
DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD
RHAPSODY
23
HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

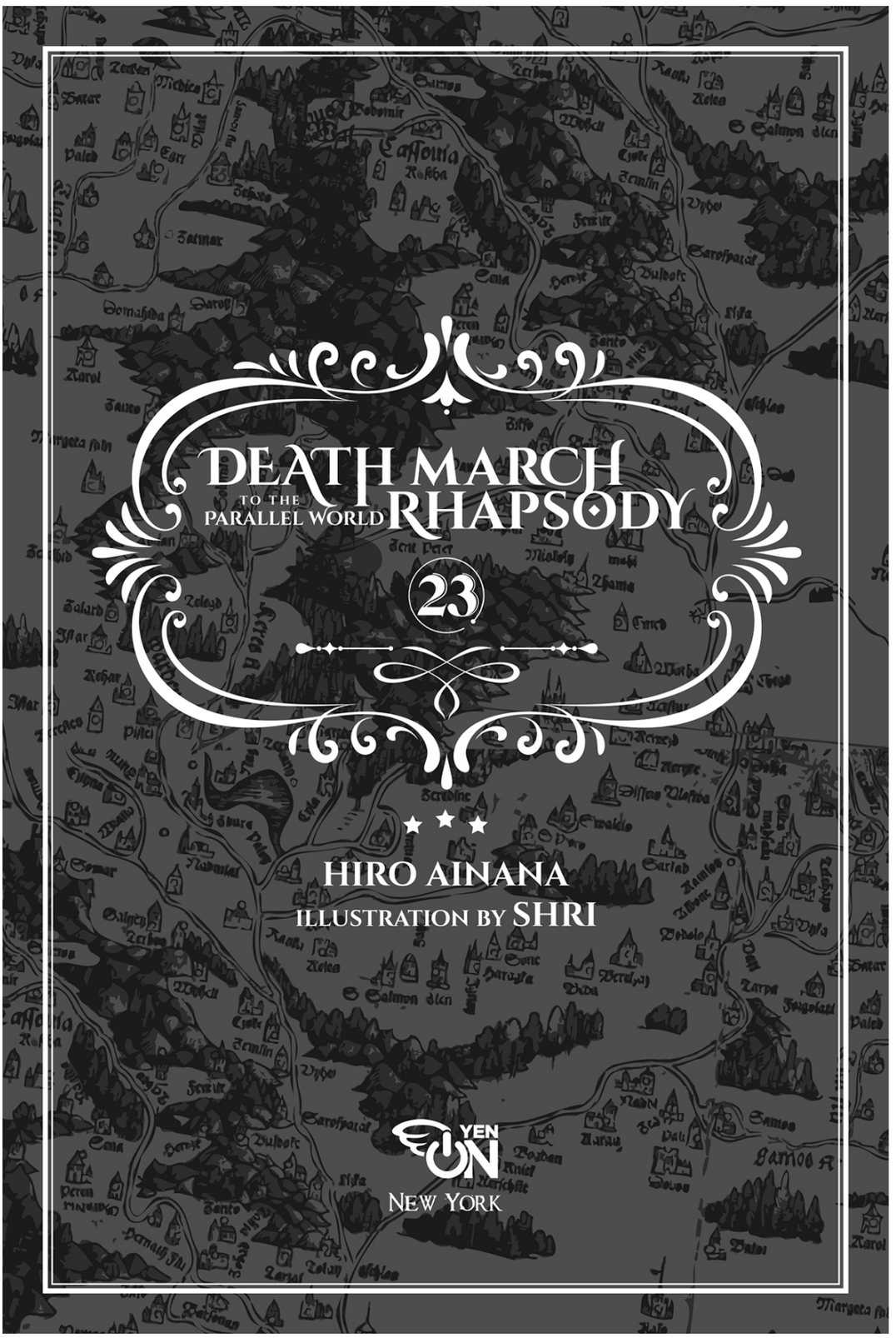
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DEATH MARCH 23
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TAMA
A cat-eared girl.
"Ninja Arts,
Shadow Biiiind?"
"Pochi's quickdraw
slash will vanquish the
enemy in a flash, sir!"
"Blink, Helix Spear
Multistrike!"
POCHI
A dog-eared girl.
LIZA
A scalefolk girl.


“Ah-ha-ha, I’ll stock up on some Masternium, too!”
“Then I will as well.”
SATOU
A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.
LULU
Born in the Kuvork Kingdom. She is Arisa’s older sister.
ARISA
A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.



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23

★ ★ ★

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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Prologue

“Mashter, a customer.”

“Mashter is here.”

“Mashter, hurry.”

I was preparing a potion in the kitchen inside the store when the three young shop assistants, who were hamsterfolk and were all around waist-height, called for me.

“All right. I’ll come right away.”

I put the half-made potion into Storage and headed toward the front of the store, with the hamsterfolk children tugging on the hem of my pants.

“Where’s Roro?”

“Roro went out.”

“Roro supplies.”

“Roro said earlier.”

Roro owned this general store named Hero’s Rest.

“Oh, there you are.”

“Sorry for the wait, Ms. Nona. Are you getting ready to leave on an adventure?”

“That should be obvious from the way I look.”

The female adventurer, Ms. Nona, was dressed in leather armor, almost bursting at the seams trying to hold her well-toned body. She was a regular at the store here.

