage.

“Would you like to join me, indeed, Sir Pendragon?”

“Certainly, if it pleases you.”

Once the child whose leg I’d healed had fled safely in the other direction, I accompanied the green-clad noble on his walk.

My goal was to help any other children escape from his path before he could harm them, of course.

It was no easy task.

He would say things like “I sense grief and terror from that direction, indeed,” suddenly change his course, slip into passages that seemed too narrow for his portly body, pretend he was turning back only to suddenly walk along a wall, and so on.

Each time, I had to run ahead of him and move the children or sometimes use my map and Magic Hand to hide them on rooftops.

The green-clad noble seemed to be enjoying my frantic state.

But I couldn’t leave him to his own devices.

The green-clad noble’s walk continued until dawn, and I stuck with him until the very end.

“Your confusion and unease were quite delicious as well, Sir Pendragon, indeed.”

With another laugh, the green-clad noble returned to his mansion.

I’d managed to keep the kids safe this time, but I couldn’t do that every single night.

“I’ll have to call in a favor.”

Speeding up my plans, I headed to the viceroy's mansion without any prior contact.

Miss Miteruna and the rest would have to take care of the morning's soup kitchen.

◆

"Sir Pendragon, whatever brings you here? The tea party isn't until this afternoon."

Despite my showing up without an appointment, the viceroy's wife welcomed me in with a smile.

Apologizing for my sudden visit, I explained what had happened the night before.

And her answer…

"Poputema is quite a troublemaker, isn't he?"

…was far lighter than I had expected.

Evidently, the plight of poor, orphaned children was entirely unremarkable to a noble.

"I know you have a kind soul, Sir Pendragon, so it pains me to tell you this, but a noble cannot be punished for harming commoners unless the commoners themselves bring their accusations forward. And since vagrant children have no citizenship, they unfortunately cannot make such accusations."

The viceroy's wife pulled me in close, as if she was scolding a child.

"Just for you, I'll tell Poputema to stop his violence, but there's no guarantee that he will actually do so."

This time, she patted my head in a show of comfort.

"No, I don't suppose he will," she added with confidence. "If you wish, I can have him expelled from Labyrinth City?"

"No, that—"

"—wouldn't solve anything, would it?" she interrupted.

Her eyes watched me thoughtfully.

“There is *one* way you could stop him. Haven’t you thought of it yet?”

The viceroy’s wife’s tone was like that of a teacher.

What way?

If I had any idea, I wouldn’t have come to make a request like this first thing in the morning.

Obviously, she wasn’t telling me to assassinate the green-clad noble.

“I believe you should already be aware of this method…”

The viceroy’s wife smiled without stating the answer.

Something I’m already aware of…?

I thought back on everything she’d said and all the events of the previous day.

“…Ah!”

“Looks like you’ve got it now.”

The viceroy’s wife looked satisfied even as I told her I wouldn’t be able to attend today’s tea party and rushed home.

◆

“Everyone, listen up!”

I gathered not only my companions but also Miss Miteruna, the maids, and the Saga Empire samurai pair who guarded our mansion and told them all about my encounter with the green-clad noble and my desire to save the children.

“You *do* have a plan, don’t you?”

“Of course.” I nodded firmly at Arisa. “The green-clad noble tramples on the children because they’re in the streets. Since they don’t have citizenship, they don’t have the right to submit accusations.”

The viceroy’s wife had told me as much.

“So we simply need to make sure they’re not sleeping in the streets. Then I, a noble, can become their guardian.”

It was all so simple, now that I thought about it.

I'd been planning to bring all of Labyrinth City's vagrant children into the orphanage anyway, so I would just be speeding that plan along.

"Now, let's begin Operation: Assemble All Orphans!"

Our slogan was: "Until the number of abused children is zero!"

"Aye-aye, sir!"

"Roger, sir!"

"Understood. We will gather the children at once."

"Master, I shall accompany Liza and the others, I report."

The beastfolk girls and Nana were first to volunteer, rushing outside as soon as I gave them permission.

"Mia and I will help gather them up, too."

"Mm. Let's go."

"Miss Miteruna and I will start preparing food and clothing for the children, then."

Arisa, Mia, and Lulu all went into action next.

"Please let Sir Kajiro and me pick up the supplies."

"We're borrowing a cart. Ayaume, you drive."

The samurai pair headed out.

Through the window, I saw Arisa addressing the kids who were gathered in one of the empty fields waiting for work.

She was probably planning on a human-wave strategy.

With the help of the young maids, I started setting up tents in the garden of the orphanage's construction site.

It might not be much better than sleeping on the streets, but at least if they were on my land, Poputema couldn't claim to have stepped on them by accident like yesterday.

◆

“…Hmm.”

We hadn’t gathered as big of a group as I’d expected.

It was almost noon, but we had only about thirty kids.

Including the kids Arisa and company had hired, that was still only fifty or so.

“Lulu, I’ll leave you in charge here. I’m going out to invite more kids.”

“Master, let me come with you, please.”

It was probably safe to leave Miss Miteruna in charge. Rosie and Annie could take care of the cooking, and the maids were here for serving and odd jobs.

“All right, then. Let’s go.”

Lulu and I walked into town on foot.

“Doesn’t it seem as if they’re avoiding us?”

“You think so, too, Lulu?”

For some reason, whenever the kids sitting on the side of the road saw us, they disappeared into the crowd.

I’d thought that the soup kitchens would make me more popular with them, but if anything, it seemed like quite the opposite.

“Master…”

When we met up with Nana in front of the west guild, she seemed despondent, despite her emotionless face.

There was a strange empty space around her.

“How’s it going?”

“The larvae are avoiding me, I report.”

Wow, even Nana?

“Is there something strange about me, I inquire?”

“No, not at all,” I assured her.

I had a feeling that there was some outside reason for this.

“Masterrr?”

I heard Tama's voice and turned around to see the beastfolk girls appear out of the crowd.

"Something is very, very strange, sir!"

Pochi's serious expression was very cute.

I turned to Liza to ask for more information.

"The three of us have been going around inviting children to the orphanage, but…"

"They're running away from us, sir."

"Mysteryyy?"

Tama and Pochi knit their brows, posing like detectives trying to solve a mystery.

"I would understand if they were running away out of fear of my face, but…"

"That can't be it."

Liza blushed a little at that.

I could see why villains might fear Liza if they'd crossed her before, but certainly not children.

"So what exactly happened when you invited them?"

"At first it seemed to be going well, but then a child with an unpleasant face saw us and whispered to the others, and they all ran away in a panic."

"Like spideerrrs?"

"They go over fences or through cracks in the walls, sir."

That was the same reaction we'd been getting from the kids.

"Do you have any idea what might have been whispered?"

"Greeeen?"

"They said 'Mr. Indeed,' sir."

Those sounded like the nicknames associated with the green-clad noble, aka Poputema.

Somehow, the green-clad noble seemed to be the reason the children were running from us.

Is it because I'm a noble like Poputema?

"Ahhh, there he is! Master!"

Arisa waved at us from across the crowd, with the group of little girls she'd initially had in tow.

We moved away from the guild to meet up with Arisa.

"Looks like you're not faring any better."

"You too?" I asked.

"Yes, it's been just awful."

Arisa sighed.

"Do you have any idea why?"

"I do, as a matter of fact. I was about to go back to the mansion to tell you."

As usual, Arisa worked fast.

"It sounds like someone's been spreading lies among the children."

Specifically, the rumors Arisa had heard were:

The young noble is friendly with Mr. Indeed.

He's a creep who likes torturing kids, just like the green man.

The young noble is only giving out food to get stupid kids to like him.

All completely untrue, of course.

Seriously, when was I ever friendly with that awful man?

More importantly, what should I do now…?

"Why don't we start by questioning whoever's spreading those rumors?"

"We can't do that. The ones who are spreading them are the same kids we're trying to help."

"Then we should ask them where they heard—"

“I tried, but they insisted they couldn’t say because you or Poputema might kill them.”

Well, that’s not good.

I didn’t want to get violent with kids, of course, and there would be no point in forcing them to go to the orphanage only to have them escape in the night and get attacked by the green-clad noble anyway.

As I stood there at a loss, a voice called out to me.

“Hey, Mr. Noble, what seems to be the trouble?”

Turning around at the sound of the suspicious voice, I saw a familiar punkish man standing before me.

It was Skopi of the Mud Scorpions, the man-about-town who I’d met as Kuro yesterday.

“It’s Skopi, right?”

“Heh, glad you remember.” The man ducked his head and grinned crookedly. “I’ve got some information for ya.”

I started to hold out some money for him, but he shook his head. “Nah, this one’s a freebie. Consider it my thanks for the other day.”

So he wanted to repay his debt.

“All right. So what’s this information?”

“I dunno why, but some guys from the Street Rats and the Gutter Frogs have been spreading nasty rumors about ya with the kids.”

The rumors Skopi described matched up with the ones Arisa had heard.

“Why would they do that?”

“I told ya, I dunno why. Knowin’ them, someone’s probably payin’ ’em off with chump change, but I couldn’t track down who hired ’em.”

The green-clad noble appeared in the back of my mind.

Now that Sokell was out of the picture, I couldn’t think of anyone else who would have reason to antagonize me.

“Skopi, I have a request for you. Do you mind?”

“’Course. I still owe ya one.”

I handed him some money and asked him to pay the Street Rats and Gutter Frogs to stop.

While I was at it, I had him hire them and some other groups to spread the word that my being friends with the green-clad noble was a misunderstanding and that I actually wanted to protect kids from the green-clad noble with my orphanage.

I figured I might as well use the green-clad noble’s bad reputation to my advantage.

Just in case, I asked them to use the code name “Green Man” instead of “green-clad noble” or “Poputema.”

That way, it wouldn’t come back to bite me later.

◆

“Now, that’s a pretty big crowd.”

By that evening, the homeless children of Labyrinth City had largely gathered at the soon-to-be orphanage.

Skopi’s work must have been effective, because by the time the sun started to set, the rate of kids arriving had risen exponentially.

Even the kids who were hovering nearby uncertainly were enticed through the doors by the aroma of the dinner Lulu and the maids were cooking.

In the end, the garden of the orphanage wasn’t enough space, and we had to add more tents in the empty lot next door, creating a makeshift wall to protect them.

I’d paid some bored-looking earth mages near the west explorers’ guild to make the wall with magic.

It had looked a bit thin and breakable, but I secretly reinforced it with my own Earth Magic once the mages left, so it would stand up even to cannon fire.

That should be enough to keep the green-clad noble from coming in on one of

his “walks.”

“Whew, that was toooough.”

Arisa slumped on my lap and starting rambling about all her hard work.

“Mrrr, guilty.”

“C’mon! What’s the big deal? I gotta stock up on a little masterium once in a while.”

Even Mia’s go-to accusation wasn’t enough to stop Arisa today.

This so-called masterium substance sounded a little fishy, but I figured I could indulge her every now and then.

“So what was so tough about today?”

“Well, some of the kids were insisting that they wouldn’t stay with a friend of Mr. Indeed.”

“A friend?”

“Well, he did hang around at the soup kitchen that one time, and then the next day you walked downtown with him to keep him away from the plaza, remember?”

Oh yeah, I guess that did happen.

“Lots of kids saw him in the plaza, so there were quite a few who were convinced that you guys are friends.”

The kids who had seen this with their own eyes were very stubborn about coming to the orphanage, even after Skopi had spread the information for us.

Thinking about it now, I figured the green-clad noble might have done those things as a precaution against this exact kind of situation.

Maybe I was being overly paranoid, though.

“I’m impressed you were able to get those kids to come here, then.”

“I didn’t. It was all them.”

Arisa nodded toward the young maids who were chatting happily with the orphanage kids.

“They explained that you gave them expensive medicine to save their lives and even hired them as maids afterward. I think that’s what finally won them over.”

“I’ll have to reward them, too, then.”

“Oh, then you should make hamburg steaks for them!”

“Hamburg steaks?”

“Yeah, they’ve been wanting to try it since Tama and Pochi told them all about it.”

“Sure, I’d be more than happy to.”

In fact, I could make it for all the kids to celebrate the opening of the orphanage.

Most of them probably still had weak stomachs right now, so I’d have to wait until they were ready.

“So what are you making now?”

“Oh, these are nameplates.”

I tried to make them simple enough for the kids to understand.

The base of the plates was made of diamond-hard scales. They were big, I had plenty of them, and most importantly, they were tough and durable.

The plates would have the child’s name, the mark of Pendragon Orphanage, and three runes engraved on the back: Lucky Charm, Health, and Safety.

They wouldn’t work as well as a magic tool, but I included them with the hopes of keeping the kids safe and happy.

The scales were fairly valuable, but they were the best surface for engraving three runes.

I covered the surface with white paint, so hopefully no one would notice.

There were a lot of kids, but I intended to finish the nameplates by the next morning.

As Mia played a lullaby to help the children sleep, I spent the night keeping an

eye on the radar for any troublesome visitors.

> Title Acquired: Guardian

> Title Acquired: Protector of Children

At the Guild

Satou here. I love those Hollywood movies where the heroes deal with one danger after another. It's fun to be on the edge of your seat and all, but I wish those kinds of things would only happen in fiction. In reality, of course, I prefer peace and quiet.

"All's right with the world."

I sighed contentedly as I watched the steam rise from my coffee into the dawn sky.

I'd stayed up all night keeping an eye out for violence from the green-clad noble or his underlings, but as if in mockery of my vigilance, it was a completely peaceful, quiet night.

Lulu, who'd brewed this coffee for me, was preparing food for the soup kitchen and breakfast for the kids we'd taken in at the orphanage.

"Now, I'd like to help out, too, but…"

Unfortunately, our current kitchen was too small to fit many people.

Finishing my coffee, I put the used mug away in Storage, transformed into Kuro, and used Return to teleport to the Ivy Manor to use their kitchen.

"Good morning, Lord Kuro."

"Good morning, Lelillil."

Leave it to a brownie house fairy: Despite it being the crack of dawn, Lelillil was already dressed and preparing breakfast.

"Sorry, Lelillil, but would you mind if I used the kitchen?"

"If you need anything, sir, please leave it to me!"

Lelillil smacked a fist to her flat chest.

"Well, it's not cooking exactly… I just wanted to make cornflakes."

I produced some kernels from a walking corn, a giant corn-like monster, and used the Practical Magic spells Multitool and Magic Mold to peel off the tough husks and crush the kernels into a fine powder.

Magic Mold created a see-through airtight container, so I could enjoy watching the kernels get crushed inside.

“Waaah, they’re turning into powder in the blink of an eye! How the hell do you do it, Lord Satou?!”

Lelillil was so surprised that she lost control of her manners and forgot to call me Kuro.

“All I have to do is spin a blade inside a container made from magic to crush the kernels into powder.”

I was using Magic Hand to spin the blade I’d created with Multitool.

During this conversation, I created almost fifty pounds of corn flour. Then I transferred the flour into bags, set up the next batch of corn kernels, and started mass-producing the flour.

Then, using the “Parallel Thoughts” skill, I started kneading the flour into batter for cornflakes even as I continued producing more of it.

“Lelillil, would you mind cooking this batter until the surface is nice and crisp?”

I lined up the thin sheets of cornflake batter on an oven plate and put Lelillil in charge of the rest.

Even with “Parallel Thoughts,” it would be a pain to control three different spells in progress while activating even more.

“Of course, sir!”

Before long, the pleasant scent of cooking corn filled the kitchen.

“Lord Kuro, is this acceptable?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect.”

I picked up a piece of the cooked, crunchy batter and took a bite.

The texture was good, but the flavor was lacking.

“Maybe I should have mixed in some milk or sugar while I was kneading the batter?”

“I’ll bring some right away, sir.”

Lelillil started to jog toward the storehouse, but I stopped her and produced the ingredients from my Item Box instead.

Then, with Lelillil’s help, I created several different varieties of cornflakes.

“The plain kind might be best if you eat them with milk once they’re ready.”

“I agree, sir. If I was going to eat this regularly, I wouldn’t get sick of that easily.”

Since the house fairy Lelillil agreed, I mass-produced a large amount of the plain cornflakes and returned to the house.

Of course, I gave Lelillil some of the cornflakes and leftover corn flour as thanks for her assistance.

◆

“Mmmm, I haven’t had cornflakes in ages…”

“So crunchyyy?”

“It goes super, super well with milk, sir!”

“Mm. New texture.”

When I offered the cornflakes to my group for breakfast, they were a big hit with the younger crowd.

“They have a really interesting mouthfeel. Sort of like deep-fried *gyoza* but different… I bet you could use them in lots of dishes.”

“They’re good with milk, but you can put them in parfaits and stuff, too!”

Arisa offered suggestions as Lulu analyzed the cereal’s potential.

“Perhaps one could add bits of jerky before cooking the batter?”

“Good ideeea?”

“That would definitely be super, super good, sir!”

The meat-loving Liza's idea was met with applause by the equally carnivorous Tama and Pochi.

I hadn't thought of that, but it did actually sound pretty good.

"Master! The larvae were satisfied as well, I report."

"Did you make sure to eat, too, Nana?"

"Yes, master! And I executed the 'Say aah' exchange with the larvae, I declare."

Nana's expression didn't change, but somehow, she seemed to be glowing with joy.

"…Young master, you have mail."

Just as we finished eating, Miss Miteruna brought me a few letters and a paper knife.

I opened the envelopes and scanned the contents.

"What's up?"

"They're from the viceroy's wife and the guild."

The former expressed concern for me and said she would dispatch a government official to help make the kids official residents of the orphanage.

As for the latter…

"It says to come get our reward money for capturing those plunderers."

Last time we'd gone into the labyrinth, we'd arrested some plunderers in the process of rescuing Princess Meetia and the others.

At the time, I'd been so exhausted from dealing with Sokell's badgering that I had just dropped them off at the guild without so much as an interrogation.

Presumably, the noble kids' guards had given testimonies in my place.

"That Plunderer King Ludaman had a pretty high bounty on his head, so I bet you're gonna rake it in."

Arisa drooled a little, with dollar signs practically appearing in her eyes.

"The wanted poster said one hundred gold coins, I report."

“Whoa, that’s awesome!”

Arisa pumped her fists.

“Why, is there anything you want?”

I was pretty sure she had everything she needed, but it was possible there was something she was keeping to herself because she didn’t want to incur too many expenses.

“Me? No, not really. But you could buy the girls in the orphanage some nice ribbons or something. For the boys, uh…food would probably be fine, right?”

“Ribbons are a good idea. They probably haven’t had the chance to wear accessories much.”

For the boys, maybe some cool scarves or belts would be good? I decided to consult with the director of the orphanage before buying anything.

“Hmm? There’s another letter here, no?”

Arisa picked up a letter that had fallen to the floor.

“Oh-hooo? A rookie explorers’ class?” Scanning it quickly, she tilted her head. “It says they happen once a month, and they want us to participate.”

She handed the letter to me after she’d summarized it aloud.

“This month’s class is five days from now, so I guess we’ll wait to resume our labyrinth exploration until after that.”

Evidently, you were normally expected to take the class after receiving your bronze badge.

“Oh, all right. I guess we’ll be busy with the orphanage for a while anyway.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine; it’s fine!” Arisa grinned gallantly.

“Of cooourse?”

“Pochi always works hard, sir!”

“Mm. Diligent.”

Tama, Pochi, and Mia seemed determined to help as well.

I wanted the kids to spend more time playing, but it didn't seem to be working out that way.

◆

"Lulu, are you giving Rosie and Annie cooking lessons again today?"

After the morning's food distribution, Lulu steered our carriage toward the west guild.

"Yes, as well as some others who wanted to learn to make potato-and-bean dumplings."

"Oh, the ones from earlier?"

During the morning soup kitchen, some grim-faced young and middle-aged men had appeared, begging to be taught how to make dumplings.

It wasn't a recipe I particularly planned to keep secret, and I was all in favor of making tastier food available for newbie explorers, so we agreed to teach them.

Of course, in lieu of payment, they would be helping out at the soup kitchen for a month.

We planned to change the main dish each month. Thanks to that, we were hoping to secure some recurring cooks.

The part-timer housewives took care of most of the work, so with the addition of these men, the soup kitchen could probably run without us helping directly from now on.

"Should I really be teaching professional chefs how to cook anything?"

"It's no different from teaching Rosie and Annie," I reassured Lulu.

Just then, I noticed hostile red dots on the radar in the corner of my vision.

Who's that?

I assumed a monster wouldn't suddenly appear in the middle of town. I opened my map and discovered that the dots belonged to the Plunderer King Ludaman and his top brass.

It had been several days since we'd caught them, but I guess they were still actively hostile toward me.

“Is something the matter, master?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I smiled and continued our cooking conversation.

Finally, the carriage arrived in front of the guild’s main gate.

“I’ll wait in the parking area.”

“Okay, I’ll try to make it quick.”

Once I turned away from Lulu, my smile faded into a serious expression.

I’d noticed another dot on my radar that wasn’t particularly friendly.

“Oh? Sir Pendragon, you have business at the guild as well, indeed?”

“Yes, I have a quick errand.”

“I see. It seems as though you cleaned the garbage from my path yesterday, indeed. You’re a hard worker indeed, Sir Pendragon.”

“It’s just part of my soup kitchen volunteer work.”

The green-clad noble was quick to allude to my taking in the vagrant children, so I smoothly evaded the subject.

Because the soup kitchen had been approved by the viceroy’s wife, his direct superior, he couldn’t bad-mouth it. His smile froze in place like a mask.

“Lord Poputema, is it official business that brings you to the guild?”

“My night walks have become less stimulating. As a result, I’m here to torture—that is, *interrogate*—the plunderers, indeed.”

The green-clad noble’s smirk deepened again as he produced a whip from somewhere and cracked it once.

“Interrogate the plunderers?”

“Are you interested, indeed?”

I nodded slowly.

“Curiosity is a fine trait, indeed.” The green-clad noble cackled for a while, then explained.

It seemed he suspected that a certain major noble from the royal capital was involved in Sokell's demonic-potion smuggling, so he had been conducting an independent investigation.

"Curious fellow that you are, Sir Pendragon, do you not wish to know that noble's name, indeed?"

The smile on the green-clad noble's face looked like that of a demon setting a trap.

"No, not particularly."

Let sleeping dogs lie, as they say.

I didn't want to get caught up in some royal capital noble infighting.

"A boring answer, indeed."

Looking disappointed, Poputema waved as if he'd lost interest in me and strolled lightly into the building.

◆

"A parade?"

When an employee guided me to the aging guildmaster's office, I was greeted with a highly unexpected proposal.

"That's right. You captured Ludaman and his men, after all the trouble they've given explorers and the labyrinth army. Before we publicly execute them, we want to make your great accomplishments known to the whole of the city!"

"I appreciate it, but no, thank you."

I was sure Arisa and some of the other girls would be thrilled, but I didn't want to participate in a celebration like that.

On its own, the parade would just be embarrassing, but in this case, I got the feeling that I'd be made to watch the execution from the front row afterward.

I couldn't really do blood and gore.

"I know you're modest and all, but this is ridiculous!" The guildmaster stood up, glowering at me like I was a disappointing son. "If you ever want to be promoted from honorary to permanent noble, you've got to show off these

kinds of accomplishments like there's no tomorrow!"

"I'm not particularly interested in becoming a permanent noble, though."

Sorry, but I don't really have any ambitions.

Besides, if I wanted to be a king, it'd be faster to just take over some monster territory or find a City Core without a master.

The guildmaster heaved a sigh.

"What a strange young man you are. If you became a permanent noble, you'd get to eat and drink your fill of as much delicious food and alcohol as you like and pick out a few pretty wives from some lesser nobility or traveling merchants, you know?"

I already got to eat and drink plenty of tasty things, and I certainly didn't want a bunch of wives. If my beloved Miss Aaze, the high elf of Bolenan Forest, would marry me, that would be more than enough.

Images of a furious Arisa and Mia and an unhappy Lulu rose to mind, but I shook my head to dismiss them along with any feelings of guilt.

"Very well, then. There's no point if you wouldn't like it." The guildmaster shrugged and sat back down. "I'll save you front-row seats for the ex—Eh, you don't want that, either?"

"No, thank you."

The guildmaster seemed to detect the reluctance on my face, so I shook my head emphatically.

"It's not often you get to see a thing like this!" She looked incredulous.

"I'm terribly sorry, but…"

I'd tried to ignore it in the old capital, but it was clear that in this relatively entertainment-free fantasy world, the public execution of criminals was considered a fun spectacle.

In the Shiga Kingdom, even murderers were generally forced to work as criminal slaves, so a public execution was pretty rare.

"Honestly. How bizarre can you get? You'll at least take the reward money,

won’t you?”

“Yes, please. Though if you don’t mind, I’d like half of the reward for Ludaman’s capture to be given to Lady Ravna of the Nolork Kingdom.”

I vividly remembered the lady knight’s rock-solid, gallant posture.

I was the one who had ultimately captured Ludaman, but she’d had a fierce battle with the Plunderer King first.

“As it happens, Lady Ravna has already said you should get all the money because you saved her life.”

“I see. I’ll give it to her myself next time I see her, then.”

Knowing the serious-minded knight, she would probably refuse the money, so I decided to make her a broadsword or something to replace her broken blade.

A Magic Sword would seem too valuable, and an iron sword would make it difficult to produce “Spellblade,” so bronze or monster parts would probably make a good base.

As I mulled all this over, a faint knock reached my ears.

“Guildmaster?”

“Come in.”

The guildmaster’s secretary, Miss Ushana, entered, along with a grade school–age girl in a cloak.

She lowered her hood, revealing short, finely textured turquoise hair.

“Ugh. Sebelkeya.”

“How rude, Lilian.”

“Don’t call me that name!”

The guildmaster’s name was unexpectedly cutesy and girlish, but I decided to save poking fun at that for our next drinking party. Instead, I looked at the girl she’d called Sebelkeya.

Her hair color and slightly pointed ears made one thing clear: She was an elf, just like Mia.

However, she seemed to belong to the research-loving Bulainan clan, not Mia's Bolenan clan.

The elf girl was level 43 and seemed to specialize in Earth and Forest Magic.

Still, after all the epic tales of Sebelkeya's bravery that the guildmaster had told me in the bar, the real thing was a lot more adorable than I'd imagined.

"The Silent Bell of Bolenan?"

Noticing the bell at my waist, the girl gasped, looked at my face, and muttered something about my hair.

"<A pleasure to meet you, *he of the black hair*. I am Sebelkeya, maiden of the Bulainan Forest, daughter of Moberitoya and Keshilsea.>"

"<The pleasure is all mine. I am Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight and vassal of the Muno Barony of the Shiga Kingdom.>"

I exchanged formal introductions in Elvish with Sebelkeya.

"<…Satou?>"

She tilted her head at my name, then whispered, "<The ninth Holytree…?>"

Hmm?

That was the title the high elves had given me after I saved the World Trees.

The high elves knew my name, Satou, but I thought the other elves all knew me as the purple-haired, mask-wearing Nanashi the Hero.

Maybe she was making an educated guess.

Fortunately, my "Poker Face" skill kept my surprise from showing, so I just acted confused and didn't answer.

"What in the world, Satou? You can speak Elvish?"

"Yes, I learned it while traveling with an elf companion of mine."

The skill, that is.

"Huh. It's unusual for Sebelkeya to introduce herself first, though. What, have you fallen for Satou at first sight or something?"

"No, I was just showing respect for the Silent Bell he wears."

Sebelkeya and the guildmaster seemed to be quite close.

“Well, you can tell me all about your trip home later. For now, where’s my souvenir?”

“You’re such a boozehound, Lilian.”

“I told you to cut that out!”

Hmm?

Looking closely, I realized that the guildmaster’s name in my AR display was **Zona**, not Lilian.

I decided to keep quiet about that for now, but there was probably some entertaining story there about “her soul’s true name” or something. Maybe I could ask Miss Sebelkeya about it if we all went drinking sometime.

“I want to show off Bulainan fairy wine to Satou, too.”

“To Lord Satou? Why?”

“…Lord?” The guildmaster raised her eyebrows. “Sebelkeya, did you eat something that disagreed with you or what?”

“Don’t be impolite, Lilian. I’m acting perfectly normal.”

“No, in all the many years I’ve known you, I’m pretty sure this is the first time I’ve ever heard you call someone ‘Lord,’ so—”

Miss Ushana interrupted the pair’s banter.

“Lady Sebelkeya, I’m terribly sorry to disrupt your conversation, but might I make a brief report to the guildmaster?”

Uh-oh. If I was privy to private guild information, I might get caught up in something else.

“Well, it seems like my business is done here, so I’ll take my leave…”

“Just a moment, Sir Knight.”

I tried to sneak out, but Ushana stopped me.

“This concerns you as well. Please stay and listen.”

I guess there’s no escaping from Secretary Ushana.

◆

“This place stinks, as usual.”

The guildmaster pinched her nose.

We had arrived in the dungeon below the guild.

The Plunderer King Ludaman claimed to have secrets to share with the guildmaster, but for some reason, he said he would tell only if she brought me along.

“This way, please.”

Miss Ushana led the way.

Ludaman was confined in a particularly fortified cell in the dungeon.

On top of being held behind sturdy iron bars, he was also bound by thick chains. According to my AR, they were a magic item called **Demon-Sealing Chains**, probably to keep him from unleashing his superhuman strength.

He’d clearly been tortured already, as his body was covered in fresh wounds and healing bruises.

“Heh, now, that was fast.”

Ludaman looked up as he noticed our approach.

…His face.

The right side of his face, which had been hidden under a mask, was disfigured like that of an ogre.

“Hunh? What, ye never seen a man’s face warped by demonic potion before?”

Ludaman glared at me.

I guess his disfigured face was a side effect of demonic potion. Illegal drugs in fantasy worlds were no joke.

“So, Ludaman. You want to give us information all of a sudden? What’s with the change of heart?”

Paying no attention to Ludaman’s state, the guildmaster questioned him

tersely.

His warped face looked undaunted, even arrogant, as if he didn't feel an ounce of pain.

"You're gonna spare my life, that's what."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're to be publicly executed, you know."

The guildmaster shut down his plea bargaining before he could even reveal the nature of the information.

"S'pose that's fair enough. But I'll be damned if my death's gonna be a show for rotten nobles and filthy peasants. Can't ye send me to Violet?"

"Think about your crimes, will you?"