“I’d like five stamina recovery potions, ten Candles of Direction, and around thirty meals’ worth of preserved foods—and make those the expensive ones! I can’t stand the dried meat that has the toughness of the bottom of a sandal, nor the hard bread.”

“Buying a lot today, I see. Are you going on a long trip?”

“Yeah, I’m participatin’ in a long trip led by one of the top adventurer clans.”

When I first met her, she was traveling alone. I was worried about her being on her own, but I was relieved she had managed to make some friends. I turned around to get the items she asked for out of a cupboard behind the counter, then lined them all up on top of the counter.

The hamsterfolk went over to the pantry to get the bulky rations. The rations that Lulu and I came up with as a result of research were a smash hit and one of the most popular products at the store.

“Mashter, the rations.”

“Mashter, we brought them.”

“Mashter, compliment us.”

“Excellent job, girls.”

I patted the hamsterfolk, who brought over the rations on their heads. They made cute little noises as they wiggled their hands and small tails with joy. Ms. Nona looked as if she wanted to pat them on the head, too. *They’ll love it, so don’t hesitate to pat them on the head!*

“All together that will be three copper pieces and twelve… Never mind the smaller amounts; three coppers will do.”

“Oh, thanks!”

Ms. Nona took out three bundles of one hundred copper coins with a hole in the center, all grouped with a piece of thread through the holes, and placed them on the table.

Ordinary folk weren’t allowed to use silver or gold currency to pay for things, so paying with copper for everything like this was convenient.

“Shall I sharpen the swords on your waist?”

“You know I’ve been doing that myself?”

Ms. Nona spoke as she detached the one-handed sword from the belt on her waist, placing it on top of the table. It showed signs of being looked after, but it wasn’t in the best condition. The climate here was extremely hot, so if swords weren’t cared for well enough, they’d soon become unusable.

As a result, there weren’t many people here who used metal swords like Ms. Nona’s; a large majority instead opted for equipment made from bone that had been strengthened by mages or a necromancer.

“Let me borrow your sword for a moment.”

I took out a special whetting stone that had recently been smelted and at once got to work on sharpening the sword.

“Now you can cut with it.”

Ms. Nona didn’t look convinced, so I showed how easy it was to cut with a piece of paper.

“Wow, that’s awesome! That Roro did a good job finding you. It’s only a matter of time until this store is one of the best in

Arcatia!”

Ms. Nona spoke as she sheathed her sword back on her waist and left the store with a big smile.

In her place, a young girl walked in with a paper bag filled with so many items, it was practically covering her face.

“Roro, welcome back.”

“Roro, are you hurt?”

“Roro, compliment us.”

The three hamsterfolk children sprang through the flap door on the counter, excitedly jumping up at the young girl.

The young girl was Roro, the owner of Hero’s Rest.

“Welcome back, Roro. You just missed a customer,” I said.

“Hello, Mr. Satou. If it was Ms. Nona, I just saw her,” Roro replied.

I took the paper bag she was holding from her, revealing her beauty that could even make castles kneel in awe. If I were to compare her beauty to Lulu’s, that should be enough to help one imagine how transcendent Roro’s beauty was—which was not surprising. Her great-grandfather was the hero Watari—she had similar roots to Lulu, and if you disregarded the fact that her hair was blond, she looked almost the same as Lulu.

I’d met her about a week ago.

The rumor that both Karion and Urion were traveling together had reached the Garleon Alliance, so we were all taking it easy and decided to visit the western regions. The reason for visiting here specifically was the Jungle Labyrinth that Arcatia was located in the center of.

Arcatia

Satou here. In olden times and modern times as well, it was often thought that if you left your hometown, you would fall victim to discrimination and bias. However, in every country I've been in, everyone was nice.

"I can see it now. That must be Arcatia."

In the center of the tropical Jungle Labyrinth stood Arcatia. It wasn't that big for a city. Compared to the city I first visited when I was summoned here, Seiryuu, this city was around one-fifth of its size.

"It looks like an egg," Liza said, with an awestruck expression on her face. Her flexible tail was adorned with orange scales, proof that she was a lizardfolk herself. Just as Liza had described, the city indeed did look like an egg laid down on its side. There was a huge dome covering the city.

We weren't able to use horse carriages today, so we were riding on the back of a golem I created.

"It's similar to the eggs Pochi makes, sir." The young girl, Pochi, with short brown hair in a bob and dog ears, spoke. Pochi, who was running side by side with Liza, took a White Dragon Egg out of her egg pouch, lifted it up, and compared it to the outer walls of the city.

"Is it broken over there?" Tama, a young girl with short white hair and cat ears, pointed out. Just as she had said, the top half of the outer wall ended abruptly, making it look like it was broken. I was certain it was there to allow light in.

"P-Pochi's eggs would never, ever, ever, break, sir! That's for certain, sir!" Pochi asserted, holding her egg tight. She might have been traumatized when she dropped her old wyvern egg while sightseeing in the western regions. Well, real dragon eggs were incredibly more durable than armor, so it would take a lot more to break it.

"Shrubs," spoke Mia, a girl with light pale hair tied into

twintails. She looked rather tired. Her hair shook as she tried to keep up with the pace of the golem, slightly hiding her distinct, pointy elf ears.

"Yes, Mia. There is a wall of shrubbery around the city, I declare."

A gorgeous blond expressionless woman spoke—Nana.

"It looks like that wall of shrubbery is there to repel small-size and midsize monsters from the city," spoke Arisa, who was wearing a blond wig to hide her purple hair, which she sorely detested. She wasn't wearing the wig earlier, but it seemed she'd put it on as we approached the city, to avoid any trouble.

"The shrubbery is charmed. The Kuvork Kingdom also did that and adorned the entrance with it."

Sharing that interesting piece of information was Arisa's older sister, Lulu. She was an extreme beauty, a literal personification of the word *siren*. Her gorgeous black hair complemented her angel-like beauty like sunshine streaking through the trees in a forest.

On Earth, she would be an idol, renowned for being one of the most beautiful women in the world, yet in this world, the standard of beauty was already so high that she was often viewed as a simple, plain woman. I knew that beauty standards varied from place to place and what time we were in, but I found it odd that she wasn't regarded as beautiful here.

"Master, is there something wrong?"

"No, not at all. I was just thinking you're looking extra cute today."

I teased Lulu a little, causing her to go bright red as she hid her face.

"Master, I—!"

"Compliment."

"Can Tama have one, too?"

"Pochi wants to be complimented, too, sir!"

"Master, I request you call me 'cute.'"

All the girls responded, aside from Liza. I was pretty sure I always complimented them, but I didn't think they'd worry about me complimenting them too much, so I gave them all compliments—Liza included.

While we were busy with that, I had a quick look around and noticed that we were approaching the gate to Arcatia. The trees surrounding the city had been trimmed down, but what caught

my eye was the distortion that was unique to the tropical Jungle Labyrinth. The distortion was caused by something different from the distortion effect in the Bolenan Forest boundaries and the Wandering Ocean. If you tried to walk forward, you would end up changing direction and would end up somewhere else entirely. The distortion barrier covered the whole area and even reached up into the sky. We would be able to stop it with Arisa's Space Magic, but we learned rather quickly that doing that in itself was a bother, so we instead chose to traverse the Jungle Labyrinth. By the way, I should mention that this labyrinth was around the same size as Shiga Kingdom, which in itself had several jungle labyrinths within it. It was that big.

"…Oh."

My map changed. It looked like it was now a map for Arcatia instead. I used "Search Entire Map" to get more information. This area was filled with beastfolk, with lizardfolk, with crocodilefolk, and with other reptilefolk making up most of the population. There were also fairyfolk such as leprechauns and spriggans. There were no elves or goblins, and only a few dwarves. Another weird point was that humanfolk only made up 1 percent of the population.

"The sage's student isn't here, right?" Arisa asked, making sure. She had gotten caught up in the plots of the great sage Sorijeyro of the Parion Province and caught up in the chaos caused by the riot of his student, Bazan, eventually having to put an end to the disruption caused by the Discordant Ones.

"Yeah, Serena said he wouldn't be."

According to Serena, the sage's disciple, who was involved in resolving the latter issue alongside the former Phantom Thief Pippin from the Echigoya Trading Company, this place was not included in the labyrinth where the sage's disciples had been dispatched. To be precise, this was the case since Serena, who was supposed to be dispatched, was currently running around handling the aftermath. No one was here.

"I hope it's peaceful here, at least." Lulu giggled.

"Can a labyrinth be peaceful, I inquire?"

"Hmm, courage."

Nana and Mia laughed as they spoke.

"Om, um, I didn't mean that…"

Lulu was cute even when she panicked. I lovingly looked over my group of friends as I did one final check of the map.

…Ugh.

I spotted several beastfolk who had been possessed by demons up ahead. Leaving them would be dangerous, so it was better we quickly dealt with them. Thankfully, there was no one with any Unique Skills or any demon lord worshippers among them.

"Rose arch."

"Those small roses are cute, I declare."

Mia and Nana had found an arch made from a rose bush. With us on the back of the golem, it seemed like we'd end up hitting our heads against it, so we got off the golem runosaur, and it returned to the soil. As we approached the rose arch, I saw that the words **Thorn Barrier** were displayed in the AR. According to the information under it, it was a barrier that warded off those with harmful motives and monsters, as well as notifying those inside it about their presence. We went under the three thorn arches and found ourselves at the front gates of Arcatia.

"Hayalt!"

A wolf man appeared above the gate, shouting something.

> Skill Acquired: "Arcatian Language"

"Shahlt!"

This time, a bear man appeared beside the wolf man.

> Skill Acquired: "Western Region Common Language"

"Master, they're both shouting 'halt.'" Arisa translated the beastfolks' commands using a ring with translation powers she had received from an elfin village.

All right, it does sound like "halt." As far as beastfolk languages go, this sounds similar to what the leopardfolk and the gray ratfolk speak. The pronunciation is rather difficult, so I'll go ahead and power up my new skills with some skill points.

"Never seen you 'round here before. You new to Arcatia?"

"Yes. It's my first time here."

"Fancy armor. You rich? Dabble in rich person hobbies, ay? Even small brats don't need armor." The bear man scoffed.

"Plus, he's a smooth-skin!" This time, the wolf man spat out an insult, looking down on me. It seemed "smooth-skin" was an insult unique to people who weren't beastfolk. Arisa and Liza both wanted to react, but I gestured to them to keep quiet for now.