I didn't recognize a key word there, so I asked Ushana in a quiet voice.

"What is Violet?"

"A nickname for a unit of the army made up of criminal slaves."

She explained that they were famous for having a low survival rate, specializing in fighting powerful monsters or being used as decoys.

Ignoring our whispered conversation, Ludaman and the guildmaster continued their verbal battle.

"I'll have you know that you'll be executed at the west gate, in front of a splendid crowd."

"Ugh, I knew it'd be no good talking to ye, hag."

Ludaman scowled, then turned to me instead.

"What say ye, Mr. Kindly Noble? Ye'll help me out, won't ye?"

I didn't know why he would assume that, but I had no reason to hear out his request.

"Ye made a point of arrestin' us plunderers instead o' killin' us on the spot. Ye must not like lettin' people die, eh?"

So that was why he'd insisted I come along with the guildmaster: He hoped to take advantage of my aversion to killing.

How had he known I was at the guild *anyway*?

"It's true that I don't like killing, but I don't intend to protest a villain being executed."

I shut down his request as well.

"I've got some information that might be of interest to ye, though."

Information, huh?

If it had to do with the noble drama the green-clad noble was talking about, that would be a hard pass from me.

Come to think of it, he'd said he was going to interrogate the plunderers, but I didn't see him here. My map told me that he had already left the west guild. Had he tortured them that quickly?

Or did Miss Ushana or Miss Sebelkeya chase him off, maybe?

"If it's about the man behind Sokell, I don't care to hear it."

"Tch."

My words made Ludaman's scowl deepen.

That must have been the information he intended to bargain with, then.

Well, he could take that up with the green-clad noble.

"Guess it's the other one, then."

This time, Ludaman continued with a smirk of confidence.

"We've got some girls trapped in the labyrinth, cultivating ruination weeds and destruction stalks for us."

…What was that?

Terrible images ran through my mind.

A loud *crack* reverberated through the dungeon.

I'd accidentally snapped one of the iron bars in my hand.

"Yikes. Scary, pal."

Ludaman drew back, sweating heavily.

“Calm down, Satou.”

“Sorry, Guildmaster.”

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself.

With my maxed-out spirit stats in this world, it was an easy task to regain my composure.

It was all well and good to get righteously outraged, but it should be the girls who were mistreated by the plunderers who enacted justice on them, not me.

“Just so ye know, we never laid a hand on them, got it?”

“Hmph. As if you lawless wretches would spare a young woman your atrocities!” the guildmaster barked.

I didn’t especially believe him, either.

“It’s true. Play with a woman even a little, and they break just like that.”

The way he seemed to view women as less than human only increased my rage.

“I can’t have me any fun unless it’s a fella on demonic potion or a powerful woman like that lady knight I fought before.”

It angered me to hear him talk about Ravna that way, but the first half of the sentence did lessen my fury a little.

If that was true, then it might actually be possible that the women hadn’t been subjected to any violence of that nature.

Either way, as soon as this conversation was over, I would go rescue them immediately.

“Besides, what was it…? *These girls will be your laborers and the fertilizer for your fields.*”

Ludaman seemed to be repeating someone else’s words.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“That’s what the yellow-robed mage who taught us how to cultivate the ruination weeds and destruction stalks said.”

Yellow-robed mage…? Sounds like we've got another mystery character on our hands.

It was probably something to do with Sokell's secret supporter, but still, I wished the mysteries wouldn't keep multiplying.

"Cultivating? You said that before, too."

The guildmaster had taken interest in a different phrase than I did.

"If you just find a field of wild plants and claim it for your own, that's not called cultivating."

"Damn, I know that much, woman. Yellow Robes told us that the girls' fear and despair would make the ruination weeds and destruction stalks grow, see?"

If what Ludaman said was true, then these ruination weeds and destruction stalks probably grew by absorbing miasma.

"Guildmaster."

"I know."

Miss Ushana and the guildmaster exchanged glances, then nodded.

"Do you know what you're saying right now, Plunderer?"

"'Course. I'll tell ye where the girls are, and in exchange…"

"We won't have you publicly executed."

At that, Ludaman sneered triumphantly.

"Then ye'll send me to Violet—"

"I'll burn you to death myself. Sit here and repent till I get permission from the royal capital."

The guildmaster's cold words send Ludaman's hopes plummeting to hell.

"…Wh-what?! One of those girls is a noble's daughter, I'll have ye know! Hey, noble brat! Stop the old hag! I swear to ye, it's a royal capital noble's daughter—"

Ludaman kept shouting, but the guildmaster left the dungeon without looking back.

“Ushana, don’t let anyone into the dungeon. And have those plunderers’ throats crushed so they can’t talk anymore.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The guildmaster’s bitter expression and harsh tone left no room for disagreement.

Was what he said about cultivation really that dire?

“Shall I send a letter to the old capital?”

“No, no letter. We can’t let this information leak to anyone. Tell the viceroy to use the City Core to convey this information directly.”

City Cores were supposed to be a secret as well, but the guildmaster was talking about them in front of me easily.

“Satou.”

“Yes?”

“Swear.”

“I’m sorry?”

The guildmaster grabbed me by the back of the neck. “Swear.”

“What would you like me to swear?”

Loosening her grip, the guildmaster explained. “Swear that you will never tell another soul that the ingredients for demonic potions can be produced artificially and that you will never share the conditions for cultivating them that you just heard.”

“Understood. I swear on the name of the ancestral king Yamato and the Pendragon family name that I will never tell a soul.”

I didn’t quite understand the importance of this, but of course I wasn’t planning on telling anyone else.

I thought she would make Ushana swear next, but because the latter was a commoner, she would be bound by the “Contract” skill later.

“Guildmaster, about the women the plunderers captured—”

“Forget them,” the guildmaster said shortly.

“You’re just going to abandon them?”

My words came out harsher than I’d intended, and the guildmaster whirled and glared at me.

“You think I’m abandoning them because I want to?”

“Then why—?”

“The plunderers’ hideout is somewhere deep in the labyrinth, in one of the most dangerous areas, in order to keep out the labyrinth army. To rescue a few captives who may or may not even be safe, it would likely cost us dozens of lives. How am I supposed to justify that?”

I could do it easily with my Return spell, but I supposed it would be a difficult mission for any normal rescue team.

“Besides…”

The guildmaster paused.

What else is there?

“It’s about the cultivation.”

“The demonic-potion ingredients?”

“That’s right. If they don’t know what they’ve been growing, that’s one thing. But if they do, then the Shiga Kingdom will want to silence them, too.”

I guess the information Ludaman told us was even more dangerous than I realized.

Judging by the pained way the guildmaster was chewing her lip, I was sure she wanted to rescue the captives, too.

After that, we went aboveground in heavy silence.

The stairs to the dungeon were sealed off with Practical Magic, and a high-level employee was stationed as guard.

I received my reward money for apprehending Ludaman and the other plunderers, then stepped into the bright outdoors.

“It’s certainly nice to feel sunlight.”

I stretched, then started walking briskly.

I guess I’ll go save those captives from the plunderers’ hideout myself.

Plunderer Roundup

Satou here. The saying* If there's one, there's a hundred *is about cockroaches, but it seems like thieves have a similarly high reproductive rate. If only someone would invent a spray or poison trap that worked on thieves.

"Now, I guess I'll start by finding the plunderers' hideout on the map…"

Arriving in our labyrinth vacation home via teleportation, I transformed into Kuro and searched for the location of the plunderers.

They seemed to have four major bases and more than ten smaller ones.

Near the base closest to where we'd captured Ludaman, there was an area containing the captive women.

Judging by their positions, I would probably have to deal with the nearby plunderers before I could rescue them.

Investigating my best route on the map, I used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to investigate the area in question.

"Looks like trouble."

The base was more complicated than I thought, with paths that were difficult to enter and easy to flee. There were slopes and ledges that they could easily slide and jump down to escape, while invading would mean a lot of difficult uphill climbing.

I could see why the labyrinth army couldn't capture all the plunderers if their hideouts were like this.

If they tried to go and fight them head-on, it would be like attacking an impregnable fortress. The plunderers could send out a few disposable underlings to distract them and scatter through the many escape routes.

"…That doesn't matter to me, though, since I can fly."

Closing the map, I used Return to teleport to the closest seal slate to the hideout.

It was a corner of a partially underwater area where I'd planned on leveling up my party next.

The fastest route from here would be to go by way of the sections where we'd rescued the labyrinth army soldiers before.

I marked out the route on my map, turning the markers visible so I could navigate like a GPS, and started my rapid approach.

Along the way, I did my best to ignore and avoid any monsters I ran into.

Passing through the second area, my curiosity was piqued by monsters I'd never seen before, but I forced myself to avoid engaging with them.

"Ooh, a natural golem."

It looked flat and smooth, without any joints, but it still walked toward me and brought down its fist.

I dodged the fist lightly, admiring the various kinds of golems that gathered as I dashed away from them.

Many of them were made of mud or stone, but some even looked like they could be melted into bronze or iron. There were even some made of crystal, but sadly no silver or gold varieties.

I might be able to find that kind with a map search, but I could think about that after this rescue mission was completed.

Using "Warp" to dodge around the assorted golems' fists, I left the golem area behind.

"I should be in the plunderer area soon…"

Avoiding the slopes and cracks with "Skyrunning," I arrived at the point of the plunderers' lookout.

Turning all my stealth and spying skills up to the max, I warped soundlessly through the passages.

Where is he?

My radar showed the dots indicating a plunderer guard, but I didn't see one anywhere.

Oh, over there.

The plunderer was perfectly camouflaged against the wall.

I used "Warp" to land directly in front of him and knocked him out before he even noticed I was there.

This seemed to deactivate the camouflage, revealing almost grayish skin.

He was totally naked, too. I guess the camouflage didn't work on clothes.

I didn't particularly care to see a nude man, so I covered him with some rags and tied him up.

Although even if it had been a woman, I didn't think I was advanced enough to be attracted to someone with a face like a chameleon monster.

His face must have been warped by demonic potion, just like Ludaman's.

I picked up the captured plunderer with Magic Hand and carried him along.

Of course, I could've just left him there, but I didn't want to come back to find a corpse half-eaten by some monster.

Placing a seal slate and using Return every time I captured someone would've been way too much of a pain.

"Ooh, so this is the trap level?"

My "Trap Detection" skill informed me that there were several traps up ahead.

Beyond the traps, a weak-looking plunderer was dozing off in the middle of the passageway.

Actually, this guy might be one of the traps, too.

Standing in front of him was a transparent monster called a "wall slime" that appeared to be trained by the plunderer.

I'd seen monsters like this once in a famous tabletop RPG I played a long time ago.

If I hadn't noticed the red dot on my radar, I might have approached to capture the plunderer and run right into the wall slime.

"All right, I can't be wasting time here."

I used Magic Hand to push the plunderer from behind, sending him right into the wall slime.

Obviously, he panicked and started flailing around inside the creature's goo.

In the meantime, I crossed over the traps with "Skyrunning," then used a pebble to shoot out the oil slime's core right as it extended a tendril toward me.

Next, I produced a Thunder Rod from Storage and used it to electrocute the plunderer in the slime's remains, rendering him immobile.

"…Ew."

The man twitching on the ground was sticky with slime.

If I knocked him out with a punch, it might get on my clothes, so I used Magic Hand to strike the chameleon plunderer's head against his, then tied him up with the same spell.

"This one's face is warped, too…"

The upper half of the man's face was covered in murky blue crystals.

Maybe there were more people who'd been transfigured by demonic potion than I realized.

Next, I snuck through a corridor patrolled by an areamaster-class monster, then used "Warp" to get through a narrow passage populated by poisonous bugs and shadow monsters, until finally I came upon the first outpost of the plunderers.

"Looks like the real fight starts here."

Two lookouts with bows were standing around chatting.

There was a total of ten plunderers at the outpost; one of them was in the 30s, but the rest were all level 10 and below.

My first order of business was to deal with the one with skills like "Sprinting" and "Off-Road Running" before he escaped.

Not that it would matter if the noise of the battle alerted the rest of the base anyway.

Once I'd finished assessing the situation on my map, I thought about using Clairvoyance to scout things out but decided against it and closed my magic menu.

I didn't want some plunderer with sharp senses to notice me doing it.

Instead, I put down the two plunderers I was carrying with Magic Hand, then landed right in front of the two guards with "Flashrunning."

"Wh—?"

"Y—"

Before they could complete a word, I knocked both of them out with a few swift punches.

There didn't seem to be walls around the outpost, so I could see the rest of the plunderers from here.

One sharp-eyed plunderer noticed me and immediately tried to break into a run.

I don't think so.

I jumped in front of the plunderers with "Warp," then quickly knocked out the rabbitfolk plunderer with the "Sprinting" skill.

"What the—?"

Once the rest of the plunderers reached for their weapons, I brought them down one by one with artful steps.

When I hit one of them, he emitted a red light.

According to my AR, it was a buff called **Demonic Body**, a special side effect of overdosing on demonic potion.

"Boss!"

Oh?

One of the plunderers who I thought I'd knocked out was pulling himself up

and shouting.

I dealt another blow to the unexpectedly tough plunderer, knocking him out properly this time.

It was the one who'd let off the red light before, so on top of creating some kind of barrier, **Demonic Body** seemed to increase the user's endurance and strength as well.

For me, it just made him a little more annoying to deal with, but it might pose a serious challenge to a fighter on a similar level.

"Never seen you before. Are you a garnet-badge explorer?"

A half-naked man in his thirties swaggered out of the shadows, looking like a self-styled big shot.

"Your Wolfsbane, comrade."

A completely naked man emerged from behind the half-naked one, handing him a spear with a black blade.

"Wolfsbane" must be the name of the Magic Spear.

"Think you can just show up and interrupt my fun? I'll be killin' you slowly, mate."

The half-naked man swallowed what appeared to be demonic potion. Red magic circles glowed on his body for a moment, then disappeared as jet-black scales grew over his arms.

"Demon Armor—Black Scales."

As he uttered what must have been an activation phrase, a pair of bumps on his forehead grew into two horns.

It was a pretty cheesy name, but the overall effect was that of a pretty cool antihero.

"Bwa-ha-ha, cower in fear! For he is none other than the right-hand man of Plunderer King Ludaman: Demon Warrior Kurse!"

The naked man sneered as he introduced the half-naked warrior.

That's great and all, but could you put some clothes on, please?

“Come at me, user of the black arts! But paralytic poison won’t work on the likes of me!”

I was actually empty-handed, but since I’d defeated all his comrades in an instant, he must have assumed that I had a hidden dagger coated with paralytic poison.

“Or are you too scared?”

Kurse brandished his Magic Spear and bucked his horns intimidatingly.

He had skills like “Spear,” “Blink,” and even the unusual “Counterattack.”

That must be why he wanted me to attack him first.

This was a rare chance, so I decided to lower my attacks to a speed at which he could counterattack it so that I could learn the skill, too.

I produced a cheap dagger from Storage, moved toward him slowly enough to avoid using “Blink,” and jabbed at the man.

“Tch. Not bad, assassin!”

I had tried to hold back considerably, but it took all the man had just to dodge, so he wasn’t able to counterattack.

Oh, all right. Tossing the dagger aside, I swung a straightforward telephone punch at him instead.

“Bad move, mate! *Demon Wolf’s Fang!*”

Shouting some kind of attack name, the man unleashed a counterattack.

Black mist whirled around his spear, spinning like a drill as it zoomed toward me.

If I let that hit me, it’d probably hurt.

I held up a magic-armored hand to knock the spear away before it hit me, then used the other hand to strike him right in the jaw.

The red light around the man’s body disappeared.

> Skill Acquired: “Counterattack”

Sweet, I got the skill.

“Guuuuuh!”

The warrior unleashed an animalistic yell and managed to stay standing.

I thought that attack would knock him out, but he was tougher than I thought.

I grabbed his shoulder with one hand, smacking him around with the other hand to render him unconscious.

“B… Bwuh…”

He seemed to be trying to say something, but the rapid blows to his cheeks prevented him from speaking properly, and finally he passed out.

“Let go of him!”

The naked man raised a scimitar and charged at me.

He should be the last plunderer in the area.

My new “Counterattack” skill helped me block and counter the attack with just the right timing.

I followed its guidance and swung my fist and was able to knock him out with even less strength than usual.

Well, fractionally less anyway.

“Now, it would be a pain to carry all these guys around…”

I surveyed the plunderers lying strewn across the floor.

There was a perfectly sized patch of exposed dirt in one corner, and I couldn’t really make a pit here due to the nature of the labyrinth, so I decided to make a temporary jail.

I tied up the men, disarmed them, and collected them all on the patch of earth.

Just as I was about to use the Earth Magic spell Wall from my magic menu, I heard a battle cry from one of the plunderers.

“My slime is the strongeeeeest!”

The second plunderer I’d defeated, the slime fellow, had recovered and was charging at me.

Judging by the red light around him, he must have popped some demonic potion while I wasn't looking.

He had cut through the ropes around him with crystalline claws that had sprouted from his fingers.

"Take thiiiiis!"

"…Yeeesh!"

Slimy tentacles sprouted from his mouth and nose, startling me into making a strange noise.

"What is this, a freak show?"

Muttering to myself, I saw in my AR that the tentacles were a monster called a **Parasite Slime**. They must have been living in the man's body.

If I hadn't electrocuted him with the Thunder Rod before, these slimes might've come out to attack me the first time.

I didn't want to have a hand-to-hand fight with this sticky weirdo, so I used my go-to, Magic Hand, to grab his legs and pull him to the ground.

Before he could get up, I pulled out the Thunder Rod and paralyzed him along with the parasitic slimes.

"You're not getting away!"

The chameleon man tried to escape while I was dealing with the slime man, but I used a stone spear from Storage to pin him to the wall.

The demonic potion must have permanently altered their bodies to recover more quickly.

"Kwaaaaeo!"

Even their screams didn't sound human.

I hit the chameleon man harder than before to knock him out, propped him up next to the other plunderers, and started making a prison with Wall to trap them in.

Even these superhuman freaks shouldn't be able to bust through a fifteen-foot-thick earth wall.

The particularly tough half-naked man, Kurse, was already recovering, and I heard him cursing through the small air hole.

“Sit tight. I’ll come back to collect you later.”

With that, I left the plunderer outpost behind.

After taking down a few more lookout posts, I finally arrived at the main hideout.

It had taken about a half hour from my arrival via Return. Maybe I wasted too much time.

“Security is one’s greatest enemy, you know.”

As one of the sentries of the main hideout yawned, I snuck up behind him and incapacitated him.

Quickly assessing the base on my map, I determined the best way to reach the captives, as well as an escape route.

“Hmm, how about a blockade?”

I used Earth Magic to create a giant wall blocking the four main passages.

The bare earth wasn’t exposed in this area, but I was still able to make a wall by using three to five times more magic than usual.

That made a slightly more brittle wall than it normally would, but I just made it extra thick to make up for that.

“Wh-what the?!”

“Those labyrinth bastards are serious this time!”

“A wall?!”

Ignoring the voices of panicking plunderers, I used “Flashrunning” to charge at the main building, to make a single opening.

Flexible Shield!

Right before I collided with the building, I used the intermediate Practical Magic spell Flexible Shield to soften the impact.

The wall I’d crashed into broke open like Styrofoam, alarming the plunderers

inside with a *boom* and a cloud of dust.

> Title Acquired: Attacker

“W-we’re under attack!”

“Is it other plunderers?!”

“No, only a demon could do something like this!”

A demon? How rude.

Oops. One of the plunderers was trying to escape through a secret exit.

I used “Warp” to appear in front of him, stomping down the stone cover he was attempting to lift.

“Good call, but you’re a little too late.”

“Tch, masked bastard!”

The plunderer whipped out a sword from his belt and slashed at me.

The black blade emitted a red light as it swung through the air.

“A cursed sword, huh?”

According to the AR, it was a magic one-handed sword from the labyrinth.

The information displayed didn’t mention that it was cursed, but it was pitch-black when I turned on my “Miasma Vision” for a moment, so there was little doubt.

Pulling out a cheap dagger again, I parried the plunderer’s sword.

The dagger broke with a sharp *clang*.

I guess cheap weapons aren’t very durable.

“What, did you crack it with some stupid attack?”

Seeing my weapon break, the plunderer sneered nastily and licked his blade.

It was only then that I noticed that his tongue was forked like a snake’s.

On closer inspection, his arms were longer than normal, too.

“Diiiiie!”

“Yer goin’ doooown!”

The other plunderers started bellowing and charging at me, too, encouraged by their comrade’s apparent advantage in battle.

These guys all had strange physical traits, too, like insect-or crab-like carapaces on their limbs or animallike fur.

One of them was even a snake from the head up, but that was because he was a race of beastfolk called “snake-headed folk.”

“Raaah!”

“Take thiiis!”

As the plunderers attacked from all sides, I swung a stone spear from Storage to knock them all back.

It wasn’t too strong a swing, but it still knocked all of them into the walls.

“Wh-where’d this bastard come from?”

“Tch! A mage?”

“There was no chant. Must be a magic tool!”

Bzzzt. It’s a Unique Skill.

“Use the drugs, boys! No holding back now! Don’t let this crazy masked bastard get away alive!”

Seeing his comrades at a loss, the Magic Sword wielder shouted instructions.

He must have been left in charge while Ludaman was away.

“This’ll be easy. When we’ve had demonic potion, we can take on an enemy above level ten no problem!”

As the plunderers scrambled for their demonic potions, the leader put on a bluffing leer, displaying a fang-like dogtooth.

Sorry, but ten levels isn’t going to do much. You’re still 280 levels short.

“Rrrrgh!”

“Here gooooes!”

Once the group had taken the dangerous drug, they entered an overdose state.

The red magic circles that appeared on their body seeped into their skin, warping their bodies even further.

Some grew horns, some had blades burst out of their upper arms, and some grew feathered or leathery wings.

They were like crude mash-ups of humans and monsters.

“That’s freaky,” I muttered.

“Heh, someone who’s never taken demonic potion wouldn’t understand this all-powerful feeling!” an effeminate man boasted.

“Here comes Red-Blade Garon, the Plunderer King Ludaman’s number one warrior!”

“I’m the top warrior here! Black-Blade Ashiro—special move Armor-Piercing Blade!”

“Already?! Fine, then I’ll use my secret technique, Triple Lava Attack!”

The leader with the black blade and the effeminate man with the red blade bantered with each other as they both launched some kind of special attack.

With the enhancement from the demonic potion, they moved remarkably quickly.

The leader’s was a slashing attack, while the other man’s was stabbing.

Of course, with skills like “Foresight: Versus Human,” I could intercept the attacks, but instead I decided to break their hearts by countering with a secret move of my own.

“Sixfold Rapid Attack.”

It was a special move I’d learned from Hayato, Hero of the Saga Empire, in the old capital.

I struck in six quick flashes of my spear, narrowly avoiding directly piercing the plunderers, who were sent flying with a spray of blood.

They burst through the wall of the building, the shock wave knocking out the

rest of the lowly plunderers with ease.

The stone spear crumbled in my hands, unable to withstand the force of the move. Then, with a loud crash, the building collapsed, too.

Escaping into the air with “Skyrunning,” I watched the plunderers from the ceiling.

The stone spear hadn’t even grazed them, but the shock wave had done considerable damage.

The Hero’s move was an impressive one, all right.

It wasn’t quite what I’d planned, but the plunderers outside were too stunned to move, so I used Remote Stun from the magic menu.

The target marks in my AR locked onto the plunderers, one after another.

“Fire.”

As the plunderers stared at the ruins of the building, mouths agape, I treated them to a rain of 120 Remote Stuns.

The Magic Bullets knocked them down one by one, but the ones cloaked with the red light of Demonic Body hadn’t been knocked out completely and started taking cover in the shadows.

These guys who were overdosing on demonic potion were a major pain.

This time, instead of the Remote Stun spell I normally reserved for people, I selected the Short Stun spell I reserved for monsters.

Another invisible rain of bullets came down, hitting the plunderers along with the other facilities of the base.

Short Stun was too powerful to leave them totally intact, since it could break even the hardest of monster carapaces, so most of the plunderers were knocked out with serious injuries.

One of them sensed the non-homing Short Stun somehow and managed to dodge it instinctively, but I took care of him with my fist.

“Now it’s time to rescue the captives, right?” I murmured to myself as I tied up the forty or so plunderers.

Because I was getting a little tired, I forgot to disguise my voice, but it wasn't as if anyone was listening.

Opening the map, I reassessed my position.

The captives were being held in an area several rooms away.

Dots indicated two people were approaching from that direction.

"Huh? Did I go the wrong way?"

One was a plunderer, and the other…

"Let go of me, you brute!"

"You got grit, eh, noble girl? I like that."

I heard their voices from the other side of the wall I'd used to seal off the passage.

"Maybe I'll just have a taste right here?"

"If you lay a hand on me, you won't get your ransom money!"

"Bwa-ha-ha!"

"What's so funny?!"

"Yer parents have already given up on you, girlie."

"Th-that can't be!"

This was a pretty awful conversation.

"I like seeing that look on a high-class girlie…"

"Wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

"Heh-heh, just havin' some fun while Ludaman's away!"

I heard the sound of fabric tearing, so I removed the wall and sprang between them.

"Wh-who are you?! There ain't no one with white hair in our gang!"

"A mask?"

Both of them looked at me in surprise.

I was currently disguised as Kuro, covering the top half of my face with a white mask.

The scar on my cheek was visible on the lower half of my face.

“Die!”

The plunderer pulled out a knife and charged.

He didn’t seem to be using demonic potion, so I used the help of my “Abduction” skill to knock him out without killing him, albeit a little painfully.

“That takes care of the last piece of garbage in this dump.”

I tried to imitate the voice and mannerisms of the movie character I’d based Kuro on.

“Th-thank you for saving me.”

The young woman I’d rescued, who was blond and around twenty years old, covered her exposed chest as she thanked me.

“I am Eluterina Rondorbell. My father is a baron, and my grandfather is Marquis Kelten, who has great military clout. I’m sure he can grant any wish you might have as thanks.”

Having been held captive for so long, the young noblewoman was dirty, a bit smelly, and so on, but she was probably quite beautiful when properly clean.

I opened my Item Box and gave her some cloth with which to cover her chest.

“So please, could you rescue the women being held captive inside as well?”

“I don’t need any thanks. I came to rescue the plunderers’ captives, so that’s what I’ll do.”

As I nodded, I couldn’t help admiring the noblewoman for asking me to save everyone instead of trying to escape with me right away.

Normally, it would be a pretty tall order, but for me, it shouldn’t be a problem.

“M-might I ask your name?”

“I am Kuro, a follower of Nanashi the Hero.”

This was the role I'd come up with while knocking out the plunderers.

"The Hero…?"

Behind her, I saw one of the plunderers twitch a finger.

I'd better take care of them first.

"Just a moment."

"A-all right…"

As I made the forty or so plunderers float in the air, the young woman let out a gasp.

"Wh-when did he recite that chant…?"

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up her nearly inaudible murmur.

Oh right. Chant-less magic is a trick that only heroes and reincarnations can usually do, huh?

I wasn't particularly planning to hide my power as Kuro, but I wouldn't want to give away any information that might make me easier to identify, either.

From now on, I would mutter things like "float" and "teleport" using "Ancient Language" and use the Illusion spell to produce some special effects, so I could claim that I was using an ancient treasure.

"B-but Magic Hand shouldn't be able to lift this many people… Is it some sort of skill?"

She didn't have any magic skills, but she seemed pretty knowledgeable about Practical Magic.

"It's an ancient treasure I received from my leader."

"An ancient treasure…"

The noblewoman murmured to herself in wonder.

"I'll be back. Don't move—just wait in this room. *Teleport!*"

I pressed a canteen of water into the girl's hands, then teleported to another room in the labyrinth with the plunderers in tow.

It was a room where my group had wiped out all the monsters back in our

second round of labyrinth exploration.

This was one of the few places in the labyrinth with exposed earth where Earth Magic was permitted, which was why I'd chosen it as the spot to temporarily keep all the plunderers.

I could've just brought them to the first outpost where I'd made a jail, but it would've been a pain to round up the plunderers from all the other outposts and put them there, so I picked this large space instead.

I put the disarmed plunderers in the area of the soon-to-be second jail, then raised a thick earth wall to the ceiling to shut them in.

The floor and sides were reinforced to prevent them from digging out. Even if they had handy skills or superhuman strength, they shouldn't be able to escape for at least the next few days.

Some of them also seemed to be female, so I put the men and women into separate jails, just in case.

It took only a second anyway, since I was using the Wall spell.

I wasn't leaving them any food, but I did supply them with a few casks of water. They would probably be fine for a few days.

Oh right.

I contacted Lelillil in the Ivy Manor with the Telephone spell.

"Lelillil, I'm going to be bringing several victims soon who were captured by plunderers. Can you make some preparations?"

"Of course, Lord Satou! Shall I prepare private rooms for them?"

I thought for a moment.

The captives had probably gone through terrible ordeals, so it was probably best not to leave them alone.

"Could you prepare one big room and a few shared bedrooms for them, please?"

"Yes! Right away, sir! I won't let you down!!"

Lelillil gave an energetic affirmative.

Thanking her, I used Return to go back to a seal slate I'd left near the room in the hideout where the noblewoman was waiting.

◆

"Wh-who's there?!"

As soon as I entered the hideout, the blond noblewoman brandished a kitchen knife at me.

She must have found one the plunderers had been using.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"L-Lord Kuro!"

…"Lord"?

"Let's go rescue the others."

"O-of course. I'll show you the way."

She started to take the lead, but I put a hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry. I know you might not want a man to touch you right now, but bear with me a minute, all right?"

With that, I lifted her up bridal-style.

She trembled in surprise, but judging by her red cheeks and her expression, she didn't seem to object.

"I-I'm sorry?"

"If you're scared, just close your eyes."

"R-right! It's my first time, so please be gentle…"

She seemed to have misunderstood. Regardless, I placed Enchant: Physical Protection on her for safety, then sped toward the room with the captives with repeated use of "Warp."

She must be pretty brave to make a joke like that after how the plunderers may have mistreated her.

Using the map, I kept zooming forward, and we arrived in a matter of seconds.

“Is it on the other side of this boulder?”

“Y-yes, thasss right…”

She mumbled incoherently, dizzy from the high speed.

Moving aside the boulder and the steel stay bar, I stepped into the dark room where the women were being held.

I could see fields where plants that looked like black-grained barley and dark-red wheat were growing.

Those must be the ruination weeds and destruction stalks, the main ingredients of demonic potion. *Ruination barley* and *destruction wheat* would’ve been more accurate, if you ask me.

The living quarters of the captives seemed to be farther inside.

“Eluterina!”

“Leader!”

As we entered the room, two girls, one with chestnut hair and one redhead, came running up to embrace the noblewoman.

They appeared to be explorer buddies, both from noble families.

To keep things from getting too confusing, I’ll just refer to the noblewoman I first met as the “blond noblewoman.”

“I’m here to save you. Bring everyone here. If there’s anything you want to take with you, grab that, too.”

The girls looked at me suspiciously, but when they saw Eluterina nod, they let out cries of joy.

Drawn by their voices, the women who’d been gathering at a distance came over, too.

There was a total of forty-three people here, all women.

For some reason, six of them were still cooped up in an area separate from the main living quarters.

“Is this everyone?”

“There are also four doctors and one alchemist. Polina went to get them, so they should be here soon.”

“I see.”

Nodding at the blond noblewoman, I looked around at the rest of the captives.

“We really get to leave?”

“I’ll finally see my family again…”

“We’re saved. I can’t believe it…”

Aside from the noble girls I’d spoken to first, most of the others seemed more confused than happy.

Right. I guess I’d better warn them.

“I’m going to get you all out of the labyrinth.”

I waited for them to understand before I continued.

“But I can’t return you to your families right away.”

At this, some of the girls started crying or wailing. I quickly went on.

“Before I release you, I have to rescue the people being kept in other areas. Please just give me a few days.”

To be honest, not all of that was true.

I was afraid that the higher-ups in the Shiga Kingdom might try to have these girls killed if they knew they’d been cultivating demonic-potion ingredients, so I wanted to buy some time to take care of that.

“I’m going to teleport us to a safe house aboveground now.”

“W-wait!”

“Please, not yet!”

A muscular girl and the blond noble both cried out to stop me.

“What is it?”

“Polina isn’t back with the doctors yet.”

Oh right. I forgot about that.

"Don't worry. I'll come back for them." Then I turned from the blond noblewoman to the muscular girl. "What about you?"

"The bodies of some of my friends, and theirs, are in the torture room over there. I'd at least like to bring back their explorers' badges or locks of their hair…"

Opening the map, I looked for the torture room in question.

Dangerous monsters patrolled the route there, including some with paralytic poison or petrification abilities.

"The path to the torture room is too dangerous. I can go there for you and get what you need."

"Please take me with you! I want to say a few burial rites for them…"

I tried to go by myself, but the muscular girl pleaded to come along, so I relented.

"All right. But I can only bring two of you."

Any more than that, and it would be difficult to protect them all.

"Then I will come with you, Elder Sister."

Eluterina stepped forward.

It appeared that the other captives referred to the muscular girl as "Elder Sister."

"All right. You two wait here for a moment, please."

I picked up the rest of the girls and their belongings with Magic Hand, then teleported all of them to the Ivy Manor.

"Wh-where are we?"

"Big Sis, look! The sun! I can see the sun!"

"Are we really outside? Truly?"

Standing in the garden, the girls looked up at the sky with tears in their eyes.

Lelillil arrived to greet us, so I left her in charge and went back into the

labyrinth.

◆

“This is the torture room?”

“Must be. I’ve never been here myself, but you can tell from the smell of blood.”

Back in the labyrinth, I proceeded to the torture room with the blond noblewoman and the muscular Elder Sister.

However…using a torch as our light source might have been a bad idea.

With the blood-slick torture instruments, the rotten odor, and the pit with flies buzzing around it, the flickering shadows cast by the flame just emphasized the horror-like atmosphere.

If this were a certain famous horror game, my sanity meter would be plummeting right now.

And sure enough…

> Skill Acquired: “Madness Resistance”

…my log only confirmed my thoughts.

I was curious about how this was different from skills like “Psychic Resistance” and “Fear Resistance,” but I still had tons of skill points, so I quickly maxed it out and activated it in the hopes of easing the disturbed feeling in my gut.

“Garth, Zahana, Bodorina…you can pass on knowing that this man has saved us.”

Miss Elder Sister peered down at the bodies in the pit, speaking gently.

I watched over her from a distance, not wanting to interrupt her good-byes.

“When the plunderers capture a man, they force him to choose between joining their crew after providing them ‘entertainment’ or being tortured to death,” the blond noblewoman explained to me softly.

Because there was an air vent that ran from this room to the field, the agonizing screams reached it directly.

The cruelty of these plunderers made me feel sick.

“We women were kept in that room and forced to tend to those strange plants, but every few weeks, the plunderers would bring in a new woman and take one away in exchange.”

The woman they took away would be tortured to death like the men.

As if just hearing those screams wouldn’t have been agonizing enough…

“I hated myself for being relieved when I wasn’t the one chosen.”

Tears started to stream down the blond noblewoman’s cheeks, so I gently held her to my chest.

While I comforted her, the other young woman finished saying her final words to the fallen explorers.

She started to go into the pit to retrieve their badges, but I stopped her.

Instead, I made a show of collecting the bones and badges into the Item Box with Magic Hand, while secretly using Magic Hand to put the entire bodies into Storage as well.

At the very least, I wanted to bury them somewhere that sunlight would reach.

“Lord Kuro, what is this magic circle?”

As she turned away to wipe her tears, the blond noblewoman pointed at a sinister magic circle decorated with skulls and bones.

Activating my “Miasma Vision,” I saw that the whole room was so full of miasma that it was pitch-black, and the magic circle was absorbing the miasma and curses.

With all this miasma around, though, I was surprised that the victims’ bodies hadn’t turned into undead monsters in the pit. Most likely, this magic circle was what had prevented that.

Flipping through some materials about magic circles, I couldn’t help wishing that I had a reverse image search.

…Hmm? I got a search result?

Evidently, Storage had had a built-in image search all along.

“It’s to amplify and diffuse madness. Looks like they used it to strengthen negative emotions and spread them around.”

This information was contained in materials I’d taken from the Wings of Freedom, a cult that had resurrected a demon lord beneath the old capital.

According to these materials, it had been passed down to one of their ancestors by the yellow-skinned demon.

They had apparently used this kind of magic circle to create fertile ground for reviving the demon lord until the chaos jars and malice urns were completed.

Maybe the yellow-robed person Ludaman had mentioned was connected to the yellow demon somehow.

“Should we destroy it?”

“Of course.”

The last thing I needed was for this thing to bring that demon lord back again after I’d defeated him in the old capital.

I used a Holy Stone’s blue light to wipe away the evil magic circle.

“Holy light?”

“So, Mr. White Hair—erm, Lord Kuro—really does work for the Hero.”

Eluterina and Miss Elder Sister looked at me with eyes full of admiration.

Anyone can use a Holy Stone, you know.

Although most other Holy Stones wouldn’t produce blue light, since I’d customized mine with blue.

Now, a thought had just occurred to me, so I kept the physical destruction to a minimum as we left the torture chamber behind.

“…You don’t want to leave?”

When the blond noblewoman brought me to the small room containing the doctors, the alchemist who spoke for their group gave a shocking declaration.

I had sent the muscular girl to gather the other girls at the Ivy Manor.

I wanted to leave the blond noble there, too, but she insisted on coming with me because she was worried about the girl, Polina.

“And why is that?”

“I’m from the alchemy guild, and these girls are apprentices from the doctors’ guild.”

That didn’t explain why they didn’t want to leave, so I waited for her to continue.

“We’ve been forced to make corpse potions and demonic potions here.”

I had them show me the potions they’d been making, all of which were very low-quality.

They probably didn’t have the skills to make advanced drugs like these.

There were some higher-quality demonic potions in the hideout, too. Ludaman must have been providing materials to an outside source to make better potions while attempting to make them on his own, too.

“If you take us outside, we’ll be publicly executed as criminals for making these illegal drugs.”

They said they would rather die here than face that fate.

According to them, even if they explained that they had been forced to do it, it wouldn’t lighten their sentence.

“Couldn’t you just flee Labyrinth City, then?”

“No…”

They regretted their sins so deeply that they would’ve felt guilty about getting away to live in freedom.

“All right, I understand. I’ll try to come up with a solution, so let’s deal with that once we’ve left here.”

Without waiting for an answer, I teleported with them to the Ivy Manor.

I could help handle their conflict after I’d rescued the other captives and arrested all the plunderers.

Since these girls definitely knew what they'd been cultivating, I had Lelillil put them in a room separate from all the others for now.

◆

"What the hell?! Just who do you think I am?!"

"Beats me."

A plunderer charged at me despite the hail of Remote Stun bullets I'd brought down on him, so I knocked him out with a punch instead.

Once I'd sent the blond noblewoman, the alchemist, and the doctors to the Ivy Manor, I'd set about taking down the other plunderer hideouts.

This was the last one left that had captives.

"I ain't done yeeeeeet!"

The bloodied plunderer stood up; I must have held back too much.

The half-baked toughness of these demonic-potion addicts was getting exhausting.

"Go to sleep already."

As the plunderer brandished a knife that was glowing red, I hopped in front of him using "Warp."

Then I held back a bit less than usual as I punched him, resulting in the unpleasant sensation of his bones splintering under my fist.

"Nnngaaahhh!"

Oops. His Demonic Body effect must have worn off right before I hit him.

The plunderer fell to the ground, bleeding out from deadly wounds.

I would've felt guilty if I just let him die, so I sprinkled a low-grade magic potion from the previous hideout over him to be safe.

"D-don't move! Or I'll kill this human wench!"

One of the plunderers I'd defeated earlier had recovered and was holding hostage a woman he'd been abusing.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha!"

The woman let out a shrill laugh despite the knife pressed to her throat; maybe the repeated assaults had made her go mad.

“This is all just awful.”

The plunderers’ toughness and their terrible deeds were both wearing me down.

I’d rescued plenty of people who had been through unthinkably terrible things, but that was one thing I’d never get used to.

The gloom was beginning to build up heavily in my heart.

“Drop your weapon now! I-I’m serious!”

The man’s knife pressed harder against the woman’s throat, drawing blood.

Ignoring his threats, I teleported over to him with “Warp,” then punched him in the face, taking care not to shatter his skull.

I had used Magic Hand to hold his knife hand in place, so it didn’t move an inch.

As the rest of the plunderer’s body went flying, his trapped arm hit an unnatural angle with an unpleasant *crack*, but I didn’t feel an ounce of regret about that.

I collected all the plunderers from this base, used Return to teleport to the jail area I’d created, and tossed them into a new earthen prison.

I could hear shouts of rage from the plunderers in several of the other jails, but I paid them no mind, returning to the last base to rescue the captives.

“The plants in this one have been picked clean, too…”

Around half of the hideouts I’d investigated had fields for destruction stalks and ruination weeds.

However, aside from the first base I visited, Ludaman’s hideout, more than half of the plants had withered, and the rest no longer bore fruit.

The main difference between the first hideout and the rest of them was that strange magic circle.

Most likely, that magic circle held the key factor in cultivating the ingredients

for the demonic potions.

“The yellow-robed mage, huh…?”

That was how Ludaman had referred to the man who had taught them the cultivation methods.

It would probably be best to try to get more information from Ludaman about that.

Since the dungeon he was in was currently sealed, I decided to talk to the guildmaster about the magic circles and save sneaking in as a last resort.

“…Wh-who are you?”

The quavering voice drew my attention behind me, where a group of women stood looking exhausted to the point of near death.

The woman who’d been laughing maniacally before was quiet as a corpse.

“Sorry, I was lost in thought. I’ll bring you all to a safe place.”

At that, the women broke into weak smiles.

“Come here, please… *Teleport.*”

I picked up each of the women with Magic Hand and used the Return spell to head back up to the Ivy Manor.

“Lord Kuro!”

The moment she saw me, the blond noble came running over to me with a shriek.

Now that she’d bathed and had put on makeup, she looked more mature than her years.

Besides makeup, I had also given the noble girls dresses, shoes, and so on, albeit nothing too fancy.

She was quite a beauty, though less like an actress and more the intellectual business-world type.

“I hardly recognize you.”

“Thank you!”

The blonde gave me a sparkling smile.

If I were a little younger, I might misunderstand her eagerness for a crush on me.

Behind her, a plain young woman waited her turn to talk to me.

“Lord Kuro, thank you for showing such generous treatment to commoners like myself.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“No, you’ve already done more than enough.”

This was Polina, the bag-carrier girl who’d gone to fetch the doctors before.

Many bag carriers and explorers tended to be pretty rough-and-tumble, but her polite words and calm attitude felt very refined.

“I brought you some hot water, Lord Kuro.”

“Oh, thanks.”

I drank the hot water to soothe my parched throat.

Through the steam, I saw that Miss Elder Sister was taking care of the girls I’d just rescued from the latest hideout, showing them to their rooms.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha!”

“Calm down. Your suffering will be over soon.”

Miss Elder Sister’s words to the disturbed young woman sounded ominous, but she was referring to Lelillil’s healing House Magic.

There had been a few other women in a similar state to this one, but Lelillil’s House Magic skills “Mind Care” and “Recuperation” had brought their minds peace.

Wow, house fairies are amazing.

I praised Lelillil’s impressive magic, and she puffed up her chest like a proud child.

According to her, the magic’s effects were temporary, but that should be good enough for now.

What these girls needed most at the moment was rest and comfort.

Since Lelillil seemed to be taking good care of them, I left her in charge with the help of three of the young women: the blond noblewoman Miss Eluterina; the carrier Polina; and the muscular explorer Miss Elder Sister, aka Sumina.

Eluterina excelled at giving people instructions, Polina was popular and good at negotiating, and Sumina was highly skilled at resolving disputes.

I also had the five girls I'd rescued from the fire assisting Lelillil and running messages to the blond noblewoman.

If they had nowhere else to go, maybe I could just start paying them to work for me.

"Do you need anything else?"

"E-erm… The food, well…"

The blond noble hesitated, reluctant to complain, so I looked to Polina to finish for her.

"There's not enough food."

"I'll put more in the storehouse, then."

Right, I forgot.

Since Lelillil had originally lived here alone, of course the manor wouldn't have enough supplies stocked up for the nearly two hundred women I'd rescued.

Incidentally, most of the rescued girls were explorers or bag carriers, but there were also doctors, alchemists, priests, soldiers, prostitutes, and other professions.

The vast majority of them were commoners, but a little over 20 percent were slaves, and there were also more nobles than I'd expected.

"What kind of food would you like?"

"We were chewing on weeds down in the labyrinth. Anything edible is fine with us, even if it's not perfect."

Polina smiled a bit self-derisively.

“Highly nutritious foods it is, then. You can check them over later.”

The Ivy Manor had a food storehouse with temperature control, so I planned to stock it with rice, vegetables, a few sweet and vitamin-loaded yellorange fruits from the Mountain-Tree, and one-ton blocks of whale and octopus monster meat.

First, however, I wanted to confirm something.

“Do you know what the plunderers were forcing you to make?”

“Yes, I heard the alchemist and doctors arguing about it at the base…”

“I’d seen them before in a medicinal herb encyclopedia at the royal academy.”

Both Polina and the blond noble affirmed, although they wisely refrained from naming the substance out loud.

“What about the others?”

“No, I believe it was only the alchemist and the doctors, unless anyone else overheard by chance.”

“I haven’t said a word to anyone, so I don’t think they know.”

Hmm. That was a relief.

“Lord Kuro…”

Seeing me deep in thought must have made them nervous about their futures; both Polina and Eluterina turned pale.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

If it seemed like they were doomed to oblivion here, I could always ask the elves of Bolenan Forest to make a hidden village for them to live in.

That might be too meddlesome of me, but I wouldn’t be able to sleep soundly knowing I’d sent them out into the world unprotected.

“I have a request for you two. Whenever you sense an opportunity in conversation, try to find anyone else who knows what you were growing.”

I felt bad for making them do spy work, but I had to figure out who else knew.

It would be nice if there was a simple way to determine the truth, but the only method I knew of was an analyst's examination.

Unfortunately, there wasn't an analyst conveniently among the rescued.

As I finished speaking with the pair, another light approached on my radar.

"Lord Kuro! Isn't there anything I can do, too? …Wait, were you talking about something serious?"

It was the explorer Sumina, who the other girls called Elder Sister.

"Sumina, did you know you were growing gabo barley and gabo wheat in the labyrinth?"

I used my "Fabrication" skill to come up with a name that wouldn't be associated with destruction stalks and ruination weeds, then offered Sumina a leading question.

Polina and the blond noblewoman looked surprised for an instant but quickly resumed their normal expressions.

"Huh, so that's what those creepy plants were called. Are they related to those gross gabo fruits?"

"Yeah, seems the plunderers were going to use them to create a goblin army."

"Yikes, now, that's scary."

Sumina seemed to believe the story I'd made up with the help of "Fabrication."

It looked like she didn't know they were actually cultivating demonic-potion ingredients, then.

"It's better if nobody else hears about this. So keep it between us, all right?"

"R-right, of course."

I didn't know how loose-lipped this Elder Sister was, but "between us" often led to something being spread around pretty quickly.

Better yet, a gossipy-looking girl passing through the hallway had been listening at the door when I said this, so the story would probably permeate the

whole group by the following day.

Hopefully, it would satisfy the curiosity of those who didn't know what they'd been cultivating.

Even if it didn't sound convincing, that could be enough for a lot of people.

"So, Lord Kuro, is there some way I can help?"

"Hmm, let me think…"

Sumina wanted to help, so I decided to ask her to sort through the tools and equipment I'd taken from the plunderers' bases.

The explorers who'd lost their belongings could get new equipment from the stash or sell pieces of equipment to buy whatever they needed.

By the time I'd finished dropping all the items in the courtyard by way of the Item Box, Sumina had returned with a group of helpers.

"Oof, that stinks!"

"It certainly is quite the stench… *Deodorant.*"

I used magic to deodorize the foul-smelling junk heap.

"Whoa! That's amazing, Lord Kuro!"

The young explorer women were thrilled about the no-longer-smelly armor and weapons.

"I'm surprised those plunderers had such nice stuff."

"There's hard beetle carapace armor, labyrinth turtle shields, and even mantis armor!"

"These weapons are pretty crazy, too. Mantis broadswords, swords made from guardian ants' scythe arms, and… Damn, an Antwing Silver Sword!"

The underwhelming gray sword one of the girls held up looked familiar.

It was one of the monster weapons I'd seen at the dark auction in the old capital.

"I'd love to try fighting with a sword like this in the labyrinth, even just once."

Miss Elder Sister and the others gazed at the sword longingly.

“Me too. How am I ever going to save up thirty gold coins?”

“I saw one at a secondhand shop for twenty gold coins once.”

“Secondhand stuff breaks so fast, though…”

Apparently, this was a coveted piece of equipment to them.

I had no problem letting them have it, but unfortunately, there was only one.

I did have the recipe and tons of the required elite antwings in Storage, though. Maybe I would try to mass-produce enough for all of them that evening?

However, they’d probably be uncomfortable receiving them for free, so I could always ask them to help me bring in the plunderers for arrest or something.

I left Sumina in charge there for the time being, then went to find the blond noblewoman, who was busy giving out instructions.

“I’m going back to deal with the rest of the plunderers, but I’ll be here tomorrow morning. If you need anything, talk to Lelillil.”

“Y-yes, Lord Kuro!”

Once I’d filled the storehouse with ingredients as planned, I went back to the labyrinth to crush the smaller plunderer hideouts that didn’t have any captives.

By the end, I’d rounded up well over a hundred plunderers in the earthen jails.

“Whew, I’m exhausted…”

I’d finished apprehending the plunderers and rescuing the captives, so I decided to take a break from hero work for the day.

◆

“Come in.”

Not long after I changed back into Satou and teleported from the labyrinth to the mansion with Return, someone knocked on the study door.

“Welcome hooome!”

“Welcome back, sir!”

“Satou.”

The younger group tumbled into the room to welcome me back.

Tama or Mia must have sensed my return.

“Welcome back, master. How’s the plunderer roundup going?”

Arisa closed the door before questioning me.

“Oh, that’s all done.”

“…Wha—?”

Arisa’s dumbfounded stare was actually pretty adorable.

“Y-you’re done already? Isn’t that too fast, even for just one area? It hasn’t even been half a day yet!”

“I scoured the labyrinth for plunderers to catch. There’s definitely not a single one left on the upper or middle stratums, at least.”

Not that there had been any in the middle stratum to begin with.

“Th-that’s unbelievable.”

“Greeeat?”

“That’s our master for you, sir!”

“Mm. Good job.”

Soaking up the girls’ praise, I sat on a sofa in the study to alleviate my exhaustion.

“Forehead.”

Arisa prodded at my brow, where I apparently had some new wrinkles.

Covering it up with a fake smile, I rubbed my forehead.

Arisa didn’t seem to like that, if her expression was any indication.

“All hands! Commence Operation: Group Cuddles for master!”

I thought I was used to Arisa’s randomness by now, but this was a particularly weird move.

“Hee-hee!”

“Cliiiing, sir.”

Tama curled up on my lap, and Pochi latched onto my right side.

“No hogging.”

“Have haaalf?”

“I’ll take this side, then.”

Mia squeezed in next to Tama on my lap, and Arisa sat down on my left side, grabbing my arm.

“Arisa…?”

“We’re using our charms to heal your ravaged heart, silly!”

Aw. I guess I must have worried them.

I let the kids’ warm presence relax me and wound up sleeping until dinnertime.

◆

“Okay, let’s go over the issues here…”

I opened the memo function of the networking tab in my menu and started listing the problems at hand.

1. The guildmaster and the Shiga Kingdom government views anyone who knows how to cultivate demonic-potion ingredients as a threat.

2. Miasma seems to be an important part of cultivating these ingredients; it’s safe to assume that the torture chamber and the magic circle were necessary components.

3. It’s highly possible that Ludaman is the only person who’s had contact with the yellow-robed mage who passed on the information about the magic circle.

4. The guildmaster and other governmental officials don’t know about point two.

5. Cultivation is still possible with only a torture chamber and

prisoners, although it's far less effective without a magic circle.

6. It's unclear how many of the young women who were prisoners are aware of what they were cultivating.

"…Hmm. I think I can actually work this out."

I could probably find a way to give the young women a future, although it would depend partly on the outcome of number six and how the government reacted to the information in number five.

If I could find a way to get the guildmaster to trust Kuro, then I might be able to convince her to let the girls live their lives freely with Kuro as their guardian.

And if I could just figure out from Ludaman why the yellow-robed mage taught him how to make the ingredients for demonic potion, then that would pretty much take care of everything, right?

As if they'd been waiting for me to get my thoughts in order, someone knocked at the door.

"Come in."

"Is now a good time?"

Arisa peered inside.

"Yeah, it's fine."

"Oh? You're looking more relaxed than I expected already. Did you take care of whatever was worrying you?"

"I haven't put it into action yet, but I think I've got a good plan."

That was all thanks to Arisa and the others for soothing my mind after dealing with those awful plunderers.

But just as I was about to thank her…

"Awww, man. I was hoping if I gave you some advice now, I could build up enough points to finally get you on the Arisa route!"

…Arisa ruined the moment.

I couldn't tell how serious she was, which was very typical of her.

Since she was here, I decided to lighten the mood by getting her opinion about my Kuro costume.

The guildmaster seemed to be in the City Core room of the viceroy's castle talking to an important person from the royal capital, so I had some time to kill.

"Actually, I might need your advice after all."

"Aw, sweet! Put 'er here!"

Arisa posed like a baseball catcher. Chuckling dryly, I offered her a seat.

Not that getting her advice was going to convince me to take the "Arisa route," though.

"So I'm working on a new disguise…"

I transformed into Kuro using the "Quick Change" skill.

"Wow, what a hottie! But he's not really *shota* enough for my tastes."

Arisa was already finding fault with my new character.

"He's supposed to be a member of Nanashi the Hero's party named Kuro."

I used the "Ventriloquism" skill to alter my voice and demonstrated it for Arisa.

Edging closer, she grabbed my collar and looked down my shirt. I thought she was being inappropriate as usual, but it turned out I was wrong this time.

"So you're only tanning your skin down to the neck."

"It'd be a pain to do it on my whole body."

"Hmm. What about your hands?"

"No, I figured I'd just wear gloves."

"What if someone wants a handshake, though?"

"I'll refuse."

"All right, I guess…"

That was partly why I had chosen a haughty personality for Kuro.

Arisa stepped back and looked my outfit up and down.

“The clothes are a little generic, though. Maybe you could match the hair with a white *gakuran*?”

“Wouldn’t a Japanese high school uniform look weird with a Hollywood actor’s face?”

“You think so? But then you could wear white gloves with pentagrams on them and be all, ‘Mwa-ha-ha!’ or ‘Empire! I have returned!’ Y’know?”

You’re mixing up so many different references that I have no idea what you’re trying to say.

“I think I’ll just stick with the outfit as it is.”

“Awww, at least make it military uniform–style or something!”

Looking in the mirror, I added more layers of the Illusion spell.

She was right: The uniform did seem to match this hairstyle.

“And then put a long overcoat on top. What color are you thinking?”

“Hmm. Nanashi wears a white jacket—should I match that?”

“Wait, you gotta go with black, then! It’s like that old line—‘You are the light, and I am the shadow’! So the leader should wear white, and the subordinate wears black!”

I didn’t really know where Arisa was getting this, but it did remind me of some super-famous shojo manga set in France.

“All right, he’ll wear black, then. The overcoat, too.”

“Oh, and you should put a purple streak in his hair.”

For now, I used Illusion to add a purple highlight to part of Kuro’s hair.

Since I had dye anyway, I could apply it to the wig before I went out.

“Now for his equipment. How about a bazooka or a machine gun?”

Arisa must have recognized the character I’d based this face on, since she suggested the weapons he used in the movie.

“No, not guns. That would overlap with Lulu’s main weapon.”

It wouldn’t be a big deal if it was a more popular weapon, but hardly anyone

in the Shiga Kingdom carried guns these days.

“A broadsword, then? Didn’t he use one in that *Great Something-or-Other* movie?”

“It doesn’t need to be based on anything.”

I made a broadsword with Illusion and held it up experimentally.

“No, bigger. You know, like a giant hunk of metal.”

“What, the kind that could cut off a dragon’s head?”

I doubted any human had a sword that could cut the black dragon Hei Long, so I went with a size that could behead a wyvern or hydra instead.

“Ooh, not bad. It could use a little more originality, though.”

“‘Originality’? What do you mean?”

I tried to make the sword’s color match my hair and clothes, but Arisa didn’t seem impressed.

“You know, like…”

Arisa looked around the room for some kind of example.

Finally, she saw herself in the mirror and seemed to come up with something.

“That’s it! Gemstones! Make the sword look like crystal!”

It didn’t sound very practical to me, but it was just for show anyway. It’d be fine.

Besides, if I used “Spellblade” on it, even a wooden sword could probably defeat an intermediate demon.

“Like this?”

I tested out a bunch of different variations: making the sword see-through, changing the materials, adding more decorations, and so on.

It reminded me of working with the art team back during my game-dev days, making me a bit nostalgic.

I’ll probably never be able to make video games here, but I’d like to at least try making board games and such.

“Stop! Try it with those same decorations, amethyst as the material, put a sapphire on the hilt, and then add rubies in the middle of the decorations!”

I manipulated the illusion to Arisa’s specifications.

“How’s that?”

“Hmm…”

She didn’t seem quite pleased, so I lined up a few different versions.

“It just isn’t quite heroic enough.”

“Heroic,” huh?

“You know, like a whip sword or a sickle and chain, the kind of weapon that’s more cool than practical.”

Like a sword that could rotate like a drill?

“I can make that kind of thing some other time. For now, how about something like this?”

I made a double-edged sword, separated it down the middle, and added a sort of light beam between the two blades.

Then I made the left side into red crystal and the right side blue, adding fire and ice illusions to them respectively.

“Oh man, nice! Now, that’s the fantasy factor I was looking for!”

Arisa seemed pleased with my new invention.

“But do you have the materials to make something like that?”

“It’d be a pain to make bauxite so I could transmute ruby and sapphire, so I’ll just use colored glass for now.”

I could technically create bauxite, but the recipe was kind of difficult.

Colored glass, on the other hand, was fairly easy to make. I’d gotten all kinds of materials and dyes when we were traveling through the Ougoch Duchy.

“Whaaat, you could actually make sword-size ruby and sapphire?” Arisa exclaimed.

It was certainly simpler than making legendary metals like orichalcum.

“Yeah, but it’d be cheaper to buy it.”

“Aw, darn.”

Arisa seemed disappointed.

Transmuting ruby and sapphire required Holytree Stone—essentially Philosopher’s Stone—which was far more expensive than either gemstone.

“Since it’s just for show, I’ll try to make it before I leave.”

“You can do it that quickly?”

“I’ll use illusions for the fire and ice, and I can combine an illusion with the Light Magic spell Laser to make the light beam in the middle.”

I wasn’t planning on fighting anyway.



◆

“Whew, that was easier than I thought.”

In the laboratory beneath the Ivy Manor, I held my newly made colored-glass sword up to the light.

Next to me was a life-size Kuro dummy wearing a uniform-style outfit.

Thanks to all my experience making equipment for my group, it took less than an hour to complete both.

“Personally, I’ve gotta say that’s some pretty good cheating.”

Poking fun at myself, I stood up and stretched.

The reason I was able to take the time to make all these things was that the guildmaster still hadn’t emerged from the City Core room in the viceroy’s castle.

I guess meetings with higher-ups took just as long in a fantasy world as they did on Earth.

Suddenly, I heard a strange beeping sound coming from the wall. There was a light bulb flashing right near the source of the sound.

Assuming it was some kind of summons, I pressed the button next to the light bulb.

“Lord Kuro, I am terribly sorry to interrupt your research. The blonde and some plain girl have business with you, apparently.”

The blond noble Eluterina and the carrier Polina seemed to have a report for me.

“Sure. I’ll be right there.”

Giving a quick response to Lelillil, I went back up to the manor.

“Including us two, the alchemist, and the doctors, there is a total of thirteen people who know.”

They had already finished the investigation I’d asked of them earlier that day.

As it turned out, not too many of the captives knew what they had been cultivating.

“I see. I’m glad it’s less than I expected.”