"Show us yer adventurin' ID, smooth-skin."

“I’ve yet to register for one. Would ID from the Shiga Kingdom be enough?”

“…Yeah. Makes no difference.”

They didn’t seem impressed that I didn’t react to their insult. Those who traversed Arcatia, or rather, the Jungle Labyrinth, were not known as explorers but were instead referred to as adventurers. I learned that there were once people who went on adventures to unknown labyrinths, which earned them the title of explorer. I had once read about it in a book I got in Garlelork City.

“Tch, not only is he a smooth-skin, but he’s also a noble, too.”

“You can go through. Don’t go causin’ problems in Arcatia. Folks here won’t care if you’re a noble, so keep that in mind.”

“If you do end up bringing attention to yourself, the Great Sorceress will impale you on the spot with her magic.”

After showing the guards my identification, they eventually let us through, albeit reluctantly. It seemed that not only were humans disliked, but nobles were, too.

“I declare there is an apple core in the center.”

“Leftovers?”

“Pochi would eat up all of her apples, sir!”

Nana and the others were referring to a large, spiraling tower in the center of Arcatia. The top of the tower was almost as tall as the egg-shaped dome around the city. According to the AR display, it was the Great Sorceress’s tower, and it seemed the city had gotten its name from the Great Sorceress who controlled the city.

“By the way, Master, did you notice?”

“Everyone looking at us?” I asked in response. Arisa nodded.

Ever since we came through the gate, we’d endured hateful looks from all the beastfolk passing us by.

“Hey, let’s all put our hoods on.”

The hoods allowed for breathing, but just in case, I used my spell Air-Conditioning to make sure they wouldn’t make us too warm.

“Are we going straight into adventuring?”

“Let’s find somewhere to stay, first. Then we’ll do some sightseeing and check out the Adventurers Guild.”

Arisa’s eyes sparkled as she asked me, but we had to see to urgent matters first.

“If we let smooth-skins stay here, it will be bad for business.

Please do what the other smooth-skins do and find somewhere to stay in the outskirts, in a cheap lodging house or other."

As we traveled through the center of the city, we found a high-quality inn close to the tower, so we tried to get a room there. However, we were abruptly turned down. It reminded me of when I used to travel cheaply as a student, and I was often discriminated against for being East Asian and was refused rooms.

"Master, there are other inns," Liza spoke, trying to cheer me up. I didn't plan on being down, but I was reminded of past experiences and felt as if I was acting a little naive again. I wondered if this was how Liza and the others felt in Seiryuu, within the Shiga Kingdom, when something similar happened to them.

"You're right, Liza."

However, in cheaper accommodations, sleeping together was the standard. So, considering who I was staying with, I didn't want to stay somewhere like that. My only other options were to buy some land and build my accommodations or set up camp somewhere within the labyrinth.

"Change of plan. Let's register at the Adventurers Guild first."

"All right!"

Arisa agreed at once, with the other girls joining in after. I looked at the map, and from what I could gather, there were three Adventurers Guilds near the outside gates, so I made the decision to head to the biggest—and main—guild. To avoid any trouble on the way, I made sure to cast magical Glamours on us, to make us appear as beastfolk.

"Master, I have located a skeleton, I report."

I followed Nana's gaze. I could see down an alleyway to a construction site where there was a group of skeletons.

"There's something weird about bone people. They have no flesh, sir!"

"Want Tama to take them out?"

"It's fine, sir. I'll fight, too, sir. Pochi has no likes or dislikes. She's a good girl, sir!"

"Hold on, you two. Those around us don't seem to be afraid of the skeletons."

Just like Liza described, the skeletons were working at the construction site.

"Let's get a little closer."

I was curious, so I got closer to the construction site. It seemed the skeletons had been tasked with mostly manual labor and the dirtier work.

“That man over there looks like the boss of the construction site. He looks like he’s a necromancer. He must be controlling them,” Arisa said, looking around the construction site.

“What an interesting sight. Both the beastfolk and the skeletons are working together.”

“Harmony.”

Lulu and Mia mumbled to themselves, seemingly impressed. Tama and Pochi were beside them, nodding along as if they understood.

“Outsiders?”

Someone passing by called out to us. Possibly due to the beastfolk Glamours we were wearing.

“Yes. We just arrived today.”

“I see. While it might be surprising, sights like that are the norm here in Arcatia.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep. The Great Sorceress formed a contract with an ancient necromancer. In return for her giving them somewhere safe to live, they help out here in the city.”

The passerby continued to tell us that was why the skeletons didn’t attack the residents.

“…You fool!”

The sudden angry voice startled both Tama and Pochi. Their ears and tails went straight with surprise, and they waved their hands about.

“Shashi! Don’t go so hard on them! Have some sympathy!

“B-but, sir. They’re incapable of feeling pain!”

“Silence! You’ve no respect for the dead! I’m borrowing the bones of some very important ancestors!”

“Aren’t you paying them for it anyway?”

“You have to understand it’s not something that can be solved with money! How would you feel if your mother died and her remains were treated like junk? How about the other people who would have to see that? You wouldn’t even consider leaving her remains with people like that!”

The skeletons weren’t the remains of monsters but were instead donations by the residents of the city. The necromancer was different from the one in Shiga Kingdom; he had

assimilated into the people's daily lives here.

"Hnng! Hnghng!" Tama was pulling on my sleeves. I looked over at her, noticing an elderly frogfolk, dressed like a necromancer, talking with a ratfolk adventurer who was dressed in battered adventurer's garb.

Uh-oh.

It was the adventurer who had been possessed by the demons I saw earlier. I was so busy with the necromancer and skeletons that I failed to notice the light on my radar.

"*I'll be right back*," I whispered to Tama before heading over to the demons. However, before I could intervene, someone cut in front of me and cut both the demon and the adventurer into two clean halves.

Onlookers erupted into screams as they all looked toward the brutal murderer—a young woman with gray hair. However, the young man paid no mind to the onlookers' gazes and screams, brushing them off like a light wind blowing over a field. The AR display gave me more information about who he was.

…For real?

I couldn't hide my surprise at how unexpected it was. He was from a race that was often depicted in fantasy works as beings who could rival dragons themselves.

"Fen!"

A red-haired sorceress in her mid-twenties flew over my head and appeared in front of us. She was wearing a large hat and was pretty plain-looking. As her skirt flapped in the wind, I caught a look at her long, healthy legs, causing me to lose track of any thoughts I had.

"Tia, it's you."

"Don't 'Tia, it's you' me! Look at you, covered in blood! Everyone! Just because this man took care of some wanted people doesn't mean he's the bad guy here! So please, don't worry!"

The sorceress named Tia used Wind Magic to elevate her voice as she spoke to the concerned onlookers.

"Oh, he's a friend of Tia's. That's a surprise."

"Ah, that's fine, then. If Tia says it's all right, then we have nothing to worry about."

The onlookers all dispersed in different directions, muttering to themselves as they left. Although she wasn't as impressive as Fen, this sorceress called Tia was quite the looker.

“Such violence!”

“This is bad, let’s scram!”

The two halves of the adventurer’s body—which Fen had sliced in two—began to melt into liquid.

“Ugh! Fen, there’s still some left!”

Tia shot off a quick Earth spell—Toss Beryl—and defeated the wood creature. Although the creature was a low-level creature around level 30, she had dealt with it fairly well. Some magic users that appeared after Tia were working with the necromancers and the skeletons, helping them clear away the remains.

They’re gone.

The murdered adventurer and the necromancers with him had disappeared. I tried looking for them on the map, but necromancers were common in this town, so it was difficult to pinpoint them.

“Master, is something wrong?”

“Someone possessed by a demon just got defeated by this wolflike man and a sorceress.”

Arisa and the others had caught up to me, so I explained what had just transpired.

“A wolf man? Where?”

I looked around, but both Fen and Tia were gone, too. I checked the map again, and it looked like they had set off to follow more possessed people. I saw their markers on the map gradually disappear. Although their methods were rather rambunctious, it seemed that there were two skilled people working together within the fortress, busying themselves with important tasks. I was rather intrigued by them, so I hoped I could bump into them again and share stories over a drink or two.

“Entry prohibited… Aw, that’s unfortunate.” Arisa let out a sigh as she looked up toward the inwardly curved outer wall. Due to Fen taking out the demons and then heading off around the village, or due to the possessed demons even appearing in the first place, the direct route to the Adventurers Guild was closed off. We ended up having to walk around the whole outer wall to get there.

“Mew?”

“Our Glamours don’t work anymore, sir.” As we went through the rose arch, our beastfolk Disorienting Glamour wore

off. It seemed the Great Sorceress had set up some sort of magic apparatus to remove any unwanted folk.

"Should we put it on again?"

"Nah, it'll no doubt just get removed again, so I'll just leave them off for now."

If our Glamours were taken off repeatedly, it would probably alert the Great Sorceress. We continued walking, with only our hoods to disguise our appearances.

"Mew…"

There were rows of run-down houses and dilapidated stores along the sides of the walls, as well as ragged-looking people and adventurers who seemed to be recovering while engaging in prostitution from the afternoon onward. The city readily accepted anyone, so there were a lot of refugees from nearby nations who had wound up here.

"It doesn't look very safe around here. Pochi, Tama, pay close attention to your surroundings."

"Aye-aye, cap'n!"

"Roger, sir!"

The young beastfolk girls fired themselves up, keeping a close eye on the suspicious figures around us. Since the outer walls were a little dangerous, I decided to change our course to the inner roads. It'd take us a little longer to get there, as it was rather out of the way of our destination, but I figured taking the safer, more cultured road was better for the little ones' education.

"'Scuse me! I'm off to seize my future!" A centaur ran out of a store near the outer wall. Fortunately, they were a few yards ahead of us, so we narrowly avoided bumping into them.

"Seikooooo! Wait up!"

A blond-haired young girl chased after the centaur, yelling.

"At least wait until the delivery is finished—"

"Forgive me, boss!"

However, the centaur shook off the hands of her pleading younger boss and ran off at the speed of a well-bred horse. The young store owner fell to her knees, dejected.

"Roro, you okay?"

"Roro, cheer up."

"Roro, are you hurt?"

The small hamster-like folk, who were around knee-height, all tumbled over themselves as they ran over to the young

shopkeeper.

“Hello, larvae.” Nana unsteadily walked over to the young hamsterfolk.

“Wait.”

“No, Mia. She needs to be looked after, I declare.”