I summoned all thirteen of them into a separate room, explained the danger they were in, and told them that I had a plan to protect them.

The alchemist and doctors seemed to feel guilty, but the other five just pleaded for my help.

Eluterina and Polina must have explained the danger to them ahead of time.

Aside from those two, I had the other eleven move into an isolated room, instructing Lelillil and the remaining pair to make sure they had everything they needed.

That was the room that the alchemist and doctors had already been staying in, so it shouldn’t be too big of a problem.

Once the girls were moved, I checked with Eluterina and Polina about the false information.

“Is the rumor about the gabo wheat and gabo barley spreading well?”

“Yes, it seems that a particularly loose-lipped young woman overheard your conversation with Elder Sister.”

Polina reported that the rumor was proving quite effective.

“Good. Once it’s gotten around enough, I’ll get them to swear to secrecy.”

That would probably make it more believable than just letting the rumor run wild.

Since that was going well, I would probably be able to release most of the girls within the next few days.

◆

“Sorry to barge in.”

That night, I dressed as Kuro and visited the guildmaster’s room via the spiral window.

“Eeeeeek!”

“You shouldn’t be flailing around like that at your age.”

As soon as I entered the room, the battle-loving guildmaster jabbed at me with her staff, but since I was here as Kuro, I simply snatched it out of her hands.

“I’m Kuro, a follower of Nanashi the Hero.”

“…Hero?”

The guildmaster raised her eyebrows suspiciously, and I felt magic power gathering around her.

I’d hoped that introducing myself as connected to the Hero would put her at ease, but obviously it had the opposite effect.

“I don’t know of any Hero by that name. The current Hero of the Saga Empire is Hayato Masaki, is it not?”

“You haven’t done your research, Lilian.”

Miss Sebelkeya, who was also in the room, chided the guildmaster.

Secretary Ushana was present, too.

“What, you’ve heard of him?”

“But of course,” Sebelkeya said smoothly. “Nanashi the Hero is a great man who rescued us elves from terrible danger. Perhaps you would know him as the man who defeated the Golden Boar Lord in the former royal capital?”

“The Golden Boar Lord? So all that nonsense the king was spouting was true?!”

She explained that the Shiga Kingdom had announced the following: *“A masked hero who is the reincarnation of the ancestral king Yamato defeated the Golden Boar Lord, the yellow greater demon, and the school of giant monster fish.”*

But since the vanquished foes sounded way too powerful, the Shiga Kingdom army hadn’t been dispatched, and there hadn’t been any major damage to the old capital, it seemed that many people assumed it was just a made-up story to cover up Prince Sharorik’s blunders.

“Do you believe me now?”

“Not yet. Where’s the proof that you’re working for him?”

“How about this? It was given to me by my leader.”

I produced a dagger-size Holy Sword from Storage, which I’d made while I was practicing forging swords from orichalcum.

Then I added magic power to it, causing the blade to glow blue.

“Blue light… Is that a Holy Sword?”

“Indeed. It’s nothing compared to my leader’s Holy Sword, but I could easily vanquish the likes of a greater demon with this.”

Kuro’s official level was set as 50, so that might be a bit too boastful.

“…So what are you doing here?”

The guildmaster still looked doubtful, but at least she was willing to hear me out.

“I was raiding a hideout of those filthy plunderers infesting the labyrinth, and I found something strange.”

“Something strange?”

I paused for a moment, keeping the intrigued guildmaster in suspense.

“Can those two be trusted?”

“Hmph! Much more than you, I’d say!”

Sebelkeya and Ushana gave satisfied smiles at the guildmaster’s swift response.

“Then I’ll say it: I found a field of destruction stalks and ruination weeds near the plunderers’ hideout.”

“…Field?”

The guildmaster’s gaze sharpened.

“Indeed. In fact, it almost looked as though they were being cultivated by humans.”

At that, the guildmaster grimaced.

She must have realized that what Ludaman had said in the dungeon was true.

“And?”

“You don’t seem too surprised.”

“I’d heard a little about it from a two-bit plunderer by the name of Ludaman.”

The guildmaster practically spat his name.

“This will be simple, then. What does the Shiga Kingdom want to do about it?”

“Burn it all to the ground. Tell me where this place is and I’ll do it myself!”

I appreciated her speedy determination.

“Let’s go right now, then. I’ll take you there—*Teleport.*”

“Wh—?”

Without waiting for an answer, I took the three to a field of destruction stalks and ruination weeds in the labyrinth.

“What?! Where are we?!”

“Celivera Labyrinth. This is the field I told you about.”

The guildmaster moved to burn it right away, but Sebelkeya and Ushana stopped her, heading over to make sure they were really the plants in question.

“…There’s blood on the leaves.”

“And bones in the soil, too—these are human bones.”

Before I’d gone to the guildmaster’s room, I’d made these fakes with the “Counterfeit” skill.

The blood was from livestock and brown wolves, and the bones were from demi-goblins.

Secretary Ushana had the “Analyze” skill, but my “Counterfeit” skill was higher, and it was doubtful she would notice the difference in the darkness here.

“They must be the bones of the people they were forcing to work here.”

“Those plunderer bastards…”

The guildmaster growled, believing my story.

“By the time I got here, the plunderers were tilling the field themselves. They must have worked their captives to death.”

It was an obvious lie, but thanks to the support of my “Fabrication” skill, the three of them fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

Hopefully, they would now assume that it was mostly plunderers who were involved in the cultivation and that there were few, if any, surviving women who might know.

“…No, there’s no doubt about it.”

“I hate to say it, but this is the real thing.”

“All right, then. Let’s burn it to the ground.”

Once the other two finished checking the field, the guildmaster began a Fire Magic chant.

She wasn’t using a forbidden spell that would affect the labyrinth, but I thought upper Fire Magic was a bit of overkill, even in an open space like this.

I prepared a fireproof hydra-hide cloak and the Earth Magic spell Wall, just in case the flames got too close.

Sebelkeya started an Earth Magic chant, too, probably thinking the same thing.

“……■■■ ***Inferno*** *Kaen Jigoku!”*

Crimson flames burst forth from the guildmaster’s staff, torching the field in seconds and quickly spreading to the surrounding area.

Exactly as I feared, the heat and flames started to come toward us, but Sebelkeya used a powerful Stone Wall spell to protect us before I had to do anything.

“Did the plunderers here run away?”

“I’ll drop them off at the guild soon.”

“Sure. I’m not holding my breath.”

The guildmaster seemed convinced that the plunderers had gotten away from me.

Once I'd ensured that her flames had burned up the field and the fake remains, I called the three of them over.

This will be the hardest part.

"There's something else I wanted to show you."

With that, I led them to the foreboding magic circle in the torture room.

"Th-this is…"

"Do you recognize it, Sebelkeya?"

"I don't know what it is exactly. But I can tell it's truly evil."

I was hopeful that I might get some new information, but the three of them didn't seem to know anything about it.

Oh well. That's fine.

In fact, it might even work in my favor.

"Hmph. How little you know."

"You're saying you know what this is?"

"Of course."

I looked down at the guildmaster with an annoyingly haughty expression.

Normally, I would never be able to act like this, but my trusty "Poker Face" skill helped me get through it.

"Well, spit it out, then."

I snorted. "It's a magic circle that absorbs and amplifies miasma. Do you know why?"

"It must be for that field…"

Yes! Perfect.

Inwardly celebrating the response I'd hoped for, I continued speaking calmly.

"What, the field? That was hardly more than a by-product."

“A by-product?”

The guildmaster repeated my words incredulously, taking the bait. I scowled to silence her.

“You really don’t know? This magic circle is what demon lord worshippers use to make a foundation with which to resurrect a demon lord.”

I made up a truly ridiculous story with my “Fabrication” skill.

My aim was to give the guildmaster the impression that growing the demonic-potion ingredients was only a secondary goal, as well as a reason to talk to Ludaman again.

“A demon lord…?!”

“It can’t be!”

The guildmaster and Ushana both exclaimed in surprise.

“Do you have a basis for that conclusion?”

I told Sebelkeya that there was a similar magic circle in the papers I’d taken from the demon lord cult the Wings of Freedom and that the yellow demon had given that information to them.

She didn’t seem convinced at first but believed me once I showed her the real documents.

“The yellow-skinned greater demon… Perhaps he was the yellow-robed mage Ludaman spoke of.”

“There are several stories of demons possessing or impersonating humans in the tales of the ancestral king, too.”

The guildmaster reached a similar conclusion to mine, and Secretary Ushana agreed.

So far, this was going precisely as I’d hoped.

“Ludaman is the plunderer you mentioned being in the guild dungeon, yes? Let me interrogate him. I need more information on this yellow-robed mage.”

“…Hmph. Very well—I’ll allow it. However, I will be accompanying you.”

“Do as you wish.”

Awesome! It worked!

Henceforth, I could legally obtain information from Ludaman.

As a bonus, they were now convinced that the cultivation was actually a front for an even bigger, darker scheme.

My hope was to find a way to help the women who’d been involved with the cultivation while the Shiga Kingdom people were focused on the magic-circle connection.

“Now, you weren’t just trying to use all this to get to Ludaman, were you?”

“I have better things to do. There are probably demon lord worshippers who were secretly backing these plunderers.”

I countered the guildmaster’s all-too-accurate suspicion with a new piece of information.

I had no actual evidence of this, but the person who gave them the yellow demon’s magic circle was very likely a demon lord worshipper, so it wasn’t exactly a lie.

“‘Demon lord worshippers’? You mean some silly club like the Wind of Freedom in the royal capital?” The guildmaster furrowed her brow.

The demon lord cult I’d encountered in the old capital was called the Wings of Freedom, so this Wind of Freedom group must be of a similar nature.

The phrase “silly club” seemed a little out of place, but now wasn’t the time to think about that.

“Never heard of them. But I do know the cult called the Wings of Freedom who revived the Golden Boar Lord.” I looked the grave-faced guildmaster directly in the eyes as I continued. “They were probably planning to revive a demon lord here.”

“That would explain the human sacrifices and the torture room… I suppose the demonic potions were to enhance the demon lord’s followers, then.”

Yeah, that sounds pretty plausible… Wait, I’m *not supposed to fall for this*

story.

If this were a game, that would be the cue for a demon lord revival, but the current Season of the Demon Lord had presumably ended when I defeated the Golden Boar Lord who was revived beneath the old capital, so we should be fine for another sixty-six years.

The demon lord revival was prophesized in seven different places.

Those words rose unbidden in the back of my mind.

Come to think of it, one of the prophesied locations the head priestess of the old capital Tenion Temple had told me about was right here, Labyrinth City Celivera.

Now I felt like I was raising a demon-lord-revival flag myself, but I dismissed those worries by telling myself: *If another one really does get revived, I'll just defeat it.*

The Golden Boar Lord I'd defeated was supposed to be one of the strongest demon lords ever, and I had more powerful attacks and equipment now than I had at the time, so it probably wouldn't be a life-and-death struggle like last time.

As long as my opponent wasn't some kind of god or something, anyway.

"Well, now that we've got that information, shall we finish up here?"

"Let me. I'll destroy the runes that make up the magic circle."

The guildmaster's magic burned up the torture chamber, and Miss Sebelkeya used Earth Magic to demolish the plunderer hideout until it was in a physically unusable state.

"So cultists who are trying to revive a demon lord… That sounds like quite the headache."

"More importantly, guildmaster, if what this man says is true, then wouldn't it be impossible to cultivate the plants without that magic circle?"

Luckily, Ushana remembered my comment about a "by-product" and connected the dots.

“They can likely still be grown without the magic circle, but it would be far less effective.”

That was the truth.

Just like most gases, miasma diffused if left to its own devices.

“Then perhaps we won’t need to make any unnecessary sacrifices.”

I looked at the guildmaster indifferently as she spoke, but on the inside, I was pumping my fists in triumph.

Mission accomplished.

Now I could release all the girls who didn’t know anything about the cultivation.

“You’ll take us back home now, yes?”

The guildmaster turned to me as Sebelkeya finished her work.

“What are you talking about?”

“You weren’t planning on leaving us here in the labyrinth, were you?”

The guildmaster grew angry, misunderstanding my words.

“What I mean is, why are you talking as if we’re finished here?”

“Excuse me?” The guildmaster gaped.

“There are still three more fields I need you to burn.”

We had a long night’s work ahead of us.

I needed them to see the fields without the magic circles to confirm that the information I’d given them before was correct.

“We don’t have enough magic to—”

“Transfer.”

Before the guildmaster could finish her statement, I used Mana Transfer.

“…My magic’s restored?”

“That’ll work, right?”

“Oh yes.” The guildmaster grinned. “It certainly will. Let’s destroy every last

trace of those demonic-potion plants.”

I brought the reliable guildmaster around to the other fields with me, and we turned every last one to ash by the end of the day.

Once I’d brought the guildmaster and company home, I could just come back and use my spirit light and Holy Stones to purge the clouds of miasma.

◆

“Wake up.”

Once we returned from the labyrinth, I pressed the exhausted-looking guildmaster into taking me to see Ludaman in the dungeon.

Sebelkeya was already sound asleep, but Secretary Ushana came along without the slightest sign of tiredness.

Ludaman growled and glared at me.

The other plunderer leaders in their nearby cells howled like wrathful animals.

“Your throat’s crushed, is it? *Heal.*”

With that, I selected a healing spell from my magic menu.

“What’s this about? Planning to off me in the dead of night, are ye?”

Ludaman bared his fang-like teeth defiantly.

“I have some questions for you.”

“Think I’m gonna answer?”

I pulled a small bottle of Shigan sake from my Item Box.

When I took out the cork, the aroma of sake filled the room.

Since the stench of the dungeon might have drowned it out, I had already cleaned the air with Deodorant beforehand.

“Sake? Ye be takin’ me too lightly if ye think that’ll buy the great Ludaman.”

Ludaman spat scornfully.

Maybe he doesn’t drink?

“Oh, so you don’t want one last taste of sake?”

I started to put the bottle back into the Item Box, and the other plunderers wailed loudly.

Ludaman glowered at his subordinates, then clicked his tongue.

“Fine. I’ll take it.”

Corking the bottle, I tossed it through the bars to Ludaman.

“Now, that’s some fine booze.”

Ludaman took a drink, then tossed it around to his subordinates before jerking his chin toward me.

“What do ye wanna know? About the mastermind who had us makin’ demonic potion?”

I shook my head. “I don’t need to know about Sokell.”

I knew Sokell wasn’t the real mastermind, but I didn’t particularly care to hear the name of the high-ranking noble behind it.

“Sokell? Ha! No, he’s just the scapegoat. It was a much bigger—”

Ludaman started to say the noble’s name, but I cut him off.

“No, what I want to know is more about this yellow-robed mage who taught you how to make demonic potion.”

If the mastermind really was a highly important noble, I doubted he would have truthfully revealed his lineage to a plunderer he was using anyway.

“Well, there ain’t much to tell.”

“Did he teach you that magic circle in the torture room, too?”

“Oh, he made that himself some five years back.”

Ludaman was answering my questions readily, probably thanks to my maxed-out “Interrogation” and “Negotiation” skills.

“Do you know why he made it?”

“Hunh? Well…”

Just as he was about to answer, the sake bottle made its way back to him. “Tch, empty.” Holding it out to me, he waggled it around meaningfully.

It was a brazen request but one well within my means to fulfill.

“Don’t get carried away, you ass.”

The guildmaster, who’d been watching in silence, snapped at him, so I gestured for her to stay back.

“It’s fine.”

I tossed him another bottle and some jerky.

“Heh-heh. Ye drive a hard bargain.”

Ludaman gnawed on the meat and took a swig of sake, looking satisfied.

“Well?”

“So he said that circle thing was for makin’ the demonic-potion stuff, but I reckon it was somethin’ else.”

Ludaman’s eyes glinted.

“Oh? And what makes you think that?”

“The jar.”

“Jar”?

That was an unexpected key word.

“Half a year ago, ol’ Yellow Robes brought some kinda strange jar, sayin’ it would enhance the circle. But after that, them ruination weeds and destruction stalks didn’t grow like normal.”

Right—the demonic-potion ingredients they were cultivating.

“So you think Yellow Robes actually needed the jar?”

“Yeah, for sure. At first he came to collect some of the plants once in a while, but then he didn’t seem to care no more. And after he left with the jar, he never showed his face again, so there’s yer answer.”

I suddenly thought of a different jar.

“Did it look something like this one?”

“Why the hell d’you have that?”

Ludaman looked surprised at the jar I'd produced.

It was the chaos jar that the demon manipulating the Muno Barony had been using to collect miasma for reviving the demon lord.

I'd found several similar jars and urns when I raided the cult's hideout after defeating the demon lord beneath the old capital.

"Wh-what is that?" the guildmaster asked.

"A chaos jar. It's an evil tool for reviving a demon lord."

The plunderers seemed as shocked as the guildmaster at my reply.

"Have you ever seen an urn like this?"

"Sure have." Ludaman nodded. "Yellow Robes sent a familiar to switch them out every half a year or so."

Like the chaos jar, this malice urn was a tool for collecting miasma to revive a demon lord.

"One more question. When did Yellow Robes last show up?"

"When he picked up the jar 'bout six months ago. He took all the urns, too, so we never saw the familiar again, either."

Hmm. Half a year ago would be before I defeated the demon lord and the yellow demon in the old capital.

Thinking chronologically, it was highly likely that those chaos jars and malice urns were used to revive the demon lord in the old capital.

"Hey, White Hair. Yer more important than the old hag, right? Can't ye send me to Violet instead? If ye do, I'll tell ye who Yellow Robes really was."

So that was why he'd shared so much information just for some sake: to set up for this request.

I was certainly interested in that information, but I didn't have the authority to grant that request, so I turned to the guildmaster behind me.

She grimaced unwillingly but gave a curt nod.

I guess information on a mage trying to revive a demon lord was more

important than preventing the spread of demonic potion.

“Go on.”

“Yellow Robes was really…a demon. Not some lesser kind, either. Intermediate at least, or maybe even one o’ them greater demons.”

As I’d suspected, the “yellow-robed mage” was most likely the “yellow-skinned demon” in disguise.

“Interesting theory. And why do you think that?”

“I tried to punch ’im while I was on demonic potion, but he stopped me with one hand like it was nothin’.”

“Is that all?”

That seemed like pretty weak proof.

“That and the eyes.”

“The eyes?”

“He had the eyes of someone real powerful. Even surrounded by dozens o’ violent, demonic-potion-enhanced plunderers, he looked at us like we was a buncha ants.”

Ludaman shivered, as if the memory alone was enough to disturb him.

“Did he have any other distinguishing traits?”

“His face was as plain as they come. ’Cept the yellowish skin and yellow horns anyway.”

Ludaman looked to his fellow plunderers for opinions.

“He spoke kinda weird, too.”

“Yeah, loud and creepy, LIKE THIS.”

That sounded like the yellow demon, all right.

“I didn’t see any information about that Yellow Robes, even when I used ‘Analyze.’”

“Yeah, and didn’t he have a demon familiar?”

Seriously?

I didn't know where to start with the plunderers' conversation.

"He had a demon as a familiar? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I analyzed it. It was a lesser demon, round level thirty."

The older plunderer with the "Analyze" skill spoke with confidence.

That probably meant my theory was confirmed, then.

"So a greater demon is trying to revive a demon lord right here in Celivera, then…"

As we went back up from the dungeon, the guildmaster looked pale, wiping the sweat from her brow.

"Nothing to fear. If the demon lord is revived, my leader will destroy him. And more than likely, he won't be."

"You seem pretty confident."

"Have you forgotten? My leader already destroyed the yellow demon in the old capital. And Ludaman said this Yellow Robes figure last appeared more than half a year ago, didn't he? The miasma they were collecting was used to revive the demon lord below the old capital."

This case was already closed.

It had all been much ado about nothing—or next to nothing anyway.

"I'll leave the plunderers to you. I won't insist you put them in Violet, but ask about it, at least."

What the plunderers had done was unforgivable, but they did at least dispel my worries about the mysterious yellow-robed mage, so I figured I owed them that much.

"All right. But if we can't publicly execute them, we'll at least have them stoned to set an example. If they survive that, I'll dispatch them to Violet."

"Good enough for me." I nodded.

Stoning was a pretty cruel method of execution that had existed since the

Stone Age.

Normally, it meant a certain death, but since the demonic potion had toughened those plunderers up so much, maybe they would survive.

I left the guildmaster to take care of the rest and put the west guild behind me.

Surely the demonic-potion-hating guildmaster would follow up about the big noble behind Sokell, even if I didn't.

◆

"I don't want to go home in a nasty mood after interrogating a plunderer, so maybe I should cheer myself up first?"

Muttering to no one in particular, I looked around thoughtfully.

By the time I left the guild, it was late in the night, which meant I couldn't go to the pleasure quarter. Instead, I decided to head to the underground lab in the Ivy Manor and make some equipment for Sumina and the other explorer women.

Of course, they would be simple things made from monster parts, not the unique equipment I'd made for my group.

"Maybe I'll start with some handy maze ant equipment?"

I looked through the collection of recipes left by Trazayuya, often called the sage of the elves.

"Let's go with something simple first."

I made some breastplates and shoulder guards with adjustable leather or string straps, plus some wrist and shin guards.

Multitool came in handy for this, but not as much as producing "Spellblade" on my fingertip.

It was especially convenient for relatively low-level monster materials, since it could cut them or bore holes through them with practically no resistance.

"Ah, crafting is so fun."

I had actually started humming to myself without realizing it.

It was hard to tell what was what if I lined them up on the floor, so I set them up on the mannequins I normally used to make things for Arisa and the other girls.

Because they were made with golem-crafting technology, they could be posed like dolls, too.

I didn't make them into golems or living dolls because then I wouldn't be able to put them away in Storage.

"Hmm, it's a little plain…"

I had tried to shape the armor in a style suited for a woman in a fantasy world, but it was missing something.

I didn't think it looked too bad or anything, but the explorers I'd seen in Labyrinth City seemed to default to a more flamboyant style, so I wanted to fiddle a bit more.

"Oh, this'll work nicely."

My eyes fell on some spare lumber from the production process.

I messed around with it a little before attaching it to the armor.

It wouldn't make the armor's defense any higher, but they do say that *man cannot live on bread alone*. It's important to have a little fun.

"Hmm, I might've made this a little too anime…"

It looked like something out of a Saturday morning fantasy show, but its stats were as high as any metal armor, so that was probably all right.

However, on its own, it would have far too many revealing gaps; I made some leather armor and a skirt to go underneath.

I aimed to make it cute and modest, with a little bit of a sexy tinge to the cuts.

For the leather, I used sea serpent hide, of which I had plenty. It wasn't as strong as the armored rat leather I'd used for my companions' camouflage armor, but it should provide the same protection as the average armor worn by a labyrinth army soldier or a garnet-badge explorer.

"The boots might be a bit of a pain."

For my companions, I'd made high-level boots with slip-and wear-resistant soles, comfortable for long walks and extra quiet for stealth, but those used all kinds of unusual materials, so it might cause problems for making that kind of thing for Sumina and the others.

Instead, I decided to simply use sturdy and slip-resistant hydra leather for the heels and make the rest out of sea serpent hide.

"All right, time to mass-produce this."

With my model outfit complete, I optimized the process and started making more pieces.

Removing the carapaces from the maze ants was a pain, but with my Magic Hand and "Parallel Thoughts" combo, I was able to finish before long.

I could make about forty sets in one go, so producing a bunch of them was a piece of cake.

"Hmm…"

I looked down thoughtfully at the finished sets of identical armor.

Originally, I'd planned to give them all matching sets, but maybe I could make something a little fancier for Elder Sister Sumina and the other veteran explorers?

Admittedly, part of it was just that I was sick of making the same thing, but it had also occurred to me that the women in their late twenties and older might not want to wear such a cartoonish fantasy-like outfit.

For them, I decided to make a more refined inner layer and use soldier mantis carapaces for the exterior.

These carapaces were a bit too large to use as is, so I cut them down and used the Earth Magic spell Polish to shave them to the perfect size.

The designs were similar otherwise; at a glance, it didn't look much different from the ant armor, but this version's defense was more than twice as high.

I made shields by cutting a labyrinth beetle's back down to the proper size and attaching a handle—not much labor at all.

However, I was tired at that point, and I decided to load up on some sugar while I contemplated what kind of weapons to give them.

“Hmm. It’s a little better with magic than bronze, lighter than bronze or iron, but its attack power is a bit lower…”

Looking through the materials I had on hand, I tried making prototype weapons out of the scythe arms or spikes of various monsters.

I followed the directions in my documents, but the cheaper kinds had rather low abilities. Thinking in video game terms, they’d be perfect for raising a newbie fighter’s skill levels.

“Oops, the best-looking recipe is in a different document.”

I flipped to a different set of instructions, murmuring to myself.

This set was a guide to making pseudo–Magic Swords and spears.

It included the Antwing Silver Sword that Sumina and the others had been admiring earlier in the day.

“…Hmm? It’s speckled silver and gray…”

I made a test Antwing Silver Sword right away, but unlike the sword I was familiar with, this one wasn’t just gray.

I looked over the instructions again.

“Ah, so it’s important to control the temperature precisely…”

I had given myself a margin of error of one degree Celsius, give or take, but evidently that wasn’t good enough.

“Heh-heh. Finally a worthy opponent.”

Entering mad-scientist mode, I experimented with the temperature control to get it down to zeros for the first nine decimal places.

That would normally be impossible, so I used the Air Control spell to even out the heat in the room, then used Liquid Control to keep the various liquids from evaporating and altering the temperature.

On top of that, I used “Magic Manipulation” to slow the flow of magic through the transmutation tools and keep everything level.

Then finally…

“It’s silver.”

I held up the beautiful silver sword, grinning triumphantly at my own handiwork.

Now, this was a sword worthy of the name Antwing Silver Sword.

Putting the speckled silver-gray prototypes away in Storage, I made an elegant scabbard for the finished silver sword.

Maybe next I could make swords out of scythe arms from guardian ants and soldier mantises?

As I let my imagination wander, I started mass-producing weapons to suit the explorer women’s skills.

They weren’t quite as high-performance as a Magic Sword, but they were as good as or better than the standard equipment of the labyrinth army, so it was probably best to refrain from making anything better.

If they were too powerful, they might attract unwanted attention.

Everything’s best in moderation anyway.

◆

“Wow, new equipment!”

“Damn, look at this! It’s a Magic Sword made from a guardian ant scythe!”

“And this one’s a soldier mantis broadsword with armor to match!”

“Amazing! Who in the world are you, Lord Kuro?”

“I can try on this armor, right? I won’t get in trouble?”

“Ooooh, a rosethorn spear!”

“This shield is cut from a beetle’s carapace, you know!”

“This is crazy. I can’t even imagine how much it would cost to get stuff like this made…”

The next morning, I showed the mass-produced equipment to the explorers staying in the Ivy Manor and was met with rave reviews.

My creative side was thrilled to have my work be so well received.

Feeling pretty good about myself, I looked around again.

“So pretty…”

Elder Sister Sumina was head over heels for the sparkling Antwing Silver Sword I’d made.

It was meant to be just an example, but I couldn’t very well ask for it back now.

Making that sword had been pretty difficult, so I didn’t really intend to make any more. If she liked it that much, I was happy to let her keep it.

“So that’s a real Antwing Silver Sword.”

“Yeah. If you mess up the temperature, they come out gray.”

The blond noblewoman appeared at my side, gazing at Sumina rather enviously as the latter held up the sword.

“Would you have preferred that one?”

“No, no! I’m delighted with the clothes and the rapier you gave me, Lord Kuro!”

I had planned on giving her and her noble friends equipment like the other explorers, too, but they said they intended to resign from the explorer business. I gave them light armor and steel rapiers for self-defense instead.

These favored gaudiness over practicality, so they had the unrealistic appearance of a squad of lady knights.

“Sumina, I’ll have you and the other explorers bring the plunderers to the west guild and collect the reward money. Then you can use that money to find housing in Labyrinth City until you can live on your own again.”

“Lord Kuro, I suppose it would be inconvenient for you if we stayed here… wouldn’t it?”

The noblewoman fluttered her eyes at me, but I responded bluntly.

“Yes, it would. I have much work to do.”

The girls who still needed more healing from Lelillil and the ones who knew about the cultivation would be staying awhile longer, but I planned to release the others right away.

“Of course… You serve the Hero, after all.”

Eluterina looked dejected, but it wouldn’t suit Kuro’s character to comfort her, so I ignored her and turned to the bag-carrier girl Polina.

“I have something to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

I asked Polina to help me come up with a cover story so that the newly freed women wouldn’t draw any suspicion.

“Why not say that we were being sheltered in the Blue People’s hidden village?”

This suggestion came not from Polina but from Eluterina, the blond noblewoman.

“The Blue People?”

“Yes. Haven’t you heard of them?”

According to her explanation, this was a nickname for blue-skinned humanoids said to very occasionally appear in labyrinth villages inside the labyrinth.

Blue People aside, I was quite interested in seeing one of these labyrinth villages, so I decided I would go have a look with my companions when we had a chance.

“I’ve heard of them, too.”

Timidly, Polina shared what information she had.

According to the rumors, some people encountered them when they got lost deep in monster territory.

As long as you didn’t antagonize them, they were apparently perfectly friendly, but if you did attack one, you’d be killed without mercy.

The women were all beauties of every shape and size, and the men were said

to be handsome, too, with wavy, seaweed-like bangs.

There were even rumors that they could evaporate into mist.

“Are you sure these Blue People aren’t actually vampires?”

The blond noblewoman was quick to refute my theory.

“Oh, no, Lord Kuro. I’ve met someone who has been to the Bloodsucker Labyrinth in the Saga Empire, and they said vampires are bluish-black, beastly creatures who don’t understand language.”

This girl’s awfully knowledgeable. Somehow, she reminded me of Nadi, the woman from the general store in Seiryuu City.

“Let me think…”

I contemplated their proposal for a moment.

“…All right. That should work.”

With that decided, I spent some time solidifying the cover story with Eluterina, Polina, and Sumina.

◆

“What the hell’s going on here?!”

“We are the Lord Kuro Fan Club. Lord Kuro is about to perform a miracle, so just sit and watch.”

Using my Clairvoyance and Clairaudience spells to make sure things were ready for me to teleport into the labyrinth, I found Elder Sister Sumina arguing with a guild employee.