Mia reached out to hold on to Nana’s clothing, but Mia ended up being pulled along with her. It seemed the hamsterfolk were just that charming to Nana.

“Roro, something is coming.”

“Roro, protect us.”

“Roro, help.”

“What’s wrong?”

The hamsterfolk were very wary of Nana, who was breathing heavily as she approached them. The shopkeeper, whom they referred to as Roro, turned around.

Oh.

Seeing the young shopkeeper’s eyes filled with tears, I suddenly felt an urge to protect her. There it was—the beauty that could topple nations.

“Wow.”

“Amazed.”

Arisa and Mia both exclaimed in shock.

“Roro, are you also over there?”

“Roro, are there two of you?”

“Roro, why are there two of you?”

“Two of me? Huh, who are you?”

Both the hamsterfolk and Roro were looking at the black-haired beauty Lulu—her looks were as beautiful as the stars in the sky.

“I-I’m Lulu. It’s nice to meet you!”

“N-nice to meet you… I’m Roro, the owner of Hero’s Rest.”

Both Lulu and Roro eyed each other suspiciously as they introduced themselves.

“What a surprise, Master,” Arisa spoke.

“Yeah, one hell of a surprise…,” I responded.

I looked over at Lulu and Roro with Arisa.

“…I never thought there’d be a girl with the same face as Lulu’s.”



They were so remarkably similar. If we took away Roro's blond hair, they were the same girl.

"Nice to meet you, Roro. I'm Satou, one of Lulu's companions. It seems you are in a bit of trouble. Is there any way that we may be able to assist?"

There was no way I could overlook a girl with the same face as Lulu's when she was in trouble.

"N-no, I'm sorry to have caused you all so much trouble even though we have only just met," Roro responded.

"I don't mean to interfere, but did your craftsperson run off before finishing their job? You know, Master here is very skilled! Do you need an alchemist or a magic tool engineer?"

"Y-you can use alchemy?"

Roro was a little reserved at first, but after hearing what Arisa had to say, she changed her attitude.

"Yeah, I guess I'm as skilled as your average person."

Arisa wore an indescribable expression as she leaned over to Mia and whispered, "*Your average person can't craft metals of legend…*"

"Oh, then I would appreciate the help! The deadline for it is close! I have all the materials ready. I can't pay you much, but if there is anything I can do, let me know!" Roro clung to my arm as she pleaded.

"Girls shouldn't say they'll 'do anything.'" Both Arisa and Mia had gotten a little jealous.

"…O-okay." Roro turned bright red as she ushered us into Hero's Rest. The order was for two hundred Candles of Illumination and fifty lesser stamina potions. I didn't know the recipe for the former item, but the centaur who worked on it previously had left notes, so I had no problem crafting them. As for the latter, it was a magic potion made from materials I had never seen before, but similar to the candles, notes had been left for them, too.

"Was it an urgent request?" I asked Roro.

"Yes. They requested it around a week ago," Roro replied.

On a narrow table near the kitchen, there was no evidence of anything being crafted.

"The customer was new, so I asked Seiko to prioritize it over all else, but…"

A vague, unpleasant thought crossed my mind, but I would only appear needlessly suspicious, so I brushed the thought to

the side.

“That’s fine, it won’t take me a week to do. Mia, Arisa, could you give me a hand?”

“Yep, of course!”

“Okey-dokey!”

“Can Tama help, too?”

“Pochi can help, sir! With all my power! Hi-ya!”

When I asked Mia and Arisa for help, the other girls all offered to help, too.

“Master, please let me help, too.”

“I’ll help out, too!”

“Thanks, everyone! Let’s all do our best!”

Even Lulu and Roro joined in, declaring they’d help in unison, just like sisters.

“Roro, help us.”

“Roro, we can’t escape.”

“Roro, so soft.”

“Larvae, don’t get too excited, I declare.” I looked in the direction of the panicked hamster girls’ voices and saw all three of them being hugged by a very content Nana.

Nana was always doing what she wanted.

“All right, let’s get to work.”

And that was how we solved Roro’s predicament and also ended up staying at Hero’s Rest.

Woodland Labyrinth

Satou here. When I was in university, I worked a part-time job in forest maintenance, but I didn't find walking through forests or climbing mountains all that difficult. It was pretty different from the mountain paths that had already been maintained.

"Hee-hee, hee-hee-hee."

Arisa was skipping along with a smile on her face. It was a few days after we had completed the order at Hero's Rest, and we were having fun traversing through the Woodland Labyrinth together as a group.

"High spirits."

"Yes, Mia. Arisa is happy that she gets to start as a 'silver tiger' adventurer, I assume."

Both Mia and Nana, who were having a conversation, had silver adventurer medals engraved with a tiger's face hanging on their chests. Adventurer ranks started from field mouse rank, and then it was starving wolf, silver tiger, and golden lion, in order of lowest to highest. As I had the adventurer rank "mithril" from Labyrinth City Celivera, I started at the second-highest rank, silver tiger.

It was not only that. Our visit to the guild was like something from a story! We had people crowd around us as if to say, *"This ain't a place for kids."* Then when we showed them our mithril adventurer rank from Celivera, they invited us into a different room, and once the guild lead took a look at us, he was all, "Now *that*'s an adventurer!" Arisa spun around, a delighted expression on her face. Half of what she described also happened to us in the Labyrinth City Celivera, but it seemed no matter how many times it happened, Arisa enjoyed it all the same.