I’d sent her out from the first area of the labyrinth’s upper stratum to make sure I could teleport there, but maybe I should’ve sent along someone who was a little better at negotiating.

Pretending not to have heard the phrase “Lord Kuro Fan Club,” I started removing the earthen walls keeping the plunderers imprisoned.

Of course, I had already blocked all the exits with gigantic walls to prevent them from escaping.

“Graaah!”

“Let’s get ’im!”

As soon as the walls were gone, the plunderers charged at me like starving animals.

I beat them down with the human-suppressing spell Remote Stun and the monster-suppressing spell Short Stun.

The upper-ranking plunderers who were at least level 30 or enhanced with the Demonic Body buff were able to resist the former, so I hit them with the latter.

One of them weaved around the falling plunderers and tried to hit me with a poison needle, but my “Sense Danger” and “Abduction” skills allowed me to knock him out before he could do anything.

Where was he hiding that poison needle anyway?

First, I used Mana Drain to take the plunderers’ magic so they couldn’t use that annoying Demonic Body. Then I tied them up with magic-sapping thornfoot ivy that I’d found in Storage.

I had instructions for how to make the mage-constricting thornfoot ivy, too, so I decided to try it out when I got a chance.

Next, I picked up the plunderers with Magic Hand and teleported to the labyrinth guild area, where Sumina and the others were waiting.

“Whoa, where’d they come from?!”

“Lord Kuro! Excellent work as always!”

Sumina’s shout interrupted the startled guild clerk.

“Take these captured plunderers to the guild. You, clerk, we need more people. Help us bring these plunderers to prison.”

The clerk looked doubtful at my haughty command, but as soon as she laid eyes on the more famous plunderers among the captured lot, she became very cooperative.

“So you’re responsible for all this commotion, are you?”

“Guildmaster.”

The guildmaster appeared on the other side of the crowd, looking bored.

Sebelkeya was nowhere to be seen, but Ushana was with her as always.

“These are the plunderers from the bases you saw last night. I searched for anyone who might’ve been working the fields, but I didn’t find anyone. Most likely they were killed by the plunderers or the mastermind behind them.”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to make up that story.

Eventually, the guildmaster would probably hear about the former captives who would claim they had been sheltered in the Blue People’s village, but those girls were convinced that they’d been growing gabo wheat and gabo barley, not destruction stalks and ruination weeds.

Besides, I seemed to be the only person with any idea how to make the magic circle required to cultivate those plants effectively, so they should be fine.

I didn’t think the guildmaster or the higher-ups of the Shiga Kingdom would want to poke the hornet’s nest anyway.

If anything did go wrong, I could always step in and help the girls escape to some far-off kingdom.

I accepted the reward-slash-hush-money from the guildmaster, gave the money to Sumina, and had her rent out some tenement houses.

Since there were nearly two hundred people in total, they basically rented a whole neighborhood.

“I’ll leave you in charge for now. Polina and Eluterina will be along later.”

“Y-yes, Lord Kuro! You can count on us.”

Sumina and the crowd of forty-six explorers proudly puffed up their chests.

Still, I wasn’t planning on just heartlessly leaving them in the lurch from now on.

I would provide them with support for the next few months until they could be independent again.

“I’ll send a merchant named Echigoya along in the next few days. If you need

anything, talk to him.”

With that, I gave them some money for their immediate living expenses.

Now, I didn’t have the fake name “Echigoya,” so I’d have to have Tifaleeza give it to me with “Name Order” later.

“And you can sell this plunderers’ equipment and use that money for whatever you need.”

The armor was probably next to worthless, but there were some monster weapons and such that might fetch a decent price.

The cursed weapons and magic tools were dangerous, though, so I was keeping those.

Over the next few days, I planned to release the rest of the girls at the Ivy Manor in small batches.

Later on, I attempted to release the masterless slaves, send them to the tenement houses, and return the ones with masters to their owners, but that plan ended up backfiring.

The owners didn’t want to pay the finder’s fee for their return. In the end, they ended up surrendering ownership of the girls to me instead.

Most of them then wanted to stay as Kuro’s slaves, but I had no desire for slaves to be used as tools.

I agreed to this out of respect for their wishes so that I could keep them safe for the time being, but eventually, when they left the tenement houses, I would free all of them from slavery.

For now, I just watched contentedly as the former captives went about their new lives happily under a clear blue sky.

Rookie Explorers' Class

Satou here. They say training is the first obstacle a new employee faces. Just as the newcomer learns, the person teaching them also refreshes their knowledge of old information, so it can be surprisingly helpful for both parties.

"I'm gonna get yooou?"

"Waaah!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

"You're so fast, Miss Tama."

Changing back into Satou and returning to the house, I found the younger group playing with some of the orphanage kids in the open field next door.

"Ah! It's master, sir!"

The sharp-eyed Pochi spotted me at once and dashed over with her tail wagging.

Arisa and Mia were also in the field, gathered on the other side with a group of girls.

They seemed to be weaving something out of the grass from the field.

"Aw, you got me. Ooone, twooo, threeee…"

Tama was deliberately slowing her pace, but she still caught up to one of the fleeing children and tapped him easily.

The boy who had been caught started counting and looking around, so they were probably playing tag.

"Welcome baaack?"

Tama waved at me excitedly, and I waved back.

Her smile was even more sparkling than usual. I guess she was enjoying

playing with other kids her age.



As I patted Pochi's head, I felt grateful to the orphanage kids for drawing out new sides of Tama and Pochi.

Food would probably be the best way to thank them.

"…niiine, tennnn! Wait up!"

The kid who'd been counting broke into a run, and the others shrieked and started dashing around again.

It was always good to see kids feeling happy and energetic.

"Pochi has to run, too, sir!"

"Okay, go have fun. Just make sure no one gets hurt."

"Yes, sir."

Pochi nodded and dashed back over to the children.

It would probably be wise for me to design some kind of strength-suppressing item so that Pochi and Tama didn't hurt the other kids by accident as they played together.

I could heal any wounds with potions easily enough, but I'd hate for either of them to get traumatized by hurting someone.

"Lulu, have you started dinner already?"

"I'm sorry—I haven't yet."

Lulu's lovely face clouded, as if she thought she might be in trouble.

"No need to apologize. I was thinking that I could make hamburg steaks for everyone today."

"It has been a while. I'm sure Tama and Pochi will be thrilled."

Once she understood why I was asking, Lulu gave a relieved, gentle smile.

"Shall we use Celivera dullcattle beef today?"

"I don't think we have enough. I was thinking hydra and rocket-wolf meat."

"Really? But we have enough beef for twenty or thirty people, don't we?"

At that, I realized that Lulu had misunderstood.

“Oh, I don’t mean just for us. I want to make hamburg steaks for the maids and the orphanage kids, too.”

Lulu looked a little distressed by this.

She was probably wondering whether to point out that this went against Arisa and the orphanage director’s policy of not giving the kids anything too extravagant for their meals.

Before clarifying my intentions, I took a moment to enjoy her cute expression.

“Don’t worry—it’s only for today. I want to reward the maids for helping gather the kids and to celebrate the opening of the orphanage, you know?”

At that, Lulu’s expression cleared up.

It was fine to give them simple meals most of the time, but I was sure they’d like to enjoy something a little more exciting for special occasions.

“…Still, it’ll be a little difficult to make hamburg steaks for more than a hundred people here, I suppose.”

“Oh yes. Since we normally make simpler meals, we built some stoves in the empty lot to cook outside.”

I see… I’ve been running around so much lately, I didn’t know they were having trouble here, too.

After the children’s bedrooms, I would have the construction workers focus on the galley next.

“Let’s do that today, too, then.”

“Yes, master!”

I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to call Liza and Nana, asking them to carry some ingredients and a meat grinder into the empty lot.

“Meeeat?”

“So much of Mr. Meat, sir!”

Tama and Pochi hovered around excitedly.

For some reason, the other kids watched them with reserved expressions.

They probably weren't accustomed to the older girls like Nana and Liza yet.

"Sergeant Tama. Sergeant Pochi."

"Aye!"

"Yes, sir!"

Tama and Pochi straightened up with serious expressions.

"It is time to commence Operation: Hamburg!" I kept an equally straight face and important tone.

At this, their eyes sparkled ambitiously, like two battle-hardened veterans about to take part in a difficult mission.

"You sergeants have an important role: Take the meat that Lieutenant Liza is cutting into blocks and use this machine to turn it into minced meat."

The pair nodded seriously.

"It would be no exaggeration to say that the entire hamburg-making operation rests in your hands."

It actually would be, but I was trying to go with the flow here.

"Do your best out there, soldiers."

"Aye-aye, sirrr!"

"You can count on Pochi, sir!"

Tama and Pochi bustled over to the meat grinder, froze in confusion when they realized there was only one handle, then started turning it together for some reason.

Guys, why don't you just take turns?

"Ooooh! You're making handribag today!"

"Mrrr? Handri…?"

Arisa came over with Mia, announcing a new nickname for the hamburg steaks.

"Come on. The kids are going to remember the name wrong."

Already, some of the nearby children were whispering “handribag” to one another, so I informed them that it was a dish called “hamburg.”

“So that’s…hamburg?”

“Wow, it uses so much meat.”

“The house kids are so lucky…”

“I wish we could try it just once, too.”

The kids hovering around nearby gazed at the meat enviously.

“Ha! I’ll just buy it myself someday.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna be an explorer when I grow up.”

“Me too!”

“As soon as I’m old enough, I’m gonna work lots and lots.”

Ooh, how optimistic.

The kids in Labyrinth City seemed to be a pretty positive bunch.

“Don’t be silly. You really think we could eat all of that by ourselves? There’ll be enough for everyone—right, master?”

Arisa looked at me for confirmation, and I nodded.

“That’s right. We’re celebrating the establishment of Pendragon Orphanage.”

“Estabbiment?”

“What’s that? Is it yummy?”

“I bet it’s delicious.”

The children seemed to be hungry, so I tried to speed the cooking along.

“The teeears…”

“They won’t stoppp…”

The young maid girls’ eyes were overflowing with tears as they sliced onions for the hamburg steaks.

I could’ve guarded against this with Enchant: Physical Protection, but onions making you cry is really part of the whole experience.

“That’s because you’re crushing the fibers. If you cut it smoothly like this, it won’t make you cry.”

Lulu kindly showed them how to cut the onions properly.

The maids all murmured in admiration at Lulu’s knife skills, which were on par with any master chef at this point.

“Master, the kneading operation is going well, I report.”

Nana was in the process of kneading the hamburg meat, her sleeves rolled up past her elbows.

This was the most difficult part, so I had Miss Miteruna and the new maids, Rosie and Annie, helping her out.

As they rolled out balls of meat, I tossed each one between my hands a few times, then lined them up on the cooking plate with some space in between.

“Is the young master playing a game?”

“You’re not supposed to play with food, you know.”

“No, no. That’s a secret magic trick to make the hamburg extra yummy.”

Arisa corrected the kids’ misunderstanding.

“Magic?”

“Oh yes. That’s why they call master the Miracle Chef!”

Looking doubtful, the kids turned questioningly toward Mia.

“Mm. Truth.”

“Wow, so it’s true!”

“The young master’s amazing.”

“H-hey! What’s that all about?! You’re cheesing me off a little!”

Arisa expressed her indignation with some old-fashioned slang.

“Waaah, Miss Arisa’s angryyy!”

“Run for it! She’s scary when she’s maaad!”

The children shrieked delightedly and ran away, so Arisa chased after them,

feigning anger.

I was glad I had her to help me communicate with the kids.

“Mister, the iron plate’s ready… I mean, the iron plate is ready, young master!”

The young maid girl who’d been keeping an eye on the iron plate on top of the stove called me over.

They still had trouble with polite language, but they were getting better by the day.

“Thank you. This looks good.”

When I held my hand above the iron plate, my “Cooking” skill determined that it was nearly at the appropriate temperature.

I waited for the perfect time and started lining up the hamburg steaks on the hot plate.

Sizzle! The delicious sound immediately drew the attention of the beastfolk girls.

Before long, the scent of the cooking meat filled the air, making the other kids look over and their stomachs start to growl.

“Everyone! Let’s help make dinner extra tasty.”

Arisa called out to the kids.

Mia started playing some music to back up Arisa’s speech, which they had probably planned in advance.

“How d’we do that?”

“We’re going to cheer them on!”

Arisa made a dramatic gesture.

“Cheer?”

“Like, ‘you can do iiit!’”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” Arisa said out loud, shaking her head. Then she pointed at her lips. “With a song!”

Like a galactic songstress using music to stop a war, Arisa spread her arms out to the children.

“We’ll put all our encouragement into a song and make the hamburg into extra, extra, extraaa tasty ‘super hamburgs’!”

“Wooow!”

“Sounds fun.”

Arisa seemed to be about as good at coming up with names as I was, but I admired how she was making a whole event out of watching me cook hamburg steaks.

“What kinda song?”

“A song from the heart! Just follow my leeead!”

Arisa started singing a vaguely familiar-sounding anime opening song, though she changed the lyrics into a parody that listed the steps of cooking hamburg steaks.

As Arisa sang her heart out, the kids started joining in one after another.

Hearing familiar voices among them, I turned to see Tama and Pochi, who had finished the meat grinding and were flanking Arisa on either side.

“Master, I’ll help with the cooking.”

“Thank you, Lulu.”

The corners of Lulu’s lips were upturned from the children’s singing.

Not a bad way to prepare dinner, if you ask me.

◆

“Mmmm!”

“Yummy!”

“So gooood?”

“Mr. Hamburg is still the yummiest and bestest ever, sir.”

“Yeah, the bestest.”

“Mmph. The yummiest!”

I watched as the kids devoted themselves to tasting the hamburg steaks.

There were too many of them to make any fancy sides, so hopefully they’d forgive me for settling on mushrooms sautéed in butter and potato fries.

“Obviously my song must have worked!”

“C’mon, you mean *our* song.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on the kids’ conversation.

The purehearted kids seemed to have a hard time recognizing when Arisa was joking.

“This is delicious.”

“No wonder Pochi and Tama were so proud of it.”

Having handed out the kids’ meals, the maids were sitting down to their own hamburg steaks.

“Call them Mistress Pochi and Mistress Tama, remember,” Miss Miteruna scolded as she returned from the house.

She had taken plates of food to the samurai pair in charge of the house’s security.

“Your hamburg steaks continue to astound, master.”

Liza closed her eyes, chewing thoughtfully.

Her tail was swishing back and forth, a telltale sign that she was enjoying herself.

“Ahhh… I still can’t measure up to master’s level.”

“Lulu, your ambition is admirable, I praise.”

“Mm. Hang in there.”

Lulu looked pleased, if slightly bitter, as Nana and Mia encouraged her.

Mia had a half serving of hamburg steak, along with a mountain of sautéed mushrooms.

Surprisingly, the other half of Mia's steak wasn't on the beastfolk girls' plates but on Arisa's.

"Heeey, don't look at me like that."

Sensing my gaze, Arisa protested immediately. She probably didn't want me to think she was being a glutton.

"Playing with those kids burns a lot of calories, you know!"

"Yeah, yeah. It's fine."

My girlfriend in college once made me join her on a diet, so I knew how stressful it could be.

Waving Arisa off, I noticed a blue dot on my radar, indicating that an acquaintance of mine was approaching.

"Oh-ho, quite a rustic outdoor feast thou hast out here, no?"

It was Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom, her short drill-shaped pigtails bouncing along.

Next to her was her stoic bodyguard, the lady knight Ravna.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Princess Meetia."

"I am glad to see thee in good health, Sir Satou."

The princess looked around at our outdoor banquet and nodded seriously.

She appeared no older than Arisa, so seeing her childish features attempt to form a mature expression was always charming.

Though I couldn't say that to her, lest I hurt her feelings, of course.

"Is there some urgent business afoot?"

It wasn't quite sunset yet, but it was still late for a princess to be wandering around on a walk.

"Hmm, I heard from Lady Reythel that thou were in some trouble, no?"

Reythel was the name of the viceroy's wife, who'd given me advice on how to help the children.

"I came to see if I might be of some help, but…"

Princess Meetia seemed to have gathered from the peaceful dinner scene that the problem had already been solved.

“I appreciate that very much.”

Instead of apologizing for the wasted trip, I simply thanked her for worrying about us.

“If you don’t mind having the same meal as the children, would you like to join us? You’d be more than welcome.”

“Hmm, art thou certain? I do not wish to take someone else’s meal, no?”

What a thoughtful young lady she is.

“Yes, it’s quite all right. I made plenty of extra in case anyone wanted seconds. Lady Ravna, I do hope you’ll join us as well.”

“Then I shall take thee up on thy offer.”

“Thank you very much.”

I had a table and chairs brought over for them and prepared some nice tableware.

I couldn’t very well give a princess the same throwaway plates we used for the soup kitchen.

“Oh-ho, this meat is remarkably soft, no?!”

Princess Meetia’s eyes widened as she took a bite of the hamburg steak.

Lady Ravna simply ate in devout silence. Her plate was empty in a matter of moments.

“Please help yourself to seconds.”

“M-much appreciated.”

I offered her another plate, which she gratefully accepted.

The hamburg steaks were made in child-size portions, so that likely wasn’t enough for a well-built knight like Ravna.

She demolished her second plate in no time but declined any more when she saw how the children were scrabbling for seconds.

The mad grab for more food that Tama and Pochi had started soon reached its end in the form of countless stuffed-looking children.

Maybe I shouldn't have started making hydra steaks when we ran out of hamburg partway through.

"That was truly delicious, no? Even I, a royal, hath scarcely eaten any meal quite as remarkable."

Judging by Princess Meetia's tone, her praise was clearly genuine.

"Wow, even the princess liked it!"

"Well, yeah. It was so yummy!"

"Hee-hee, we really got something special."

The kids seemed surprised and pleased to learn that the food had been exceptional even to a royal.

"I wonder if we'll ever get to eat like that again?"

"Probably not, right?"

Noticing the children's questioning gazes, I responded. "We can't do it all the time, but we'll try for a few times a year, at least."

The orphanage director nodded, indicating that it wouldn't be a problem.

"Yaaay!"

"Hooray!"

"I wonder when we'll get to eat it next?"

"Not for a while, I'm sure."

"But how long's a while?"

"Just a while!"

The children's conversation was adorable as ever.

If I gave them a specific date, I'd be afraid of seeing the looks on their faces in the event that I broke my promise, so I avoided any concrete statements.

I didn't want to be the kind of father who made empty promises only to break

them when the weekend came.

“Oh right, Lady Ravna.”

There hadn’t been a good opportunity during dinner, but now I produced a broadsword made with monster parts from my Garage Bag.

The sword I made from the soldier mantis blade arm was too big for most people. It would be best suited to someone like Lady Ravna.

I’d changed the name of the maker on this one alone, so it shouldn’t cause any problems in the future.

“A visiting merchant left this with me…”

“Oh? A monster broadsword? Would you mind if I gave it a few swings?”

“Go right ahead.”

I gladly handed her the sword.

As far as I could tell from my travels and time in the old capital, Shiga Kingdom nobles and their servants tended to dislike equipment made from monster parts, but Ravna and her employer, Princess Meetia, seemed to have no such reservations.

“Whoa!”

“Ooh, that lady’s strong.”

As the knight swung the gigantic sword around with ease, the kids all watched admiringly.

In a place like Labyrinth City, it was probably normal to look up to the strong.

“It may look unrefined, but it’s really quite a wonderful, well-balanced blade.”

Lowering the sword, the knight gazed at it with the fiery eyes of a maiden in love.

“In particular, it conducts magic with far more ease than the likes of any bronze sword.”

Huh? I did adjust it with “Magic Manipulation” so that magic would pass through it more easily, but I don’t think it’s all that impressive, is it?

One of my handmade Magic Swords would definitely be at least 20 percent more effective.

“This is unlike any of the broadswords I’ve ever tested in a Labyrinth City armory. Was it made by a famous smith?”

“It’s the work of an up-and-coming swordsmith named Hephaestus, I’m told.”

At a nearby table, Arisa did a spit take with her after-dinner tea and was scolded by Lulu.

She must’ve recognized that I’d taken the name from the Greek god of blacksmiths.

Of course, it went without saying that this was one of my pseudonyms.

“Hephaestus, you say? Surely a name that will go down in history.”

I saw Arisa quavering with suppressed laughter, but I just ignored her and accepted the knight’s praise.

“I’ll let the merchant know next time he passes through.”

Lady Ravna held out the broadsword to me, looking reluctant to part with it, but I gently pushed it back.

“Sir Pendragon?”

“Please keep it. I was asked to find a true master of combat in Labyrinth City to use that broadsword.”

“What do you mean? I’m quite certain I don’t have the means to pay for such a fine sword.”

“No need to pay anything. It’s for publicity, you see. Not to use you as a billboard, but if anyone asks you about the sword, please tell them it was made by Hephaestus. According to him, that would be more than enough payment.”

This was the excuse I’d come up with in advance to reassure her.

I’d never seen any kind of billboards in this world, but they seemed to have a word for it, at least.

“For a sword this splendid? Surely not…”

“The merchant told me its maker considered it a failure, you know. It’s too large and heavy, he said, so nobody in his hometown was able to use it.”

The knight could barely pull her eyes away from the sword as she protested. I used my “Fabrication” skill to give her a push of encouragement.

“Please, won’t you use it for his sake?”

“Ravna, to refuse any further would be rude to Sir Satou and Sir Hephaestus.”

“Very well, Princess.” A word from her employer was enough to finally put Ravna over the edge. “Sir Pendragon, thank you. I shall use it with the utmost care.”

“If you notice anything interesting while using it, please let me know. I’ll pass it on to the merchant who gave it to me.”

“I most certainly shall.”

Lady Ravna nodded gallantly, strapping the sword to her back.

Just as I thought, it suited her perfectly.

◆

“Whoa, are we out of place or what?”

A few days after the hamburg feast, my group and I went to the explorers’ guild to take the rookie explorers’ class. As Arisa observed, however, we were incredibly out of place.

The students around us were all middle school–age kids in secondhand clothes and with homemade equipment.

There were some beastfolk mixed in among the humans, like tigerfolk and snake-headed folk.

“E-excuse me! A-are you the teachers?”

A young girl entered from the guild’s practice grounds and looked at us timidly.

She was equipped with chain mail, a steel mace, and even a buckler.

According to my AR, she was the daughter of a hereditary knight serving the

feudal lord of a neighboring territory.

She was looking toward Nana and Liza, but I answered in their place. “No, we’re students just like you.”

“O-oh, I’m sorry. I’m Gina, daughter of Sir Darrel the—”

“Hey, mister! What are you doing here?”

“Good to see you again, mister. Are you a teacher now, too?”

Miss Gina was interrupted by the Lovely Wings: a pair of explorers we’d rescued from a monster rampage in the labyrinth before.

Clearly, they were our teachers for the day.

“Hey, everybody here?”

A bearlike, bearded man with a wooden sword strolled over.

“Sir Dozon? Are there extra teachers today?”

“No, I think it’s no one but you two and me.”

The three teachers seemed to know one another.

The explorer Mr. Dozon was a commoner, despite the Lovely Wings’ use of “sir.”

“Are you here as a student of the rookie explorers’ class, Sir Noble?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Whaaat? But you’re an expert already, mister!”

“Sure this isn’t some kind of mistake?”

The Lovely Wings pair exclaimed in surprise, so I showed them the letter I’d gotten from the guild.

Other than this initial misunderstanding, the class went pretty smoothly.

“…So anyway, if ya start by huntin’ them potato and bean monsters, you’ll never go hungry, kids.”

The rookies listened intently to Dozon’s lecture.

“For some reason, though, just huntin’ potatoes and beans all the time won’t

make ya stronger.”

He explained that it was all but impossible to level up by defeating those monsters, even for a brand-new, low-level explorer.

“So form groups of three or more, and if you see any maze rats or maze moths while you’re huntin’ the beans and potatoes, make sure you go after those guys first.”

The latter weren’t worth much beyond their monster cores, but they were worth hunting for leveling up.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tama and Pochi nodding vigorously.

You know none of this applies to you at your level, right?

“What about the entangling canola that show up in those areas?”

“Ahhh, labyrinth *manju* stands will sometimes buy those off ya, but usually there’s not much use for ’em. And they’re tougher than the potatoes and beans, so I’d avoid fightin’ ’em if ya can.”

Dozon responded to the rookie’s question dismissively.

“Canola? Couldn’t you get oil from it, then?” Arisa asked.

“Hunh? If ya need oil, all ya gotta do is hunt goblins and bring ’em to a butcher, yeah?”

Dozon looked at Arisa like she’d said something totally ridiculous.

Since making plant-based oil required certain processing and solvents, it was probably easier just to get it from oil slimes.

Still, I’d love to get my hands on vegetable oil, so I decided to check later if I had any recipes.

“Anyway…”

Dozon went back to his main point.

“When ya hunt them rats and moths, ya might see goblins or maze ants, but don’t touch ’em until ya got the proper equipment. Maze ants are particularly tough. Without the right weapons, even your teachers here might have trouble with them.”

Dozon gestured to the Lovely Wings, who chuckled dryly.

“Yeah right! We could beat a goblin up no problem!”

one particularly bold student shouted at Dozon.

“A stray one, maybe. But there are strong ones that travel in groups near where the beans and potatoes live. If ya ever get into it with those, throw a smoke bomb or a flash bomb and run for it.”

Bopping the mouthy child on the head, Dozon turned to warn the others.

“Anyone who doesn’t have any flash bombs, raise your hands.”

We were the only ones who raised our hands in response to Dozon’s declaration.

After lecturing us for a while about how an explorer should always be prepared, Dozon gave us a sample smoke bomb and flash bomb.

He informed us that they were sold at the west guild’s shop, so I decided to buy a bunch before we next went into the labyrinth.

“Listen up, you lot! For us explorers, our bodies are our tools. If ya get hurt, it’s all over!”

Tama and Pochi tilted their heads inquisitively at this.

“What about potiooons?”

“Ya won’t make any profit if ya use somethin’ so expensive,” Dozon responded.

“Really, sir?”

“Tama. Pochi.”

Liza made a lip-zipping gesture at Tama and Pochi, which the two hurriedly mirrored and shut their mouths.

“The only folks who can afford to use potions on the regular are noble parties or garnet-badge explorers.”

Really? I didn’t think they were that *expensive…*

I was a little confused, but by then, the subject had already shifted from

potions to overnight camping.

“It might be a little early for you lot to try this, but if you’re gonna stay in overnight, make sure ya bring food for twice as long as you’re plannin’ to stay. And hire bag carriers, too. Water’s real heavy.”

Right, I guess it’s not like everyone has water stones or Well Bags.

“Mister, you’ve stayed in the labyrinth before, right? How long?”

“Yes, about seven days.”

“Seven days?! With those little girls?! That’s crazy.”

Mr. Dozon looked shocked.

We had a base there in the style of a vacation home, so it was fine for us, but I guess normally it’d be rough to sleep on the damp ground night after night.

“Don’t follow their example, kids. Most people stay only three or four days. Some lookouts hole up in the mantis or beetle areas for near half a month, but they’ve got troops to bring ’em supplies, so that’s different. If ya try to do the same thing, you’ll end up dead.”

Half a month in the labyrinth without a shower or anything? Just thinking about it made my head itchy.

I was still shuddering about that when the lecture ended and we moved on to practical lessons.

Dozon and the Lovely Wings pair split up and taught the rookies some basic moves.

“Hey, Sir Dozon, can you use ‘Spellblade’?”

“Yeah, right! If I could do things like that, I wouldn’t be wastin’ my time as an explorer.”

Dozon scoffed at the curious newbie’s question.

At that, Pochi and Tama looked at each other.

Fortunately, the lip-zipping gesture from before seemed to have worked, so they didn’t say anything careless.

“The only folks who’re still explorers even though they can use ‘Spellblade’ are weirdos like Jelil and Zarigon.”

“So *Zakorin* can use ‘Spellblade,’ too? That’s surprising…,” Arisa murmured rudely.

Judging by the way my companions had acquired it, I imagined that “Spellblade” was mostly a rare skill because weapons that could conduct magic well weren’t widely available.

If practice weapons for it like wooden Magic Swords became popular, the amount of “Spellblade” users would probably increase.

◆

“You sure? This is a lotta people, even for a noble.”

“Yes, it’s fine.”

Once the lesson was over, I invited the teachers and rookie students out to a bar near the guild.

All my treat, of course.

It wasn’t quite like an after-work drinking party, but I’d learned a lot of useful information and explorers’ common knowledge from Mr. Dozon and the others, even the rookies, so I wanted to thank them by treating them to food and drink.

“Whoa, we’ve never eaten at a place like this before!”

“Hey, quit starin’ like that. They’ll think we’re a buncha country bumpkins!”

“Well, we *are* country bumpkins! What’s the big deal?”

Many of the rookies seemed anxious, but it wasn’t a particularly high-class bar.

A single silver coin was enough for all the food and drink you could want.

“Once we’re full-fledged explorers, d’you think we’ll be able to eat at places like this all the time, too?”

“Sorry, but even we only come here a few times a year.”

“Wait, really?”

“Ah-ha-ha, well, maintenance and repairs on all that armor and equipment really add up.”

I heard the Lovely Wings chatting with a rookie.

So even well-established explorers didn’t have a great cash flow.

“Mr. Dozon, what would you like?”

“Let’s start with a round of ale and whatever meat ya can bring out fastest.”

Dozon placed a decidedly manly order with the waitress.

“Just fruit water for these girls, please. And how about a heaping helping of whatever dishes you recommend?”

“Let’s order everything on the menu!”

Since most of my companions were too young, I ordered fruit water for them.

I could probably let Liza drink, since she was old enough, but I refrained because drinking tended to make her sleepy.

“A-are you quite sure?”

“Yes, if that’s all right.”

The waitress seemed taken aback by Arisa’s bold request, but I handed her a few gold coins and told her to let me know if it wasn’t enough.

“Well, damn, aren’t you doin’ well? Your girls got some pretty fine armor, and I hear you’re even givin’ out food to the needy, right? Most nobles don’t have enough cash for all that, do they?”

“Yes, well, I happened to make some rather profitable trade deals on the sugar route,” I answered with an arbitrary excuse.

In truth, the amount of money I’d made on the sugar route wasn’t even 1 percent of my loot from the Valley of Dragons, but it was a convenient reason that satisfied most people’s curiosity.

“You can make that much just from trading?”

“Master simply happens to have some remarkable connections,” Arisa replied to the rookie. “He wouldn’t have been able to profit so much if he hadn’t been

friends with the king of Lalagi.”

“Friends with a king?!”

“Whoa! You’re amazin’, mister!”

The newbie explorers looked at me in awe.

“Fancy meeting thee here, Sir Satou.”

“Good evening, Princess Meetia.”

Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom emerged from a passing carriage.

“C-cute!”

“Mr. Noble seems to know an awful lot of cute girls.”

“Maybe she’s from a good family?”

“I wonder if I could get her to marry me when I’m a garnet-badge explorer?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Her Highness is a princess from another kingdom.”

A whispered conversation reached my ears from the direction of Arisa and a few of the rookies.

Hmm?

I saw the green-clad noble entering the west guild. Was he there to interrogate the plunderers?

As I watched his movements on my radar, I saw a few yellow dots appear, which indicated a monster that wasn’t hostile.

Looking in that direction, I saw a woman accompanied by two panther-like monsters.

“Oh, don’t worry. That’s just a tamer and her pet monsters.”

“I’ve never seen an explorer with pet monsters before.”

“Ya haven’t? A lot of explorers use pet monsters or golems, y’know. Necromancers and summoners, on the other hand, even veterans like me hardly ever see those,” Dozon explained after noticing my gaze.

“See? There’s Lun, a puppet user. Joggo and the golem army will probably be

back from the labyrinth soon, too, so ya might get to see that."

Lun's puppet looked like a marionette made out of bricks.

It moved stiffly, but according to my AR, it was actually pretty powerful.

"Here, I brought some ale, boiled beans, and meat skewers. The stew will be out soon. You can snack on the meat until then."

"Great, thanks."

We quenched our thirst with the ale and fruit water the waitress brought, and the rookies dug into the meat skewers.

The beastfolk girls were quick to join in on the feeding frenzy.

"Mmmm!"

"S'been ages since I had meat."

"In our village, we only ate meat during harvest festivals an' such."

The young explorers ate with relish as they chatted excitedly about the food.

Soon the meat skewers were gone from the table. As we munched on some dried snacks and drank the ale, I saw several explorers greet Mr. Dozon on their way by.

He seemed to be a pretty friendly, helpful sort, so he knew a lot of people.

"Sumina! Hey, if it ain't Sumina!"

This time, it was Dozon who called out to a passing explorer.

It was the Elder Sister who I'd rescued from the labyrinth.

"Sir Dozon! Good to see you again."

"S'been so long, I thought ya might be dead!"

Dozon and Sumina exchanged warm greetings.

"Looks like ya got some pretty nice equipment there, though. What, ya workin' for some noble now?"

"Yeah, right! Like they'd ever hire me." Sumina laughed. "But I'm working for someone even better than that."

“Yeah? Who?”

“It’s a secret. Maybe I’ll tell you once he gets famous, though. I got this armor and sword from him, too.”

Sumina patted the silver sword in its scabbard and grinned mischievously.

Then she edged it out of the sheath just enough that Dozon could catch a glimpse of what was inside.

“I’ll be damned! Is that—?”

“Yep, it’s the real thing—like in the legends!”

Sumina winked charmingly at the startled Mr. Dozon.

“Sumina…make sure you do right by a Magic Sword like that, yeah?”

“Of course!”

She nodded cheerfully, explaining that she’d just been to a knowledgeable friend to learn how to properly care for the silver sword.

“Sister Sumina!”

“Oops, gotta go. Let’s grab a drink sometime soon, Sir Dozon.”

With that, she ran off toward the friend who had called her name.

“Sure is rowdy in here. These your rookies, Sir Dozon?”

When Sumina left, a different explorer came in and walked over to Dozon.

“Hey, Jejeh. Yeah, they’re some kids from my rookie explorers’ class.”

The explorer talking to Dozon looked somehow familiar.

“Oh really? …Wait, what?! It’s you!”

The man seemed to recognize me, too.

“He’s from that bloodied party we helped the first time we went into the Celivera labyrinth,” Liza reminded me.

Thank goodness she’s so good at remembering faces.

“You really saved us that time! Let me pay you back with some drinks tonight.”

“Since when can the eternally broke Red Ice party pay for anything?”

“This man saved my comrade’s life, you know.”

“Would you like to join us? You can share your exploring expertise with the newbies.”

Mr. Jejeh said he would foot the bill, but I couldn’t have him spending several gold coins just for a few watered-down potions.

Instead, I asked him to share some funny incidents and horror stories with us and the rookie explorers.

After Jejeh, other explorers who were friends of Mr. Dozon continued to trickle in.

“My, it’s lively in here.”

“Have you finished your work for today, Guildmaster?”

“Who cares? Thanks to that white-haired hero-follower freak, I’ve had so much work that I haven’t been able to get good and drunk lately.”

“I’ve been telling you to stop getting so drunk all the time anyway.”

“Oh, quiet, Sebelkeya.”

It was the guildmaster and Miss Sebelkeya.

The former tried to order an ale, but the latter stopped her and asked for water and a few dishes for dinner instead.

The rookie explorers didn’t seem to know their faces, but some of the veterans like Jejeh and the Lovely Wings sat up at the arrival of two important people from the guild.

“Oh-ho-ho? Sir Pendragon’s drinking with the guildmaster all buddy-buddy-like!”

Hearing a joking voice from the door, I turned to see the labyrinth army captain and the foxfolk officer who often accompanied him, along with an incognito General Erthal.

“Captain, do you think we’ve been betrayed?”

“Well, I’m sure a drink will cure whatever *ales* us.”

“Oh, Captain, your awful jokes are killing me…”

In response to the foxfolk officer’s complaint, the captain bopped him on the head.

Clearly, these two were as close as ever.

“Would you like to join us as well? The food here is really quite good.”

“If a gourmet like you recommends it, Sir Pendragon, I’m sure we can’t go wrong.”

General Erthal sat down in an open chair behind me.

Sensing his aura of extreme importance, the other explorers at the table promptly dispersed to other seats.

“We’ve got the whole place reserved today, so order whatever you’d like.”

“Does that mean you’re footing the bill, Sir Knight?”

“Yes, it does.”

I nodded at the excited-looking foxfolk man.

“Whoo-hoo!” he roared, prompting another punch from his superior officer. As they played out their usual comedy routine, I asked the waitress to bring some food and alcohol to General Erthal’s table.

“Right away, sir. Here’s the food you ordered before.”

Our table was filled with several plates of meat and a big pot of stew.

There were several small bowls and ladles next to the pot for people to serve themselves.

“A foreign princess, the guildmaster, and the army general?”

“Who in the world is this guy?”

“Garnet-badge explorers are really something else.”

“You morons! No ordinary garnet-badge explorer has all those impressive connections.”

As Liza and Lulu politely handed out the food, I heard the explorers at the other tables gossiping.

I'd met Princess Meetia through sheer happenstance, but the latter two were just my drinking buddies…

"Here you are, master."

"Thanks."

I accepted the mead Lulu handed me.

"To Sir Pendragon and the future of the rookie explorers!"

""""Cheers!""""

General Erthal raised yet another toast, and we all clinked glasses for the umpteenth time that evening.

As the adults continued drinking, the younger kids tucked food away with endless appetites.

"It's delicious."

"Munchy-crunchyyy?"

"This meat is nice and chewy, sir."

The beastfolk girls seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely, probably because of all the different meat dishes at this place.

I decided we should come back to eat here once in a while.

"Master, this seafood dish is delicious, too."

"Mushroom stew."

"Thanks, you two."

Arisa and Mia offered me their plates, so I tried a few bites.

The seafood melted in my mouth, flooding it with flavor.

I was a little hesitant about the toadstool-looking mushrooms floating around in the stew, but they were delectable as well. The spice was addictive, a vastly different flavor from any chili pepper.

Both of them went better with wine or mead than ale.

I couldn’t think of anything more fun than enjoying tasty food and tasty drinks while chatting with friends old and new.

Looking up at the full moon in the sky, I raised my glass of mead.

Peace really was the best way to live, in this world or any other.

> Title Acquired: Coordinator

> Title Acquired: Banquet Boss

The Demon's Offer

The name's Ludaman. I was born the bastard son of a petty bandit and came to Labyrinth City to make a name for myself. It was all smooth sailing at first. They even started calling me the Plunderer King. But now…

"…I'm in a dungeon."

As I sat grumbling on the dirty, stinkin' floor, one o' my henchmen stuck his ugly mug between the ceiling and me.

All of 'em have messed up their faces from using too much demonic potion.

"What're we gonna do, boss?"

"Gettin' into Violet's not much better than public execution or the coal mines. We'll just be human shields for fancy-pants nobles and knights."

"So let's make a break for it before they put them enslavement collars on us!"

"I can bend these bars no problem with my superhuman strength!"

"Yeah, exactly. We can fight unarmed just fine."

I'd thought o' that, too, of course.

But this dungeon was rigged up with magic-sapping magic circles.

My "Body Strengthening" and "Desperation" skills wouldn't work here.

Not that we'd stand much of a chance busting out of this well-like place even if I could use my skills.

And even if we could, that "Hero's follower" bastard already took our hideout.

We could break into a shop and steal some weapons and money, but where would we go? There was only the desert to the west or the monster territory to the south.

I didn’t think either of those would be any better than Violet or the coal mines.

“Just wait for the right moment.”

“What the hell’s the ‘right moment’ supposed to mean anyway?”

Kurse, my self-proclaimed “right-hand man” who’s always calling me “boss,” was givin’ me the stink eye.

So I grabbed his head and slammed it into the ground.

He flopped around, begging for mercy.

“You’ll know it when it happens.” I glared at my goons, speaking slowly. “We’ll hear from ’im soon enough.”

“Who? You mean that yellow-robed bastard?”

“You think demons are gonna come?”

“You idiots,” I snapped. “No, the guy who was making demonic potion with the ingredients he bought from us. The mastermind behind Sokell.”

The guy I’d sent to follow him got himself killed. His head actually got left on display in front of our hideout.

When we’d tried to sell our own demonic potions in the royal capital or the crossroads city of Kelton, the merchants got killed, too. The only place we got away with it was the trade city at the southern end of the royal family’s territory.

I didn’t know if they still needed us, but either way, I figured they’d contact us sooner or later.

Even as I thought about it, I heard the sound of the dungeon door being unlatched.

I knew it.

Then I heard footsteps.

Only one set.

The guards always moved in groups of two or more.

“Been waiting for ya.”

“Oh my, you say that as if you knew I would be coming, indeed.”

It was the old noble in green clothes.

I’d met him once before I became a plunderer, when I was doing dirty jobs in Labyrinth City.

If I remembered right, he was the rotten bastard who controlled the dark side of the royal capital’s highest nobles…

“…Count Poputema.”

“My son is the head of the family now, so I’m a *former* count, indeed. Nowadays many people call me by the charming title of Counselor Poputema, indeed.”

Poputema spoke like a weirdo, creepily ending all his sentences the same way.

The Poputema I knew was a much better speaker, his tone sharp as a razor.

Who the hell are you?

The words almost slipped out, but I stopped myself just in time.

If I said that out loud, there was no doubt the conversation would be over.

“Gotcha. Let’s cut to the chase, then, yeah?”

“You small fry are always so hasty, indeed.”

My idiotic henchmen all bristled at his rudeness.

Their growling and rattling at the bars would have frightened a weaker man, but this one’s face remained calm.

“Don’t gimme that. You’re the one who told us that Pendragon brat was coming to the guild, aren’t ya?”

Poputema didn’t answer. He just kept wearing that crescent-moon smile.

“I hear you succeeded in being sent to Violet, indeed. Are you pleased to serve as the disposable pawns of royal capital nobles, indeed?”

That really set off my goons.

They were playing right into his hands by getting riled up.

“Shut up! I don’t wanna hear another damn word from you lot till this conversation is over!”

I kicked an iron bar and shouted, which shut ’em all right up.

My top brass hadn’t made a sound for a while. They were simply watching in silence, keeping a shrewd eye on Poputema’s position.

If he came within reach, they would probably grab him and use him as a hostage.

“I was hoping to enjoy your rage and fear a little longer, indeed.”

Poputema shook his head with an infuriating expression.

“So? Did ya come here to silence us? Or to make a deal?”

“You misunderstand, indeed.”

Poputema fished around in his enormous sleeves.

“I am not the demonic-potion manufacturer, indeed.”

The hell is he doing here, then?

“There’s been less miasma than usual in Labyrinth City lately, indeed.”

“The hell is miasma? Make some sense, will ya?”

I jerked my head at him impatiently.

“I do so despise uneducated scum—Ah, here it is, indeed.”

Poputema produced some kind of green stone from his sleeve.

What the hell is that?

“A Summoning Pearl, indeed.”

The green pearl hit the ground and broke, black liquid seeping out of it and drawing an ominous magic circle.

“Indeed, indeed, I am here, indeed.”

A grotesque green creature emerged, speaking in the same bizarre way as that Poputema bastard.

He was like a giant eyeball with limbs, wings, and a tail.

“A d-demon?”

One of my henchmen who could use “Analyze” spoke up.

For a demon, he didn’t have a very intimidating presence. Must be a lesser one, then.

Which meant…

“So yer a friend of Yellow Robes?”

“I suppose you could say that, indeed. We have been sworn allies since ancient times, or perhaps I should say we’ve been stuck with each other, indeed.”

The eyeball demon cackled at Poputema’s words.

Ignoring his odd behavior, Poputema walked closer to the demon.

“Were you able to borrow from the pink one, indeed?”

“Indeed, indeed, of course, indeed.”

A black hole appeared next to the eyeball demon, and he pulled out a strange pink clump.

As soon as I saw it, my whole body seized up with fear, like something had grabbed ahold of my heart.

Shit.

That thing’s bad news.

Way worse than any stupid eyeball demon.

“The hell is that?”

“It feels good, indeed.”

I forced down my fear and glared at Poputema.

“Sliiiime!”

Our resident slime-loving idiot in the cell across from us grabbed the bars and bellowed.

Dumbass. Does that really seem like a slime to you?

“Oh dear. Do you really want this sphere that badly, indeed?”

“Gimme it! Gimme that slime!”

Poputema nodded at the eyeball demon.

“Hurryyy!”

“Stop! You idiot!”

Heedless of my shout, the slime lover grabbed the pink ball from the eyeball demon.

“We’ll be together forever.”

As he always did with slimes, he opened his mouth and swallowed it whole.

“Guh, it’s a feisty one…”

His stomach began to swell.

“Oogh… It’s movin’… Nnngh—”

The slime lover’s body lost its shape, turning to transparent pink goop.

Then the slime spread, starting to swallow up the other henchmen in the same cell.

“Gaaaah!”

“H-heeeelp!”

“Boooss!”

My henchmen reached through the bars, begging for help.

“Indeed, indeed, fear, indeed.”

The eyeball demon flew about, clapping his hands in delight.

Having absorbed all the prisoners in one cell, the slime began reaching its tentacles toward the lower cells.

“Boss, they’re still alive in there…”

My self-proclaimed right-hand man, Kurse, was right: Even as their skin began to dissolve in the slime, my henchmen were still struggling desperately.

“Of course they are, indeed. The pink sphere exists to wring pain, fear, and hatred out of living things, indeed. It can’t do that if it kills them, indeed.”

“Indeed, indeed, extraction, indeed!”

The eyeball demon flapped around next to Poputema.

“B-but why us?” one of my men cried out.

It was a good question: He could’ve just gone to the slums instead of coming all the way to the guild dungeon.

“Normal humans are too fragile, indeed.”

From the sound of things, the bastard had already tested it out.

“Since you’ve turned yourselves into half-monster freaks with demonic potions, you’re much heartier, and your souls are nice and rotten from preying on your fellow man, indeed.”

“Indeed, indeed, perfect, indeed!”

Half monsters, huh…?

I touched my warped face unconsciously.

“As they struggle inside the pink sphere, they’ll pollute Labyrinth City with miasma, indeed.”

“Indeed, indeed, fertilizer, indeed.”

The eyeball demon nodded enthusiastically.

I didn’t know what miasma was, but I could tell by looking at those guys that it couldn’t be good.

If we didn’t get away, I had a feeling that a truly horrible death awaited us.

“What’re ya gatherin’ this miasma stuff for? We can probably help ya.”

While I searched for some way out of here, I kept up the conversation so that he wouldn’t turn his slime thing on us.

“To bring about His Majesty’s second coming, of course, indeed. But I do not need your help to—”

Then Poputema paused, sinking into thought.

I didn't know what he was talking about, but "His Majesty" usually meant some big shot, like a king.

What the hell was this "second coming," though? Maybe he was setting up some trap for the Shigan king or something.

"…Your soul seems to be nice and dismal, indeed. The hatred is perhaps too strong but not half-bad overall, indeed."

Whatever he was getting at, it sounded like I might be able to avoid getting swallowed by that slime thing.

"Do you have any of those, indeed?"

"Indeed, indeed, souvenir, indeed."

The eyeball demon ceased his dancing and handed Poputema some kind of pouch.

"Not just a short horn but a long horn, too, indeed. Perfect, indeed."

Poputema took a sinister-looking horn out of the pouch.

"I will give you options, indeed."

He tossed the long horn to me.

I could probably use it as a weapon, but judging by how it felt when I caught it, it was probably some kind of magic tool or cursed item.

"What kinda choices?"

"It's simple, indeed. You simply hold that horn to your forehead and speak a little password, indeed."

"This some kinda enslavement collar?"

"How very rude, indeed. It is an artifact given to us by my god, indeed."

An artifact?

No artifact this guy had could be anything good.

It was better than that pink sphere thing, but not by much.

"If you're compatible, it will make you far stronger than any amount of demonic potion, indeed."

“More than the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga?”

“With that horn, yes, indeed.”

I gazed at the horn in my hand.

It was a trap, no doubt about it.

But if I could be more powerful than the strongest swordsmen in the Shiga Kingdom…

My whole life had taught me that strength was everything, so I’d be lying if I said the offer wasn’t tempting.

“B-boss?”

I ignored my concerned-sounding subordinate’s voice, thinking.

Demonic potion already had side effects that made the user look less human.

If this horn made me more powerful than that, then I might lose my humanity entirely.

But even still…

It sounded much better than being eaten by that slime thing and being tortured alive until I eventually kicked the bucket.

“If you don’t wish to use it, you can make miasma for me in the pink sphere, indeed.”

Poputema challenged me as if reading my mind, so I sneered back at him.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

“B-boss, no. You don’t want to do that…”

Ignoring my henchman, I jerked my chin at Poputema.

“Tell me the password.”

“Such excellent determination, indeed. Your nastiness is worthy of this horn, indeed.”

He had no right to talk with that smug look on his face.

“If you succeed in adapting to the horn and gaining its power, I shall even let

you meet His Highness, indeed."

"Hmph. Like I'd waste my time meeting some damn king."

Rebelling against a king would be way more interesting.

It might be nice to go at it against the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga, too.

"Hurry up and tell me the password."

"'Take my loathing as thy provisions and grant me tyrannical power'—no, I suppose that's too complicated for someone like you, indeed. 'Turn my hatred into strength' will suffice, indeed."

"You sure know how to piss a guy off."

I glared at Poputema, held the horn to my forehead, and repeated the bastard's words.

The simpler version, obviously.

As soon as I was done, searing pain spread from my forehead throughout my body.

Every part of me seemed to pulsate, like I was tearing myself apart. I tried to distract myself by focusing on the cold of the ground.

"Guraaaarrrgh!"

An ear-piercing roar echoed through the dungeon.

"Now, evolve into a being that can destroy any opponent, indeed."

My bones cracked and splintered, piercing through my skin as I became something inhuman.

"Aaaaaaahhhwwwrggghgh!"

I didn't realize that the awful howl was coming from me until the pain finally started to subside.

Just as it faded, I felt a new sensation course through my body like a muddy stream.

Fear, rage, bitterness, envy, hatred, every kind of dark emotion threatened to consume my mind.

“LIIIiiiIIKE… HEEeeEELLLLLL!”

I fought back against the forces attempting to crush me and warp me into something else.

“You won’t get the best of the Plunderer King Ludaman!”

I howled at the dirty ceiling with all my might.

Finally, the still-pulsing flood of dark emotions retreated somewhere deep into my body.

“What a surprise, indeed. I never imagined you’d be able to retain a sense of self after using the long horn, indeed. What a happy miscalculation on my part, indeed. You really are demonic to the core—”

Poputema applauded as he stepped toward the jail.

Dumbass.

I shot out an arm, which had become sharp and swordlike.

The iron bars were sliced neatly in half, along with that bastard Poputema, whose body fell to the floor in two pieces.

I couldn’t help sneering at the laughable sight.

This feels good.

Enjoying the emotional rush, I looked to the sky and laughed.

“B-boss?”

“You turned into some kinda monster…”

“N-no, that’s a…demon…”

A demon?

I see. So I’ve been reborn as a demon.

Suddenly, I felt all-powerful.

“H-help!”

“Mr. Ludaman…”

My henchmen trembled as they looked at me fearfully.

Ahhh, now, that feels good.

I want to hear them scream…

"How violent, indeed."

Startled, I turned toward the voice.

"How the hell are you still alive?"

"I—I *am* a part of a greater demon, you know, indeed. Even if this avatar is destroyed, I will just wake up in my own castle, indeed…"

Poputema coughed up blood as he muttered.

"…H-how strange, indeed. Why can I not discard this avatar, indeed?"

"Indeed, indeed, it's obvious, indeed."

Looking down at the confused Poputema, the eyeball demon cackled mockingly.

"…Now I remember, indeed."

Poputema stared up at the lesser demon, then widened his eyes, still bleeding.

"I was abducted by a demon and—mind controlled? Or was my personality overwritten…?"

As Poputema murmured to himself vaguely, the light left his eyes.

"Indeed, indeed, such a fool, indeed."

The eyeball demon waved his arm, and the pink slime swallowed up the two halves of Poputema's corpse.

"Hey, Mr. Eyeball. Who's this 'His Majesty' Poputema was talking about, huh?"

Even the king of a huge land like the Shiga Kingdom couldn't turn someone into a demon.

"Indeed, indeed, it's obvious, indeed."

"Just tell me."

The eyeball demon looked mocking, so I kicked him as I gave him an order.

I didn't really need to ask, but I wanted to be sure.

"Indeed, indeed, His Majesty, indeed."

Cackling, the eyeball demon landed on the pink ooze.

The slime reached up with a tentacle and ensnared him.

"Indeed, indeed, the demon lord—"

Before he could complete his sentence, the eyeball demon was pulled into the ooze and melted away into nothing.

I knew it. "His Majesty" was a demon lord.

"…Boss?"

Ignoring my henchman, I pushed out the bars that I'd already sliced up with my claws, picking up the pouch Poputema had dropped when I killed him.

I couldn't hold it properly with my bladelike limbs, though, and several horns fell out of the ripped pouch.

There were more long horns like the one I'd used, as well as some shorter ones.

I picked up a few and looked around at my lackeys as they quaked in the cell.

Now, this could be fun.

I would rampage with the ones bold enough to follow, and any fools who couldn't commit would be fed to the slime.

"What's it gonna be?"

I held out the horn in my hand and challenged them.

Battle of Labyrinth City

Satou here. I wish villains would wait to cause trouble until after mealtime is over. Anyone who causes mass chaos when people are in the middle of enjoying delicious food deserves punishment of the utmost severity.

“Mew?”

“What is it, Tama?”

Hearing Pochi’s uncertain tone, I turned to see Tama looking around with her ears flat and her spine stretched.

I know this pattern.

A feeling of dread set in as I expanded my radar and map displays.

“Oh-ho? What’s going on outside the guild there?”

“The clerks are running outside. ’Sthere a fire or what?”

I heard the foxfolk officer and Mr. Dozon commenting nearby.

Quickly, I skimmed the information on my map.

Are you serious?

The cluster of red dots indicating the plunderers locked up in the dungeon had started getting sucked into a new, much bigger red dot—no, a red area—that was heading aboveground.

According to the details on my map, it was a slime-type monster called a **Squish Sphere**.

“Liza!”

I closed my map and stood up.

Liza quickly choked down the meat skewer she was holding and grabbed the Magic Spear leaning against the wall behind her.

“Mew!”

“Ish an emergenshee, shir.”

Sensing the imminent danger from Liza’s posture, Tama and Pochi quickly gobbled up all the meat on their plates, hopped to their feet, and grabbed their helmets from the floor.

They would’ve almost looked cool if their cheeks weren’t stuffed like chipmunks.

“What’s going on?”

“Damn, I’m sensin’ somethin’ powerful over there…”

“Huh? What is it?”

The more experienced explorers seemed to grasp the situation immediately, while the newer ones were confused.

In fact, some of the rookies kept obliviously eating their food.

“Waaaah!”

“Wh-what is thaaat?!”

As the onlookers screamed, a pink liquid burst out of the guild entrance.

No, wait. That’s the thing I saw on my map…

“Master, it is a giant slime, I report.”

Nana’s face was emotionless as usual while she tightened the strap on her helmet.

The pink liquid crashed into the plaza in waves, coming to a halt in a large, round shape.

My AR display showed detailed information next to the giant slime.

I was on guard because of its giant size, but in reality it was only a slime of level 40 or so.

It had skills and a unique race ability like “**Life Regeneration**,” “**Absorb**,” “**Amplify**,” and **Miasma Production**.

That last one was probably the most important point. And if I just activated

my spirit light once I defeated it, I could probably purify the miasma caused by the skill in question, too.

The more pressing matter was probably figuring out who'd set this giant pink slime loose to wreak havoc in the guild.

And before I could even search my map, the culprits showed up of their own accord.

"Master, look! Something came out!"

"Black shadooows?"

"They're like people in strange armor, sir."

The black shadows that the beastfolk girls were pointing to emerged from behind the giant slime. According to my AR, they were **lesser** and **intermediate demons**.

The demons glared at the fleeing humans and cackled maliciously.

There were two intermediate demons and as many as ten lesser ones.

My map said there was another lesser demon patrolling near the west guild building, but there were no humans in danger there, so I decided he could wait until later.

"A-are those demons?" Arisa gasped.

"How can there be that many demons if a demon lord hasn't been revived?" Dozon shook his head disbelievingly.

"Kinkuri, can you see?"

"Juuust a minute…"

Next to Dozon, the captain asked the foxfolk officer to have a look with his longscope.

"…Geh, they really are demons. And I can't even see the information for two of them. The big ones in the middle—I think they're intermediate."

At that, the rookie explorers turned pale and started fleeing along with the staff of the bar.

“Looks like this’ll be my last battle.”

General Erthal stepped forward with his mithril sword in hand.

“Guildmaster, I’ll buy you some time for a chant. As soon as it’s finished, burn up those demons and the giant slime, and me along with them.”

Speaking without looking back, General Erthal looked like a badass legendary hero.

Between the level-41 general, the level-37 captain, the level-52 magic-using guildmaster, and the level-43 Miss Sebelkeya, I didn’t think we were in such dire straits, but I didn’t want to ruin the mood.

If things got too out of hand, I could step in for them.

“Goodness, talk about putting an old lady to work.”

The guildmaster grumbled as she drank a potion that instantly cured her inebriation.

“I’ve no intention of burning you with them, though. Just delay them somehow and get out of there.”

“I’ll give you the signal,” Sebelkeya added.

“Come with me, Bahman.”

“Of course, sir.”

The captain followed behind the general.

“I’d really rather not…”

The foxfolk man covered his head preemptively, but the usual punishing fist didn’t come.

“Kinkuri, go down to the labyrinth army barracks and get backup.”

“All right. Don’t die, you two…”

The foxfolk officer saluted and ran off at considerable speed.

“……■■■■■ ***Iron Protection*** *Koutetsu Shugo.”*

Sebelkeya finished a chant.

With a mysterious visual effect like armor wrapping around his clothes, General Erthal's outfit suddenly took on the defense power of full armor.

Of course, I also cast Enchant: Physical Protection on him in time with her spell.

Sebelkeya looked confused for a second but then glanced at me and seemed to understand.

I didn't want to attract any attention by clarifying what I'd done, so I just pretended not to notice.

"Huh! So this is the support magic of a former Hero's follower… See ya later, Guildmaster. I'm gonna back up His Excellency the general."

Patting his own arms, Mr. Dozon hefted a giant hammer and ran after General Erthal.

If what he said was true, then Miss Sebelkeya was in a previous Hero's party. I'd have to ask her about it sometime over drinks.

"Lady Ravna, could you take Princess Meetia to safety and inform His Excellency the viceroy of this situation?"

"Understood!"

"W-wait, Ravna—"

The stern-faced knight lifted the tiny princess under one arm and rushed out of the bar.

The two Lovely Wings were still around, so I asked them to start evacuating nearby residents.

"Shall we get going, too, then?"

There was a brief flash of surprise across my companions' faces when I called to them.

Did they think I was going to leave them here even though they were battle ready?

"Now, that's more like it!"

Arisa recovered and exclaimed with her usual excitement, and the other kids

gave a chorus of cheers in response.

“Of course, master!”

“I’m gonna wiiin?”

“Pochi’ll work hard, too, sir!”

“Yes, master.”

“Mm. Got it.”

“I’ll try to snipe them from a distance.”

Our enemies’ levels ranged from 30 to 40 at the highest.

The intermediate demons were higher levels than my kids, but none of them had any particularly threatening skills or magic except one lesser demon inside the building, so they would probably be fine with my support.

“Satou, wait.”

But for some reason, the guildmaster stopped me.

“What is it?”

If we didn’t hurry up and help them, General Erthal and the others might get hurt.

“Intermediate demons aren’t like lesser ones. We can’t lose promising youngsters like you here. Go meet up with the viceroy to make a comeback plan and leave this to us adults.”

The guildmaster was uncharacteristically serious.

Judging by her grim expression, she probably thought they were going to lose to these demons and the giant slime, just like General Erthal did.

“We’ll be fine—don’t worry.”

I smiled reassuringly.

Intermediate or not, I could still defeat it with one strike if I aimed for its core; the only real difference was the slightly higher level.

“Satou, pride will only lead to your own—”

“Let him go, Zona.”

Miss Sebelkeya interrupted the guildmaster, gesturing for us to go on ahead.

The guildmaster turned to argue with her, but I had no time to watch the two bickering, so my group and I left the bar.