"It's a lot bumpier here than I thought it'd be, being a jungle and all…"

"You're right. When I think of the Amazon Rainforest, I

imagine it being wide, flat plains, but here there are hills every few yards, which makes it difficult to walk."

The ground in Celivera Labyrinth was also uneven. However, here in the Jungle Labyrinth, tree roots were protruding from the ground, ivy was hanging everywhere, and the weeds made it difficult to see where we were putting our feet.

"Mew! Third from the right, meat. One from the left, grass. Fifth in the center, bugs. Are the bugs fighting?" Tama was walking ahead of us, keeping a close eye on her surroundings, while also warning us about the presence of monsters ahead. Tama's "meat" referred to mammals or reptiles, while "bug" simply stood for insect-type monsters. "Grass" referred to plantlike monsters. She wasn't naming the different types of monsters like it was a video game. She was instead warning us of the dangers in each direction, letting us know which monsters we would encounter.

"I guess we will go right next."

"Yes, sir. No matter how many meats there are, it'll be a piece of cake, sir."

Liza and Pochi nodded at each other.

"May we?"

"I'll leave it to you two."

While we were currently in the deeper part of the Jungle Labyrinth, the concentration of miasma in Arcatia wasn't very high, meaning the monsters that patrolled around these parts weren't that strong.

Liza and Pochi walked ahead by one hundred feet before suddenly disappearing. That was the effect of the space distortion in the Jungle Labyrinth. I could see where both of them were with radar and a map, and I remembered the way they went, so it was fine.

Even then, there was some stability to the distortion here, meaning if we went in the same direction, we would eventually meet up with them. If it ever came to that, I could have used Unit Deployment, even if there were risks when using it.

"I'll deal with grass."

"I want Mia to protect us, I declare."

Swish.

There was not only Mia and Nana but also Mia's pseudo–wind spirit, Sylph, who was full of energy and raring to go.

"In that case, Lulu and I will head to the center and check out

the battle there. If it looks bad, we'll intervene. Is that all right?"

"Sure. I trust you, Arisa."

My companions all went their separate ways. I waited for a while with Tama, when Liza and Pochi, wearing very smug expressions, returned with the remains of a wild boar on their shoulders.

"We caught our prey, sir!"

Shortly after, Nana and Mia returned, dragging along with them the remains of a monster that resembled a stalk of broccoli.

I guess we're having stewed broccoli and wild boar ribs for lunch.

I put the monster's remains inside a bag made for carrying the spoils from our hunts called a "Magic Bag," then all of us headed in the direction that Nana and Lulu had gone before disappearing. Once we made it out of the distorted area, we found ourselves standing in an open space.

"They got Daz! At this rate, it's all over for us! Throw a spell over here!"

"We've almost got them! Hold on a little longer!"

I could hear angry voices coming from some men. I wouldn't have been able to hear it through the distortion earlier. I saw Arisa and Lulu, so I headed over to them. In the open area, which was a sunken basin, there were three large ants—around the size of a small truck—battling with around thirty adventurers.

"They're not bad."

"Acrobatiiiiic?"

"They're going *pow*, *bang*, *wallop*, sir!"

The two young beastfolk girls were watching the beastfolk adventurers fight for their lives against the ants. Although the giant ants' attacks were slow, they appeared to be rather strong and tough. As for the adventurers, five of them were separated from the main group applying Heals, and two were mages casting Wind and Ice Magic, supporting the warriors of their group. From what I could see, aside from their rear guard and porters, everyone was wounded.

"It looks like they're struggling," I noted.

"The ants have been showering them with their acid breath," Arisa explained.

"I offered to help, but they turned me down," Lulu added,

explaining why she had yet to intervene.

“Daaanger? Daaanger?”

“Reinforcements have arrived, sir!”

Three centipede-like monsters appeared out of the jungle on the opposite side of the basin. There were often random encounters in labyrinths with space distortion, so it was always paramount to stay alert.

“Mew.”

“They’re creepy.”

“Bugs aren’t delicious, so Pochi doesn’t like them, sir.”

“You can do a lot with the carapace of a centipede,” I spoke as I patted Pochi on the ear.

“Oui, oooui. Fried frog meat is deeelicious.”

“Yes, it is. It reminds me of the labyrinth in Seiryuu.”

That reminded me, our frying pan had a hole in it, so instead of centipede carapace—which was fairly resistant to heat—we ended up frying frog meat instead.

“Master, some of the adventurers have run off. Their front line has collapsed, I declare.”

“Ah, this is bad.”

Two to three of the beastfolk had made a run for it. The monsters then used the opportunity to break through their rank, creating a hairy situation for the remaining beastfolk.

“Lulu, Arisa—take out the centipedes over there. Mia, divide Sylph up and hold back the ants. No need to attack them.”

The three of them nodded in response to my orders and set to work.

“We’re the silver tiger-ranked band of adventurers, Pendragon! We’ll now begin our rescue mission! If anyone has any complaints, leave it for later!”

I felt like if we offered them help, they would be too prideful to accept, so I went for a bit more of a forceful approach.

“Liza and the others, take out the ants one by one.”

Confirming that their vanguard had started to run, I fired off three Remote Arrows in the direction of the remaining ant and killed it.