For some reason, there were fires breaking out all over the ground leading to the guild plaza.

◆

“Master, here they come!”

I followed Liza’s gaze upward to see countless fireballs streaking toward us.

They landed some distance away from us, setting fire to the ground like napalm bombs from a movie and producing black smoke as they continued to burn.

All the smoke made it difficult to see, but when I looked around, I saw explorers fighting lesser demons and their minions all over the plaza.

There seemed to be many a courageous fighter in Labyrinth City; I saw several bloodied battle junkies grinning ferociously as they fought.

A few explorers had collapsed with mortal wounds, so I used Magic Hand to sprinkle potions on anyone in range.

“Master, should you really be doing something so flashy?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

Arisa seemed concerned that I was displaying my mysterious abilities way too much, since I normally hated standing out.

But unless someone was watching from above like a god, most people would probably just assume somebody gave them a potion or someone used Healing Magic on them.

“Woooo! I can still fight!”

“Let’s bring these demons dooown!”

A few of the dimmer bulbs among them promptly ran back into the fray,

heedless of their own lack of strength, but I ignored them and looked around the area.

General Erthal and the vanguard had already engaged in battle with the leading intermediate demon.

Looking at it now, the intermediate demon was actually very big.

General Erthal was a considerably tall fellow, but this creature was several times his size.

My AR display showed that the demon, which had an insect-like black exoskeleton, was level 44.

“Master, theeere?”

Tama pointed at a lizard-like lesser demon lurking behind the giant slime, his elongated throat glowing red.

That was probably where the napalm-like fire was coming from, then.

He was being guarded by the other intermediate demon, a female eight-legged silver creature, so the explorers couldn’t get close enough to fight him.

And even as I looked on, the lesser demon opened his mouth to fire again.

“Waaah, we’re in dangerous danger, sir!”

Pochi flailed in a panic.

You think I’d let that happen?

I produced a pebble from Storage and flung it right at the lesser demon’s glowing red throat.

The pebble flew so fast, it nearly broke the sound barrier, bursting right through the demon’s neck.

The impact caused a rather interesting reaction: The lesser demon’s throat ruptured, and napalm-like liquid gushed out, setting fire to the other demons around him.

“Master, here comes another.”

At Liza’s warning, I turned to see a lesser demon charging toward us.

“DERIDERIDELYEEEEN.”

The female demon, who had the lower half of a spider and the upper half of a humanoid praying mantis, let out a strange cry.

Her four mantis arms were all shaped like swords and scythes.

“Achilles Hunterrr?”

“Take this, sir!”

Tama and Pochi weaved toward the creature, slashing at her pivot legs.

“Come forth, ‘Spellblade’!”

Liza applied “Spellblade” to her Magic Spear and charged directly toward the demon.

Not far behind her was Nana, her shield at the ready.

The demon stopped in place, swinging at the group with her four blade arms.

“Have a little Deracinator!”

Arisa’s barrier blocked the demon’s arms, giving Tama and Pochi an opening to slash up her forelegs.

The demon’s dark-gray breasts split into eight spikes, shooting toward Liza and Nana.

“Orb-weaver spiders are not sexy, I criticize!”

Nana’s bizarre shout was laden with her “Taunt” skill, so all the spikes turned to target her.

With the added power of Flexible Shield and “Body Strengthening,” Nana was easily able to knock back the spikes, which stabbed deep into the cobblestone ground instead.

“‘Triple Helix Spear Attack’!”

Liza’s special move pierced deep into the chest of the demon’s spider body.

“DERIDERIDELYEEEEN.”

Without twitching an eyebrow at the demon’s shriek, Liza pushed her spear in deeper, with magic blades rotating around it in a helix that drilled even further

through the creature's body.

"Take this!"

Lulu shot with her Fireburst Gun, taking out one of the demon's compound eyes.

"……■■ ***Blood Blaster*** *Ketsueki Bakusan."*

Next, Mia's Water Magic spell altered the demon's blood, turning it into blades that expanded the demon's wounds until her head exploded.

This was my first attempt at blood-altering magic, which I'd thought of after hearing about the vampire-like Blue People, but I decided to tell Mia not to use it anymore.

It was just too gory, and I didn't want to have nightmares.

"DERIDELYEEEEN."

The demon's humanoid upper half slumped lifelessly, and the spider lower half split open to reveal giant fangs.

"……■■■■■. Here comes a hot one!"

Finishing her chant, Arisa shouted to the rest of the group.

"A knock back with a shield bash, I declare."

Nana struck the spidery demon with her shield, forcing her backward, then leaping away from her.

Liza put some distance between herself and the demon with a nimble backstep, and Pochi tumbled to the side from her in somersault-like motions.

Somehow, Tama was already standing by my side.

She's like a ninja.

*"****Blast Shot*** *Goukadan!"*

Arisa's intermediate Fire Magic spell shot straight into the demon's mouth, incinerating her from the inside.

Yet even after an attack like that, the demon's health had gone down by only about 40 percent.

I guess demons are pretty tough, even the lesser ones.

“Lulu, aim for the core.”

“R-right!”

Arisa’s attack had revealed the demon’s core, at which Lulu fired a shot.

“Blocked, huh?”

“Yeah, she must have some kind of barrier.”

Right before hitting the core, the Fireburst Bullet had bounced off some kind of protective red light.

I flicked my wrist, tossing a small stone at the core.

The same light appeared and shattered the stone, but its fragments didn’t lose all their momentum, so a spray of stone pieces wound up splintering the core.

“Up in smoooke?”

“She turned into a cloud and disappeared, sir.”

With her core destroyed, the demon turned into a black cloud and vanished as usual.

Tama and Pochi seemed disappointed that there was no corpse left.

It was good that they were so willing to eat monster meat and all, but I definitely couldn’t eat anything that was half-humanoid anyway.

“Mister! Look out!”

Someone called from behind me.

Nearby, I saw a garnet-badge explorer spurt blood and collapse.

I couldn’t see what he’d been fighting.

“He can turn invisible!”

A middle-aged man shouted a warning as he ran over to rescue the fallen explorer.

Maybe it’s sort of like the chameleon plunderer from the labyrinth?

I drew my fairy sword, slicing through the invisible demon with a single slash.

“GUHEOOOOH.”

The demon let out a dying howl as he turned into black smoke and vanished, leaving behind a softball-size core.

“You never cease to impress, master.”

“Buenooo?”

“You’re amazingly amazing, sir!”

“My highest praise to master, I declare.”

Okay, let’s save the flattery for after the fight is over.

It wasn’t that hard to figure out where he was anyway, since he had shown up on my radar and had an AR display next to him.

“Damn, how’d he do that?”

“He felled a demon in a single blow!”

I heard people murmuring in amazement behind me.

Deciding to save my excuses for later, I settled on a wave of thanks to the person who’d given us the warning.

“Next ooone?”

“Let’s keep it up!”

We made our way toward General Erthal, taking down lesser demons as we went.

I was concerned that there would be more casualties if I used this as an opportunity for the girls’ training, so I snuck in my own attacks with theirs to keep the fights short.

“Who in the world are they?”

“They’re all women and kids, but they’re just as strong as Jelil or Zarigon!”

“You don’t know? They’re the guildmaster’s favorite party.”

“I thought he won her over with booze and snacks, but he’s actually really

strong!”

The explorers chorused in amazement as they watched our fight.

All of them were riddled with wounds; even the ones who were higher level than the demons were severely injured.

I guess demons are a lot more difficult than normal monsters.

“Here, please use this. It’s a magic potion.”

“Wh-what is a maid doing here?”

“I…owe ya one.”

I had Lulu distribute magic potions to anyone who looked close to death.

They were watered-down potions that I’d made to hand out, but they would serve well enough as first aid.

Unlike before, these explorers were pretty close, which was why I refrained from using Magic Hand to give out potions this time.

“Watch out! Behind you!”

One of the explorers who was drinking a potion stopped and shouted.

A big, bearlike lesser demon was charging at Lulu’s back.

Of course, I’d already noticed his proximity, but I just watched with Magic Hand at the ready.

Realizing that she didn’t have enough time to grab her Fireburst Gun, Lulu chose a different course of action.

“Hi-ya!”

With a cute little squeak, Lulu sent the bear demon flying through the air. It was one of the moves she’d learned in her self-defense courses in the elf village.

Even the bear demon seemed surprised to be thrown by the delicate Lulu; he hit the ground looking as if he had forgotten to counterattack.

“Damn…”

“That’s one hell of a strong maid.”

“Maybe she’s no ordinary maid, y’think?”

“Well, what is she, then?”

“She’s gotta be the legendary Maid King, strongest of all the maids!”

The surreal scene had apparently made the explorers lose their senses a bit.

That was all well and good, but I thought Lulu should be called a queen, not a king.

“GURORORORN.”

The bear demon roared with rage.

“That’s our next target!”

“Got it!”

At Arisa’s command, the beastfolk girls rushed the bear demon.

Lulu quickly grabbed her Fireburst Gun.

Noticing the explorers staring at her, she drew back nervously.

“E-erm…”

With a quick curtsy, Lulu dashed back toward the rest of the group.

“We better step it up, too.”

“Let’s show ’em what us veteran explorers are made of!”

“““Yeah!”””

Their spell of insanity seemed to be over.

It was good to be enthusiastic and all, but I wished they would value their lives a bit more as they fought.



◆

“That all you got, old man?!”

“Your Excellency!”

From the front lines of the battle, I heard a loud *clang* and the raspy shout of the captain.

I dodged the demon that was blocking my vision, leaving my companions to finish him off as I ran forward.

From the look of things, General Erthal had gotten into trouble while we were fighting off this demon.

I guess Sebelkeya’s and my defense magic wasn’t enough to keep him completely safe while fighting an intermediate demon.

“I won’t let you!”

“Outta the way, small fry!”

The labyrinth army captain rushed to protect the general with his shield, but the demon with the insect-like exoskeleton kicked him away.

Dozon had already been blown off the battlefield and was in the middle of being healed by a lovely priestess.

“Found you, Pendragon.”

The demon looked straight at me as he spoke.

For a demon, his speech was surprisingly normal and fluent, without any weird sentence endings.

“Sorry, I don’t have any demon acquaintances.”

I spoke lightly, buying time for General Erthal to drink a potion.

While I was at it, I opened the map and inspected the demon’s detailed information.

I’d checked only his levels and special skills before.

“Have you forgotten my face already?”

With a crunching sound, the exoskeleton helmet opened to reveal a humanoid face within.

The features were human enough, but the skin was a dark red that was almost jet-black, so he didn't appear to be a human in armor.

However, that face did look familiar.

"…Ludaman."

The Plunderer King Ludaman sneered triumphantly.

I scanned the information in my AR display.

His race now read **Demon**, overlapped by **Demonic Human**, but his name field still said **Ludaman**.

This was merely a guess, but I'd be willing to bet that a lackey of Yellow Robes—the yellow-skinned demon—had given him a short horn or long horn to turn himself into a demon.

The other ones' races had only indicated **Demon**, and they didn't have names.

I contemplated all this in less than a second, then started searching my map for the culprit even as I prepared for battle.

No likely suspects caught my eye. The green-clad noble was nearby, but he appeared to be in the giant slime's stomach.

I didn't see anyone else, so I decided to just ask.

"So when did you quit being a human and turn into a demon?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

Ludaman turned his right arm into an ax.

That's pretty impressive.

"Who gave you the horn?"

"I'll tell ya if ya beat me."

Ludaman sneered nastily.

Clearly, he had no intention of answering my questions.

“I’ll be killin’ ya nice and slow for all the trouble ya caused me.” He licked his lips. *“I’ll crush yer arms and legs so ya can’t move, then kill those kids and ravage those women in front of ya, one by one.”*

Okay, he’s dead.

Ludaman’s taunts caused dangerous thoughts to run through my mind.

“…Could I give you one piece of advice?”

“Hunh? If ya wanna beg for yer life, go right ahead.”

“You should probably keep that face mask closed.”

Suddenly, Mia’s Blood Blaster spell burst through Ludaman’s face.

“GUUUUUH!”

I guess demons still feel pain.

“I’ll kill ya! I’ll kill ya dead, Pendragon!”

“You sure about that?”

General Erthal and the captain seemed to have recovered.

I turned to look for Dozon, but he and the priestess were nowhere to be seen.

“Master!”

Arisa contacted me with the Telephone spell.

“The slime’s making its move. It isn’t going anywhere, but it’s using its tentacles to grab dying people and pull them in.”

I used “Parallel Thoughts” to keep talking to Ludaman while looking at the semitransparent slime.

The outlines of several dozen people were visible inside it.

Checking my map’s detailed information, I found that most of them were still alive.

Strangely, when their health bars were nearly depleted, they would recover a certain amount.

That must be the slime’s “Life Regeneration” skill at work.

As for the reason, the race-specific inherent ability **Miasma Production** in the slime's AR made it all too clear, along with the agonized faces of the people inside.

It was probably using their pain to produce more miasma.

"Eyes on me, bastaaard!"

The glowing black ax swung down toward me, but I parried it with my fairy sword.

Experimentally, I tried producing "Spellblade" only on the area of the blade that was making contact with the ax in order to protect it.

Manipulating the magic was difficult, but it cost less power than regular "Spellblade." Not by much, though.

"GRAAAH!"

Ludaman followed up the slash attack with a flying kick, so I jumped aside.

Then the rest of my group entered the fray.

"Achilles Hunterrr?"

"Slash, sir!"

As usual, Tama and Pochi leaped in to slash at Ludaman's legs.

At the same time, Liza jabbed her spear at his thigh as he tried to kick them away.

"Look out!"

The short demon tail that had grown on Ludaman's backside split into two, trying to pierce Pochi's and Tama's heads.

I quickly used Magic Hand to stop them, but it turned out that I was just being overprotective.

"Emergency doooodge?"

Tama pushed Pochi down, the impact moving both of them out of the way of the tails.

The spikes jabbed into the ground instead, sending rock and dirt flying

everywhere.

Meanwhile, Liza continued attacking Ludaman with her spear.

He dodged her thrusts with a short jump, then aimed an overhead kick at me in midair.

Perfect.

I let the kick hit me head-on, sending me flying toward the giant slime.

“““Master!”””

My friends’ distressed cries pained me, but I’d done this on purpose.

“Are you all right?”

Arisa contacted me via Telephone.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Okaaay?”

“Thank goodness, sir.”

I could hear Tama’s and Pochi’s voices, too.

Just as I was about to apologize for worrying them, I crashed right into the giant slime.

Obviously, I didn’t want my clothes to dissolve, so I activated “Magic Power Armor” to protect myself from the corrosive slime.

“I switched to the advanced Space Magic spell Tactical Talk, since I figured it’d be more convenient during battle.”

“Good thinking.”

Praising Arisa’s quick wit, I checked my radar.

There, I saw Liza’s marker running toward me at full speed, only to stop and head back to the others.

I guess I’d really worried them.

“Master, requesting battle instructions.”

I examined the other lights on the radar.

General Erthal and company seemed to be coming back to the battlefield, as if to replace me.

“Let the general and the captain take the front lines and just back them up as needed.”

“Understood.”

The demonified Ludaman was a higher level than my kids. There was no way I wanted them to be fighting him up close while I wasn’t around.

“I’ll come back as soon as I rescue the people inside this slime.”

“Can help.”

“Mia, you support Liza and the others, please.”

Having stopped right in the center of the slime, I marked on my map all the people who needed rescue.

There were more of them than I’d expected; everyone who was still fully intact was alive.

But if I took too long cutting up the slime to save them, there would probably be more casualties before long.

Confirming the markers’ positions in my map’s 3-D view, I put “Spellblade” on the ends of each of my fingertips.

Cut.

Thin red lines lit up the slime from the inside, and in the next instant, it was reduced to a puddle of pink liquid on the ground.

“The slime’s core has been destroyed! Quickly, carry out the wounded!”

I shouted to the explorers and guild employees who were watching from safe hiding places.

For some reason, this slime didn’t actually have a core, but it had been destroyed just as easily, so that probably didn’t matter.

Isn’t that…?

In the corner of my vision, I saw the top half of the green-clad noble.

I looked around, but his lower half was nowhere to be seen. The slime must have melted it.

I despised this man, and it was very likely that he was the one who'd turned Ludaman and his henchmen into demons, but I still couldn't bring myself to turn my back on anyone near death.

Walking to what was left of his body, I poured an intermediate potion over the gaping wound, using intermediate Healing Magic from my magic menu at the same time.

Of course, even that wouldn't miraculously restore his lower half.

"Pendra…"

Opening his eyes slightly, the green-clad noble started to speak but collapsed into my arms before he could finish.

He must have *really* passed out. I guess the old saying *Ill weeds grow apace* is true, since this evil bastard had managed to survive such a mortal wound.

But I could question him later. For now, I shoved the green-clad noble into the hands of a guild employee who came running up.

"Master, help us!"

As soon as I heard Arisa's voice, I dashed toward her and the rest of my group.

The silver intermediate demon who'd been protecting the napalm lizard was giving them a great deal of trouble.

Even as I watched, he sent the beastfolk girls skidding across the ground.

The silver demon started to charge after them, so Nana stepped in to protect the girls.

But the silver intermediate demon's eight arms knocked her out of her stance, and a blade went careening toward her face.

Look out!

I tossed a flash bomb right into the intermediate demon's face.

It was the one I'd gotten from Mr. Dozon at the rookie explorers' class.

In the instant that the flash filled our surroundings with light, I used “Warp” to get close enough to kick the demon’s arm away, then teleported back to my original position before the light faded.

The demon’s arm went flying off and knocked down one of the spires of the guild building, but we’d just call that a necessary sacrifice.

Keeping Nana from getting seriously injured was far more important than any building.

“Demon!”

“KILLKWYEEEELKKILLLL.”

I used the “Taunt” skill with my shout, drawing the silver demon to attack me instead.

Her whole body was practically made out of blades.

I blocked the barrage of attacks from her seven remaining arms with my fairy sword, watching to make sure that my companions were able to drink potions and restore their health.

Still, this thing’s attacks were a lot sharper than you’d expect for level 40.

I understood why Liza and the others were having trouble.

“Sir Satou, move away from the demon!”

As I warded off the attacks, inwardly a little impressed, I heard Miss Sebelkeya shout from behind me.

I grabbed one of the silver demon’s lancelike arms and used centrifugal force to swing it around and toss the demon toward the guildmaster.

“……■■ ***Inferno*** *Kaen Jigoku!!”*

As her voice rang out, the guildmaster unleashed a swirling mass of crimson flames.

Using Magic Hand, I grabbed the silver intermediate demon and held her in midair so she couldn’t flee once she landed.

As she kicked in the air like a cartoon character, the inferno crashed into her, sending heat and flames flying around.

The heat rolling off her was so violent that it threatened to burn anyone nearby.

“Did that kill her?!”

The guildmaster’s unnecessary words invoked a *Nope, she’s still alive* flag.

Writhing in the flames, the silver demon still had more than half of her health left.

Using the flames as cover, I used “Warp” to get closer and cracked her core with a “Spellblade”-infused stone spear.

“Thank you, Guildmaster!”

Confirming that the demon had turned into black smoke amid the flames, I called out thanks to the guildmaster as she held her staff aloft in the distance.

Thanks to her, I was able to avoid the problematic reputation of having defeated an intermediate demon single-handedly.

“There you are, master.”

“Are you hurt?”

Liza and the rest of the group came running over, their healing finished.

“I’m sorry I took so long to help.”

“No, if we had only been stronger—”

Arisa interrupted my and Liza’s apologetic loop. “Save all that for later! We’ve got to help the general with that other intermediate demon, and fast!”

“Don’t worry about that. Just help out over there, please.” I pointed at some explorers who were struggling against a few lesser demons.

Backup would arrive soon, but I was afraid they’d run out of strength before that happened.

“Okey-dokey! But what about the general?”

“I’ll go back him up myself.”

As I spoke, my eyes were on Ludaman, who was toying with the general like a cat would a mouse.

◆

“I’ll take it from here. Drink this potion, please.”

Blocking Ludaman’s ax arm with my fairy sword, I called out to General Erthal, who was wheezing heavily.

“M-my thanks, Sir Pendragon.”

“Think you’re getting away?!”

As General Erthal retreated, Ludaman attempted to jump over my head and finish him off.

Fortunately, a stone pillar rose from the ground to stop him.

That was most likely the magic of Miss Sebelkeya behind me.

Ludaman furiously destroyed the pillar, but this time a giant ball of flame flew at him with a roar.

“Tch! I’ve had enough of your meddling, old hag!”

Ludaman created a black barrier in front of himself, blocking the powerful fire spell.

Since it was cast by a mighty level-52 mage, the flames broke through the barrier in moments, singeing his bug-like carapace until steam rose from the joints.

“Should you really be taking your eyes off me?”

As I watched, Ludaman attempted to charge the area where the guildmaster was encamped, so I slashed at him from the side.

He counterattacked with an ax arm, but I parried that and sliced the arm off at the elbow.

It was pretty tough, but nothing my fairy sword couldn’t handle with a touch of “Spellblade” at the moment of impact.

“What the hell are you?!” Ludaman roared.

Since turning into a demon, his voice had become considerably more shrill, lacking impact.

“A noble and a garnet-badge explorer, I suppose?”

“Even Erthal’s mithril sword couldn’t cut me, so how the hell did you slice off my arm?! Who are you really?!”

Wow, is he really that tough?

Ludaman attempted to ward me away with punches and kicks, but I refused to let him put any distance between us, focusing on buying time.

“Maybe the guildmaster’s Fire Magic weakened your armor?”

“Like hell!”

Giving an arbitrary excuse, I watched my radar and saw that General Erthal was returning to the front lines.

It would be a pain if Ludaman stayed that tough, so I made what appeared to be feint swings in order to slice a bunch of tiny cuts in his armor.

“Thanks for holding things down here, Sir Pendragon.”

“The guildmaster’s magic seems to have weakened the demon’s armor.”

“That’s excellent news.”

General Erthal wore a fatigued grimace.

Since he seemed to be getting tired, we’d have to put an end to this fast.

I blocked Ludaman whenever he attempted to attack General Erthal and got in his way whenever he attempted to dodge.

“Aaaaargh! Help me out here, you lot!”

Ludaman called out to the surviving demons, but none of them was able to respond.

“I’ll make you regret turning to the path of evil!”

General Erthal’s sword cut deep into Ludaman’s leg.

The demon dropped to his knee, and Sebelkeya’s Spears Field spell tore into him, countless silver spear tips bursting from the ground.

“GROOOOORRR!”

Ludaman was knocked backward as he howled.

Several Magic Bullets followed close behind.

“So they’re finally here?”

The labyrinth army’s giant golems were approaching from the other side of the plaza.

The Magic Bullets just now had been from the mages riding in the golems.

And from the east, the direction of the viceroy’s castle…

“Guillotine Blade!”

The gallant knight Lady Ravna appeared, unleashing an attack on Ludaman’s back with a flash of red light.

Behind her was one of the viceroy’s guardian knights.



The other three had stayed behind to protect the viceroy.

“Shiga Sword Style—Secret Technique Cherry Blossom Flash!”

The viceroy’s guardian knight leaped in from the other side, sweeping downward with a special move laced with “Spellblade.”

Pinkish-red shards of light flew from the blade, scattering like cherry blossom petals.

It was quite a pretty move; I’d have to learn how to do it sometime.

Behind them, I saw some soldiers readying a Magic Cannon on a cart.

Well, this is going great now.

If this were an anime, I bet the theme song would be playing in the background.

“YOU DAMN PIP-SQUEAKS! I’LL—!!”

As Ludaman bellowed, fireballs of various sizes hit him in the face.

This time they’d come from the guildmaster and Arisa.

Mia was too focused on healing and support at the moment to pitch in with an attack.

Ludaman staggered and dropped to the ground, and I pinned his right arm down with a stone spear, flipped him over, and cut off his left arm.

“Your Excellency, now!”

“Go to hell, Ludaman!”

“UAAAARGH!”

General Erthal’s “Spellblade”-infused mithril blade swung down and sliced off Ludaman’s head—or so it seemed.

The explorers and soldiers filled the plaza with cheers.

I heard the head hit the ground and saw Ludaman’s body start to go up in black smoke, so I didn’t watch too closely.

Even if I’d set up General Erthal to finish him off, I didn’t want to watch a

demonified human die.

Turning my back on the severed head, I started walking toward my friends.

“Mew!”

Tama was slumped like a sack of potatoes in Liza’s arms, but then her ears suddenly flattened, and she looked up sharply.

A red light appeared on my radar.

Quickly, I whirled toward the direction of the light.

◆

“Indeed, indeed, transport, indeed.”

A green lesser demon with a strange way of speaking was emerging from the cobblestones that were coated in the giant pink slime’s remains.

He was mostly comprised of a single giant eyeball that had sprouted limbs and wings, most likely a different-colored variation of the first lesser demon I’d ever seen back in Seiryuu City.

The eyeball demon looked around, noticed that his allies were gone, and dropped the bundle he was carrying.

According to my AR, the contents were the demonic-potion pills I’d confiscated from the plunderers. Ludaman had probably ordered him to retrieve them.

“Indeed, indeed, how embarrassing, indeed.”

The eyeball demon picked up Ludaman’s head and began tossing it from hand to hand.

“So there’s still another demon left?”

“Looks that way.”

As I responded to Arisa, I pulled my stone spear out of the ground.

It was in poor taste to toy with a dead body, even that of a criminal.

Besides, though the eyeball demon was only level 30, he had dangerous skills like “Psychic Magic” and “Shadow Magic,” so I wanted to dispatch him as

quickly as possible.

“Indeed, indeed, revival, ind—”

An ominous magic circle appeared below the eyeball demon, and I flung the spear, piercing straight through the center of the giant eyeball.

The magic circle disappeared, and the eyeball demon sank, twitching, into the pink puddle.

But in the next moment—

A geyser of pink liquid burst up from the ground, forming a humanoid shape some fifty feet tall.

According to my AR display, he was a **level-50 intermediate demon**.

And his name was…**Ludaman**.

Here I thought only *tokusatsu* villains got revived in giant form when they were defeated.

Ludaman didn’t have any revival-related skills, so I assumed the pink slime had come back to life, absorbed Ludaman, and revived him as well.

“Doesn’t he know villains aren’t supposed to come back stronger when they get revived like this?”

Arisa seemed to have used her Status Check gift to read Ludaman’s information.

“This wretch just won’t go down…”

General Erthal glared up at the humanoid creature’s face.

The labyrinth army started to attack, but both physical and magical shots were simply absorbed into the demon without causing any damage.

I wanted to turn into Nanashi or Kuro and defeat him, but that would be difficult to do with so many people all around.

My best bet was probably to have the guildmaster defeat him with advanced attack magic.

“PWEEEENNN.”

As the unstable new form of Ludaman continually collapsed and re-formed, he howled and looked down at us.

“DOOOOORAWA.”

His hate-filled eyes were turned straight toward me.

Oops. I guess he hates me now.

“Guildmaster! I’ll lure Ludaman close to the labyrinth gates! Give me a signal when your spell is ready, please!”

Calling out to the guildmaster, I ran toward the empty area in front of the labyrinth gates, taking care not to use “Flashrunning” or “Warp.”

With each step the giant Ludaman took, a loud rumble echoed, the cobblestones breaking below our feet.

“Everyone, stand by—No, get to a safe distance and give me some cover fire!”

I gave an order through the still-connected Tactical Talk.

The guildmaster’s advanced spells had a very wide range after all.

“GWOOOOONWN.”

I was starting to feel like I was in a giant-monster movie as I reached the labyrinth gates.

The revived Ludaman’s movements seemed sluggish but were deceptively fast, since he was ten times my size. He caught up to me in a matter of moments, bringing down his giant fist.

The fist crushed the ground beneath it, sending up a splash of pink liquid.

Wherever the liquid hit stone, it produced a sizzle of white smoke—it must have been acid, then.

I hopped away lightly, dodging the flying fist and acid spray.

As I fled, I tried to talk to the revived Ludaman, but he no longer seemed capable of understanding or responding to speech.

“Protect Sir Pendragon!”

On the captain’s command, the labyrinth army golems lurched into the area

in front of the gates.

Facing the gigantic Ludaman, the six metal golems looked about as powerful as preschool children.

“We’re ready over here! Come back!”

After I ran around for a little longer, General Erthal’s shout echoed across the plaza.

The guildmaster’s chant must finally have finished.

The golems grabbed onto Ludaman’s legs to help me escape.

Even in this form, Ludaman seemed to deeply despise me; he attempted to give chase, dragging the golems along.

Then a giant hand stopped him.

Emerging from the broken cobblestones, the hand quickly turned into the upper half of a giant golem, grabbing Ludaman’s waist and preventing his movements.

“Hurry, Sir Pendragon! That golem won’t last long!”

I heard Miss Sebelkeya calling out and my companions cheering me on.

Just as I escaped from the bowl-shaped entrance to the labyrinth, the guildmaster’s staff unleashed a torrent of crimson flame.

“UOOOOOOHHHWN.”

Ludaman’s final form unleashed a howl and began to crumble in the flames.

“Good work, master. Looks like we’re finally done here, huh?”

Gazing up at the giant pillar of flame burning against the night sky, Arisa handed me a damp towel.

I looked up, too, as I wiped the grime from my face.

The creature had already lost its human shape, reduced to a loose column of water.

But even now, the revived Ludaman’s health bar hadn’t hit zero.

Once it reached around 10 percent, the speed of its reduction slowed, and at

times it even wavered back up like an ocean tide.

“That’s not good.”

“…Huh?”

My compatriots looked at me with concern.

I checked the guildmaster’s and Miss Sebelkeya’s status, but neither of them seemed to be in any condition to deal the finishing blow.

They’d run out of magic and gone into an overdose state from using too many magic recovery potions. There seemed to be a cooldown period for using too many potions, like in a game.

The Practical Magic spell Mana Transfer would probably work differently, but I couldn’t just use that here.

“It’s fine.”

I had a backup plan for such an occasion.

Searching through Storage, I started preparing for one last move.

“But…”

Arisa pointed up at the creature that had been Ludaman, which was starting to re-form into an even larger humanoid shape.

I patted the younger kids on the head to reassure them.

“Don’t worry.”

Then I pointed up at the sky above the re-revived Ludaman.

“Black shadooow?”

“Someone’s there, sir!”

Tama’s and Pochi’s exclamations drew the attention of the guildmaster and the others.

“Wait, isn’t that…?”

I winked at Arisa, holding a finger to my lips secretively.

“Who’s that?”

“It’s Kuro, one of Nanashi the Hero’s followers.”

“The Hero’s follower?”

I heard the guildmaster and General Erthal talking behind me.

To be exact, it was a posable life-size mannequin dressed in Kuro’s outfit.

It couldn’t fly on its own, of course, so I was using Magic Hand to move it around.

That was how I’d produced it from Storage, too, of course.

I’d also equipped it with a high-level recognition-inhibiting item so it couldn’t be analyzed.

“Foolish plunderer, who sold your soul to a demon…”

I used the “Ventriloquism” skill to speak through the Kuro dummy.

“I shall destroy you with the power of justice given me by the great Hero.”

The new form of Ludaman reached up into the sky with an armlike appendage.

Checkmate, Ludaman.

I took out a certain object from Storage via Magic Hand.

Something I’d acquired in a place called “the void.”

FLASH!

A blinding light filled the air.

BOOM!

Half a second later, there was an explosive, earsplitting sound.

It was one of the lightning bolts the World Tree had fired at me when I was fighting the space jellyfish.

The lightning of the World Tree could repel even the black dragon Hei Long, so as soon as it struck the revived Ludaman, he crumbled into black ash.

Then, just like any demon’s end, he dissolved into a black cloud and disappeared.

His marker disappeared from my map, too. It seemed to really be over this time.

I wasn't able to find out who had turned him into a demon, but I could ask the green-clad noble I'd pulled out of the giant pink slime.

"Is it over?"

The guildmaster approached, held up by Jejeh of the Red Ice party.

"Yes, it seems to be."

"Hmph. I suppose we owe him one, then."

The Kuro dummy was nowhere to be seen when the guildmaster looked up; I'd already put it back in Storage.

"This area will be difficult to fix up."

"I'm beyond tired. Let Ushana and Sebelkeya take care of it."

Between the acid and the lightning, the labyrinth gate area was in a state of utter destruction.

The guild plaza's cobblestone paving was in shambles, too.

"Good work, all of you. Go home and get some rest—let the others take care of things here."

With that, the guildmaster headed back to the guild building.

It was probably time for us to get a good night's sleep, too.

Epilogue

Satou here. It's fun and relaxing to program by myself as a hobby, but it's also fun to work with a bunch of other creators, bouncing ideas off one another to make a finished product together.

"You want to nominate me for the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga?"

"I do. It wouldn't be immediate, but I can introduce you to their leader, Sir Juleburg."

A few days had passed since the demon Ludaman's rampage.

General Erthal had summoned me to his office at the labyrinth army barracks one morning to discuss this proposal.

"Your level isn't high enough yet, but you fought an intermediate demon. Even that hardheaded Sir Juleburg won't take that lightly. If you can't join the Eight Swordsmen right away, surely you'll at least be admitted to the Order of Holy Knights."

I understood that his intentions were 100 percent good, but to be honest, this was kind of inconvenient.

"I don't know if you could say I 'fought' an intermediate demon. I didn't really land any hits—I basically ran away from him."

"That's only because your level is still low. Nothing a little training can't fix."

General Erthal was as thickheaded as ever.

"Besides, you've survived encounters with no less than three intermediate demons now, haven't you?"

"I'm just quick to run away, that's all."

I'd even gained a strange title called Runaway King, probably because of all that fleeing from the slime-Ludaman fusion.

“Sir Pendragon, being skilled at evasion is something to be proud of. It’s only by surviving battles that you can build up experience and fight again.”

I absolutely agreed with General Erthal’s statement, especially in a level-based world where you really could get stronger by racking up experience like an RPG.

At any rate, it didn’t seem like any of my excuses were going to work on the general.

I felt bad, but I would have to directly decline.

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Excellency. I truly appreciate the offer, but I’m afraid I must decline any such promotion. The only lord I serve is Baron Muno. Truth be told, I only came to Labyrinth City to train with my companions-in-arms so that we might better assist with the barony’s revival.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but it seemed like a good-enough reason to decline, so I decided to give it a try.

“I see… He must be a truly remarkable lord to be worthy of such loyalty from you.”

“Yes, quite so.”

I smiled and nodded.

Baron Muno really was a good guy, especially since he didn’t discriminate against demi-humans and the like.

“Very well. Then I shall not press you any further. But if you change your mind, come back anytime. I’ll gladly promote you.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll be sure to do so.”

General Erthal finally accepted my rebuff of his offer.

“Hey, Excellencyyy! I made some fairy wine as a gift for Sir Pendragon!”

As if he’d been waiting for the tension in the room to ease, the foxfolk officer came in wheeling a wagon.

Sweet melon whiskey turned out to be whiskey poured into the halves of a smallish melon.

“Drinking this early in the day?” the general grumbled.

This was normally when the captain would knock his subordinate on the head, but today he was away heading up the repair efforts.

“Aw, this isn’t enough to get drunk off, right?”

“I suppose not.”

General Erthal nodded.

Are you really okay with that?

“These are high-quality melons. Are they from the Eluette Marquisate?”

“I don’t know about the quality, but yes, you’re exactly right about where they’re from.”

One of the nobles I met at the tea party had given me a bunch of lemons, saying that his wife’s family sent them.

I was planning on making melon sorbet or something to thank him.

“Come on, dig in, Sir Pendragon. The tastiest way to eat it is to mush up the melon inside so the juice mixes with the whiskey…”

The foxfolk officer handed me a bowl and spoon.

I guess I might as well.

“Damn, that’s good.”

“Riiight?”

I was so surprised that I gave a murmur of wonder without thinking.

The melon juice and whiskey went together surprisingly well.

As I went on eating, the ratio of juice to alcohol changed along with the flavor, which was a lot of fun.

“I bet this would work well with brandy, too.”

“We’ve got Shigan sake, too…”

Now, this was a taste I could get addicted to.

A dry breeze blew in through the window of General Erthal’s office, high at

the top of the building.

The breeze and the melon cooled me off as I chatted with my drinking buddies.

Somehow, it reminded me of when I would go to visit my grandfather during the Bon holiday and drank *umeshu* with my family.

I'd have to try making some homemade *umeshu* to bring here sometime.

Oh, and wind chimes, too.

◆

"Looks like we can't get in with a carriage here, young master. Shall we go to the parking area?"

Once the early drinking party at the labyrinth army barracks had wrapped up, I went to the west guild in a carriage driven by our new maid Annie.

Of course, I'd already sobered up, and I used Everyday Magic to erase the smell of the liquor.

I was sure Annie and the others wouldn't want to deal with an employer who got drunk early in the morning.

"No, I'll just get out here. I want to look around a bit."

"All right. I'll go and wait for you in the guild's parking area, then."

After parting with Annie, I looked around the repair work being done at the guild plaza as I walked along the path to the guild building.

In addition to General Erthal, the guildmaster and the viceroy's wife had also requested to speak with me today.

""Ah, hey, mister!""

The two women of the Lovely Wings party waved me over.

"Are you two heading into the labyrinth?"

"Yep, you got it!"

"There's not enough carriers with all this construction work going on, so we're joining the garnet-badge expedition party."

“We’ll be able to pay off a lot of our debt after this gig!”

It seemed they were still paying off the fine from the “chain rampage” they had been held responsible for causing the first time I met them.

As a parting gift, I gave them several watered-down healing potions each.

“Whoa, you sure, mister?”

“Thanks a bunch!”

Once I’d seen off the happy pair, I looked at the workers around the plaza.

I could hear the captain shouting hoarsely as the labyrinth army golems carried materials around.

There were a few very young kids at the construction site, but they were just doing odd jobs suited to their age, not heavy labor.

According to what I’d heard at the soup kitchen, all the construction workers were being fed breakfast and lunch.

That was probably why migrant workers from nearby towns and villages had come to work, too, not only the residents of Labyrinth City.

I was using this influx of people as a chance to release more of the women I was protecting at the Ivy Manor, sending them to live in the tenements the explorer group had rented.

“Don’t just stand there spacing out, young master. It’s dangerous.”

“’Scuse me! Comin’ through!”

Some familiar-looking young ladies ran by carrying a box.

They were probably taking it to the area near the guild where food carts were lining up.

Before long, the aroma of frying food filled the air.

“The croquette line starts heeere!”

“This is the end of the deep-fried-skewer line.”

“Fried potatoes here, piping hot and crunchy!”

Each of the three lines had a child standing at the back with a sign illustrating

the corresponding dish.

The master artist behind these DANCING CROQUETTES, WINNING SKEWERS, and FLYING FRIED POTATOES signs was none other than Tama.

The last masterpiece she'd produced at the time, SUNLIT HAMBURG, was framed and hanging in the orphanage cafeteria.

Apparently, some of the kids had taken to praying to it.

"Ah, it's Mr. Viscount!"

One of the little girls next to the sign holders pointed at me and shouted.

"Looks like you're all working hard."

I patted her head, then handed out candies to all of the orphanage kids who were working as sign holders, telling them to keep it our little secret.

"Oh, hey, mister! Lulu, your master's here."

The redheaded Neru, who was working as a hawker in a maid outfit, called out to Lulu as she fried the croquettes behind the stall.

There was a bit of a story behind Neru and Lulu working together.

Some of the girls who'd been held captive in the labyrinth were too traumatized to enter it again, and since most of them had no way to make a living short of selling themselves, I had given them some food carts and recipes for croquettes and such as thanks for helping "Kuro" solve the predicament.

Lulu was working with them to demonstrate the cooking techniques.

"Welcome, master!"

Lulu flashed me a dazzling smile.

It was so cute that if this were a shojo manga, the flowers around her would probably spill over into the next panel.

Sadly, I wasn't able to see her chatting with Tifaleeza, who was taking the money and making change in lieu of a cash register.

Miss Elder Sister and the blond noble didn't seem to be on food-cart duty today.

“Sorry to interrupt. I was just passing through, so I thought I’d see how things were going.”

“Here, mister, for you!”

“Thanks, Miss Neru.”

“You can just call me Neru!”

I accepted the small parcel of food she handed me, then headed into the guild.

◆

“Smells good. Got some skewers?”

“Yes, help yourself.”

I put the package of fried food from Neru and Lulu on the guildmaster’s desk.

“Fried potatoes, too.”

Sebelkeya peeked inside and nodded sagely.

Unlike Mia, she generally ate meat, but she seemed especially fond of fried potatoes.

Since these ones were fried using oil from the entangling canola that Mr. Dozon had mentioned at the rookie explorers’ class, they were relatively healthy.

“Ushana, let’s get some ale. It’s the perfect pairing for meat skewers.”

“No drinking until your work is finished, Guildmaster.”

Secretary Ushana smiled politely as she denied the guildmaster’s request.

“So what did you need to speak with me about?”

“Oh, fine. But fried food loses its flavor when it cools down. Let’s eat and talk.”

The guildmaster bit into the skewers as she spoke.

“Firstly, about that cultivation business. We’ve learned that you need a *special magic circle* to do it properly.”

“Does that mean the gag order has been lifted?”

“No, you can still technically cultivate them without one, but it’s not as effective. The gag order still stands.”

As such, the top-brass plunderers who had survived the incident the other day were going to be publicly executed as planned; the others would be reduced to criminal slaves, have their power of speech limited, and be sent to assist with the reclamation of the Azure Lands: a monster territory where the percentage of lost slaves was exceptionally high.

It might seem harsh, but I didn’t feel particularly sorry for them. They were getting their just deserts, considering their misdeeds.

“As for the main topic…”

The guildmaster’s face grew serious, and she hesitated a moment.

“It’s about that demon incident. Have you ever seen one of these, Satou?”

The guildmaster pulled a cloth bundle from her pocket, unwrapping it to reveal a short horn and a long horn.

“This one is a short horn. So…is that perhaps a different variety of the short horn?”

I paused for a moment, then used my “Fabrication” and “Poker Face” skills to pretend I’d never seen the long horn before.

“Pretend you never saw it, then.”

I nodded, and she put the two horns away.

“Do you know where those horns came from?”

“Yes.” The guildmaster answered me immediately. “Poputema.”

“…Did he confess to that himself?”

“Yeah, he spilled everything. If you have any questions for him yourself, go to the viceroy’s place.”

According to my map information, he was being confined in a separate house on the viceroy’s estate, not in the dungeon below the castle or even the spire where nobles were normally imprisoned.

“By the way, have you heard from that Kuro fellow lately?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then I suppose this is the only place he’s come since then…”

The night after the incident, I’d visited the guildmaster’s room as Kuro and asked her to protect Elder Sister Sumina and the others.

When I’d innocently visited the guild the next day, they told me about Kuro and Miss Sumina, so I offered the fried-food recipes to help them.

It all worked out pretty conveniently, since now I could support them from a distance.

“Well, let me know if you hear from Kuro again.”

“I will, of course.”

Although that was unlikely to happen, since if I needed anything from the guildmaster as Kuro, I would probably just go straight to her.

After that, Secretary Ushana asked if I could spare any assistance for the rebuilding of the guild property; I offered enough money so that I wouldn’t incite jealousy or suspicion from the other nobles.

◆

“…Sir Poputema?”

When the viceroy’s wife and I went to visit, we were greeted by the now-legless Poputema, resting in a casket of white light.

It was probably because his green-dyed hair had been cut and he didn’t have his usual makeup or manicure, but he gave the impression of a frail old man very different from the green-clad noble I knew.

But his ashen face wasn’t moving in the slightest, making him appear dead.

“Is he…alive?”

I could tell through my AR display that he was, but I asked the viceroy’s wife anyway to try to find out what exactly was going on.

“Yes, the viceroy is using his power to forcibly keep him alive.”

“So that he can be questioned?”

The viceroy’s wife shook her head quietly.

“No. Once the temples of the six gods used their Holy Magic to cleanse him of the demon’s brainwashing, he confessed everything of his own accord.”

I always thought he had a demon-like presence, but I’d never imagined that he was being brainwashed by one.

I suppose even in the Muno Barony, my “Analyze” skill and AR display hadn’t been able to detect the demon consul’s Psychic Magic brainwashing.

No wonder Psychic Magic carried such a strong stigma.

As I later learned, it was the aged Head Priestess of Heraluon Temple who was able to sense his brainwashing, not any skill or Holy Magic.

It was probably similar to how a skilled artisan could identify even the smallest error.

I was a little curious as to why the number of gods seemed to be one short, but there was probably a good reason, so I didn’t press further.

“Would you mind, my dear?”

“Of course.”

The viceroy nodded gravely at his wife.

“O great spirit of Celivera City, I, the viceroy, implore you: Grant the diadem of power to your humble servant… ■ ***Equipment*** *Souchaku.*”

A ring-shaped light appeared around the viceroy’s forehead. When it vanished, he wore a circlet of blue-green crystal.

He had probably summoned an item with which to use the City Core’s power.

“I will now release the suspension. Sir Pendragon, please keep it brief.”

He didn’t explain much, but I more or less understood.

The City Core’s power was probably keeping Poputema alive in a state of suspended animation.

“Suspended state, release.”

The viceroy invoked one of the City Core's key words.

The white light around Poputema disappeared, and his lips and fingers began to twitch.

"Nnnguuuuuohhhh!"

A scream squeezed itself from Poputema's mouth.

"Darling, the anesthesia."

"O-of course. ■ ***Remove Pain*** *Mutsuu.*"

The viceroy used the City Core again, and Poputema's screaming ceased. His breathing was still heavy, but he seemed to be able to speak.

"Sir…Pendragon…"

His eyes fell on me, and he called me over in a weak rasp.

The viceroy's wife nudged me forward, so I leaned my ear close to his mouth.

"It seems…I've caused you…a great deal…of trouble."

His whispers were punctuated by frequent pauses.

The viceroy's spell was supposed to relieve him of pain, but he still seemed to be suffering.

"I…owe you an apology and my thanks."

I used the menu to compensate for his halting speech in my mind as I listened.

Now that he had been cleansed of the brainwashing, it was strange to hear him speak without saying "indeed" all the time.

"Your kindness delayed the demons' plans. That is a great achievement."

What had I done as Satou? Taking the homeless kids into the orphanage, I guess?

I wasn't really sure what plans he was talking about, though.

"Without your good deeds, Celivera City would have fallen to ruin and been used to revive the demon lord before anyone realized what was happening."

Okay, I hadn't even realized that was happening.

From the sound of things, the demons really were trying to revive a demon lord in Celivera City.

"Thanks to your delay and the work of that Hero's follower, the demons panicked and resorted to hasty methods to try to revive the demon lord in Labyrinth City more quickly."

Did that mean there were still demons left?

I searched the map, but there weren't any demons in Labyrinth City or the kingdom land that encompassed it.

I did notice a somewhat concerning presence in the mountains overlooking the city, but I could deal with that later.

"No need to worry. Now that their forceful plan has failed, there will be no demon lord revived in Celivera for the foreseeable future."

Poputema spoke as if he'd read my mind.

"The royal family and the Hero of the Saga Empire are bound to have taken notice of such conspicuous actions. The crafty demons will likely use that as a distraction and plot to revive the demon lord elsewhere. History makes that all too clear."

So Labyrinth City was safe, but there might be a demon lord revival somewhere else?

It occurred to me again that the Tenion priestess in the old capital had told me that there were other areas where a demon lord revival was prophesized.

I'd assumed the other six places were all just misses, but maybe not…

"Therefore…"

Poputema coughed violently.

Blood trickled from the corner of his lips.

"That will have to do."

The viceroy's wife wiped the blood with a handkerchief.

“What Poputema is trying to say is that your actions saved Celivera City. I shall award you the Celivera Holy Order Medal in the near future.”

The viceroy spoke in the coughing Poputema’s place.

I didn’t know what the medal was worth, but I’d admit it did make me happy to have my actions acknowledged.

“One more thing.”

Poputema’s voice wavered, as if he was speaking his last words.

“I want you to tell the innocent people I hurt that I deeply apologize. I will entrust all my personal assets in Labyrinth City to you. Please distribute them to everyone who was hurt by my folly…”

With that, Poputema’s eyes fluttered closed.

“Darling!”

“R-right. ■ ***Suspended State*** *Kashika.*”

The viceroy’s City Core stopped Poputema as he teetered on the verge of death.

“Looks like we made it just in time.”

“Good work, darling. Poputema still has one thing left to do.”

The only possibilities I could think of for the near-death Poputema were either saying farewell to his next of kin or being presented to the kingdom as the mastermind behind the incident, but judging by the viceroy’s wife’s demeanor, I guessed that it was the former.

Once we had determined the schedule for the medal-awarding ceremony, I left the viceroy’s castle.

◆

“Thanks to those reborn demons and the pink sphere, there should be plenty of miasma in Labyrinth City, indeed.”

Standing on a mountain ridge looking down on Labyrinth City, a suspicious-looking man in green clothes murmured to himself.

He spoke just like Poputema had as the green-clad noble, but physically the only resemblance he bore was his clothing, as he was otherwise a burly, macho man. A wyvern stood by his side with its wings folded in.

I had all my stealth skills activated and had gotten close with successive uses of “Warp,” so the man and the wyvern didn’t seem to have noticed me yet.

“As long as nothing gets in the way, soon the miasma will eat away at the people, and their negative feelings will permeate into the labyrinth, allowing the second coming of His Majesty, indeed.”

He swept aside the sleeves of his dark-green cloak, spreading his arms dramatically like an actor on a stage.

Sure enough, activating my “Miasma Vision” showed that Labyrinth City was producing a thick haze of miasma.

Obviously, the demons’ plans hadn’t been completely thwarted yet.

I’d just have to cleanse all that miasma later.

“Enjoy your brief springtime while it lasts, indeed. Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho…”

A shrill cackle ill-suited to the man’s stern features echoed across the mountains.

According to my AR and map, his race displayed two overlapping words —**Human** and **Avatar**. Finding that suspicious, I’d simply come to investigate, but clearly he was related to the green greater demon who had been controlling Poputema.

“Next I must help the *pink* one, *indeed*. So troublesome, but I must repay for the loan of the pink sphere, indeed.”

He turned around, grimacing like a top-tier villain, then froze when he saw me sitting on top of a rock.

Figuring I might as well, I tried giving him a friendly wave.

“Wh-who are you, indeed?!”

“…Nanashi the Hero.”

When I responded coolly to the green-clad man, the wyvern finally noticed

me and spread its wings in a threatening pose.

“What exactly are you planning in Labyrinth City?”

“Oh-ho-ho…”

The man laughed loudly.

“If you can catch me, perhaps I will tell you, indeed.”

He pulled out two white spheres from his breast pocket, which produced magic circles from which two green lesser demons appeared.

The man himself began to sink into the shadows beneath him.

He was probably trying to use the lesser demons as a decoy while he escaped.

I’m not letting that happen.

I ignored the lesser demons, closed in on the green-clad man with “Warp,” and kicked him out of the shadows.

“Guuuh! Wh-what did you do, indeed?!”

The man groaned in pain.

“How can an attack on my avatar reach my real body, indeed?!”

I guess using a fusion of Sacredblade and Magic Armor on my foot when I kicked him must have worked.

> Skill Acquired: “Holy Light Armor”

Since I’d gained a new skill as a result, I put skill points into it and activated it right away.

“E-enough, indeed. Stop that at once, indeeeeed!!”



I decided to test out the new skill by kicking him again with blue light glowing around my foot, which he didn't seem to like.

The lesser demons and the wyvern had charged at me from behind to try to protect the man, so I destroyed them with Sacredblade on my fingertips.

"To think you could damage me through my avatar… No wonder you were able to defeat the red, blue, and yellow senior demons, indeed. You are a completely freakish monster, indeed."

The man wobbled as he addressed me rather rudely.

I reactivated my new "Holy Light Armor" and wrapped blue light around my fist.

"I'll destroy you too right now, then!"

My punch left a streak of blue light in the air as it cracked into the green-clad man's face.

He spun and went flying across the ground, his head dragging through the dirt.

"I-indeeeeed!"

The man shrieked like a peculiar monster, turned into green smoke, and disappeared with a poof.

I was kind of hoping he would dramatically explode, but I guess clichés can only go so far.

I picked up the lesser demons' cores from the ground and put the wyvern's corpse away in Storage. The vanished green avatar didn't seem to have dropped a core.

I'd thought about putting a marker on the avatar and letting it go, but there was another one in the northernmost city of the royal territory. I put a marker on that one instead and destroyed this one to cheer myself up.

◆

Something else had caught my attention, so I headed up into the air with "Skyrunning."

“…Is that a magic circle?”

Activating “Miasma Vision,” I looked down at Labyrinth City and found that the miasma appeared to be in the shape of a black magic circle.

If my memory was correct, it lined up perfectly with the green-clad noble’s nighttime walking route.

So he’d chosen that strange path to trace a magic circle, not just to mess with me.

However, certain areas, like the location of my house and parts of downtown, were wiped clean, leaving the magic circle broken and nonfunctioning.

I went back home with the Return spell and strolled around with my spirit light fully activated to erase the magic circle.

Mia was the only person currently in Labyrinth City with the Spirit Vision gift, so it should be fine.

“Caught you, Pochi!”

“Awww, I got caught again, sir.”

The power-limiting items I’d given Tama and Pochi seemed to be working well.

Waving at the kids as they played in the empty lot, I continued my walk.

“Mia, dear, your music is always lovely.”

“It makes me feel stronger by the day!”

“Mrrr. Flattery.”

Mia was performing for a group of elderly folks by the reservoir.

All of them were smiling and looked energetic.

“See yooou?”

“Thankee, dearie.”

As I walked along by the ranch, I saw Tama hopping over a fence as an old lady bowed behind her.

“Granny?”

“Here, drink this. The little cat-eared girl gave us some herbs.”

The elderly woman boiled the herbs and gave them to her sickly grandchild.

I’d forgotten how good Tama was at identifying and gathering medicinal herbs.

Walking down a street of farmhouses, I arrived close to the north gate near the private houses.

“Bwa-ha-ha, what a haul!”

“Good work, Arisa!”

“Now we’ll get extra food for dinner!”

“Larvae, praise me as well, I request.”

“Ah-ha-ha, you’re so funny, Nana.”

Arisa and Nana were walking along with large packages, followed by a gaggle of children.

They’d been setting traps near where veria plants grew, catching lots of veria mice and sand moles.

“It reminds me of hunting for stag beetles over summer vacations.”

Arisa gave me a sunny smile.

I guess her childhood had been pretty wild.

After we parted ways, I walked through the noble quarters and the nature park that contained the Ivy Manor.

“Allow me to accompany you, master.”

Once I’d done a loop around the city and returned to the west gate, I met up with Liza.

She’d been running along the outer walls of Labyrinth City as part of her training. Unsurprisingly, it was Arisa who had given her this idea.

Arisa probably thought it would cheer Liza up, since she’d seemed depressed that she wasn’t more help in the battle against the silver intermediate demon.

“Did you enjoy your run?”

“…Yes, sir.”

She didn’t seem to like it very much.

“I guess we should start exploring the labyrinth again soon.”

“Yes, master!”

At my casual comment, Liza broke into a bold smile.

Aside from harvesting hopping potatoes and walking beans, the group hadn’t been in the labyrinth much lately.

“All right, maybe we can start tomorrow, then.”

“I shall inform the others at once!”

Liza dashed away, leaving me behind.

With the pleasant background noise of children laughing and construction workers bustling around, I watched Liza vanish into the distance.

Her tail was whipping rhythmically back and forth.

“Is she that excited to get back into the labyrinth?”

Smiling to myself, I looked up at the cloudless sky.

Walking around the city with my spirit light fully active seemed to have worked well: The shroud of miasma had disappeared from above Labyrinth City.



It was probably safe to assume that the demons' plot to revive a demon lord in Labyrinth City was now thoroughly vanquished.

As I strolled past the street stalls, some enthusiastic hawker kids called out to me brightly.

"Mister! We've got spices that'd go great with any meat dish. Why don't you take some home?"

"Take a look at our Eluette rock salt, too."

"We just got a fresh batch of sesame sauce, a Vistall Duchy specialty!"

If we were going back into the labyrinth, we'd certainly need to stock up on spices and ingredients for some meat and vegetable dishes.

"Maybe I should do a little taste testing?"

Murmuring to myself, I wandered over to take a look at the kids' wares.

The following day was shaping up to be perfect labyrinth-exploring weather.

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you for picking up the eleventh volume of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

Before we discuss this volume, let's talk about the anime adaptation for a moment.

As you may have already heard, I was able to visit SILVER LINK., the company producing the *Death March* anime. There, I got to meet Director Oonuma, the production committee, and many other staff members.

I spoke primarily with the director and scenario writers, and we had some great discussions about the setting and important aspects of the series.

I also got to join in a lot of meetings about the direction of the work, the backgrounds, the animation, and so on, which was surprising and very educational.

Not long before I wrote this afterword, I even got to listen in on the tape auditions for Satou and Arisa.

There were two surprising things about this.

One: Around 140 voice actors applied for the roles.

It was incredibly inspiring to hear so many talented voices acting out my characters.

And two:

Damn, voice actors have so many layers!

It might be rude to say this to a pro, but every one of them was so amazingly good!

From famous voice actors who you often hear in anime to fresh newcomers,

every single one played Satou or Arisa beautifully.

I'd never heard my work read aloud before, so I was so happy that I wound up flailing around like a fool.

Honestly, I wanted to say, *Let's hire them all!*

But no matter how hard it was to choose among them, since they're tape auditions, selections must be made.

I was told before we started that it would be tough, but I had no idea how hard the choices would actually be.

While I knew that the original author's selections were just to help narrow down the options before the studio auditions, I carefully listened to every one of them over and over, out of respect for the talented voice actors who took their roles so seriously.

I took notes on who suited the character, who sounded the way I'd imagined them, who was likely to play the characters' other scenes well, and so on. By the end, the names were all blending together, but I managed to narrow it down to a chosen few.

In the near future, I also plan to attend the studio auditions, so I think I'll report about that on social media or in the next volume. Please look forward to it.

Well, I went on about the anime for a bit too long. Let's dig in to the main points of this volume.

This is part two of the Labyrinth City arc.

Like the previous volume, the story arc is somewhat similar to the web version, but there are new characters, different events, and so on. The twists and the ending have also changed a great deal from the web version, so I'm confident that even readers of that version will find plenty to enjoy.

A certain "indeed" fellow, a previously defeated villain who makes a comeback, and all kinds of other story elements all come together in the end.

When you've finished this volume, please go back and reread from Volume 10 again.

I'm sure that the knowledge of what happens will reveal a lot of the meaning and reasons behind a certain mysterious person's actions.

Of course, side stories are one of the selling points of *Death March*, and this volume makes no exception!

It's jam-packed with Satou's monster-part crafting, interactions with kids at the soup kitchen and the orphanage, and all kinds of new characters.

And there are battle scenes, too, of course!

Even Satou, who normally works in the shadows, spends this volume facing dangers that threaten the existence of Labyrinth City itself with his fairy sword in hand.

What unexpected allies will he fight alongside?

If I told you here, it'd be a spoiler, so please first read this volume and find out.

Before I say thank-yous, I'd like to make one announcement.

Volume 5 of Aya Megumu's comic adaptation of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody* should be on sale at the same time as this volume.

It's full of lovely townscapes, wonderful expressions, and touching portrayals of the characters. If you haven't read it yet, I'd love for you to check it out.

As a bonus, you even get to see characters who aren't illustrated in the novels!

And now for the thank-yous.

Excellent advice and suggestions from A and K in the editorial department made many scenes far more readable and realistic. I owe them a lot for pointing out so many small details that I could easily miss as the author.

I hope you'll continue supporting and guiding me in the future.

As always, I can never thank shri-san enough for the illustrations that fill the world of *Death March* with vivid color and light.

The main star of this volume's art is Tifaleeza!

…Although, to be honest, my personal favorite might be the cute Neru, with

the cowlick in her hair and her protruding fang.

She didn't show up much in the second half of this volume, but I was so charmed by the illustration of her that I wound up hastily shoving out other characters to bring her back in the end, and now she even shows up in the next volume. (She wasn't supposed to.)

Of course, I have to thank the Kadokawa Books editorial department and everyone else who was involved in the development, creation, promotion, and sale of this book.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all to you, the readers!!

Thank you so much for reading this book all the way to the end!

I'll see you next time for the Labyrinth City arc part three!

Hiro Ainana

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