“Mia, come with me. We need to heal their injuries.”

“All right, leave it to me.”

I held on to Mia, and we flew down toward the basin. By the time we had reached the area where the adventurers’ most heavily injured members were, thanks to the work of my group,

the monsters had all been defeated. The adventurers who had just recently been frantically running around trying to escape all stood stock-still, unsure what to do or what to even say.

“Let’s help them heal their wounded.”

“Ah, thank—”

“Hold on just a minute!” A large man intercepted the gorilla man who was just about to thank us. He was a lionfolk and looked to be around middle-aged.

“Didja forget that I said we don’t need any help?! Very bold of a smooth-skin! Don’t expect anythin’ in return for helpin’ us! I’d rather you pay us for the damn trouble!”

The lionfolk showered us with angry remarks. Well, although they were in a pretty tough situation, we did kind of barge in, and I *did* also say if they had any complaints to leave them for later. But I didn’t expect this much aggro in return. I felt a little embarrassed.

“You got that, smooth-skins?! Now get out of here—”

“Hey, dumbass!”

Just as the lionfolk was about to go further in his tirade of rage, the gorillafolk from before clomped him on the head with his giant fist. It echoed a huge *thunk!* noise as the lionfolk man collapsed to the ground. Beastfolk were rather sturdy, so even if they did faint after a hit, it was very rare that it’d do any damage to them.

“The hell you think you doin’?! You big hairy gorilla!”

“Shaddup! You’re a damn fool! A failure of a leader! You can’t even see how strong these people are, yet you’re just runnin’ ya mouth!”

The gorillafolk and the lionfolk man began to exchange blows with each other. They were both going at it, so there was blood flying around everywhere. It was pretty violent. The gorilla seemed to be winning, and with one final punch, he knocked out the lionfolk man and left him sprawled out on the ground.

“Hey, sorry about that, fella. This guy hates smooth-ski—humanfolk. I’ve beat the livin’ daylights out of him as an apology for his rude remarks.”

Well, you didn’t have to go that *far.*

“Damn, Daz isn’t breathing.”

“It’s no good. My magic isn’t working! We need magic medicine! Is there anyone with at least intermediate magic

medicine?” Opposite the two sparring beastfolk was a micefolk woman who was using Water Magic, trying to heal the wounded. She was shouting for help.

“I can heal.”

“Really? Then please help us! I can pay you—!”

“Later. Mia, if you would.”

“Hmm. **Aqua Heal**.”

I cut off the gorillafolk man who was trying to negotiate pay and signaled to Mia to use her healing spell. Once she finished her incantation, she then aimed her water spell at Daz and the other injured adventurers.

“Yes! That’s it! Daz is breathing again! Daz, can you hear me? You’re back!”

“Amazing… That magic is leagues above my own…”

“Nailed it.”

I turned around and saw Mia shooting me a peace sign with an accomplished look on her face. I responded with a smile and a thumbs-up.

“Once again, I owe you my thanks. I’m Gogh, a silver tiger–ranked adventurer.” The gorillafolk man introduced himself.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Satou from the silver tiger–ranked adventuring party Pendragon.” We shook hands as we introduced ourselves.

“Now, as thanks for your aid… If possible, I’d like to offer you fifteen pieces. If you would be so kind to accept…” The gorilla man wore a complicated expression as he spoke.

“Fifteen pieces?”

“I am very aware that it is a low price, but we are mostly made up of starving wolf ranks, and we have a lot of field mouse–ranked porters with us, too. If you wish for more, we will need around a month to gather it—”

It seemed he was trying to negotiate the reward money with me. Roro had told us earlier, but here in Arcatia, when it came to shopping, they only used copper coins. When it came to larger sums of money, they would often do business with gemstones or copper with a hole in the middle, connected into bundles by a piece of thread.

In this case, the gorilla man meant fifteen pieces of copper coin bundles.

“Oh, I’m not unhappy with the offer, or anything. I wasn’t looking for compensation anyway, so I am just a little confused

by what you mean."

"But I can't just *not* pay you—"

"In that case, if we ever cross paths in Arcatia, just treat us to something, then."

"Got it. I'll treat you to anything you want! Even woodland boar or slices of a seven-faced snake!"

Tama and Pochi both got excited at the gorilla man's promises, both saying "Meat!" in unison.

"Gogh! Ms. Mia's magic is amazing!"

The Water Magic user tugged on Gogh's arm as she excitedly rattled on. It seemed that once Mia had finished healing the most gravely wounded adventurers, she had gone around to the others and healed all of their injuries.

"I expect nothing less from the honorable elves. I knew that the fairy mages back in my hometown all worshipped them."

"Elves?"

"Put some respect in their name! The honorable elves! Even the prideful chief of my town, as well as the priest, all bowed their heads toward the elves!"

"Okay, geez."

The gorilla man flinched in response to the Water Magic user's sharp glare.

So even in the giants' villages, the elves are treated specially. Hmm.

"Not to mention, isn't this a first? I don't think an elf from the Bolenan Forest has come to Arcatia before, right?"

"Wrong."

"Really? Have I just not met one befo—?"

"Wrong. Polanian."

I explained to the very confused gorilla man that Mia wasn't Bulainan; she was Polanian. I could tell that was what Mia wanted to tell him.

"Gogh! We've got a situation. Our goods were destroyed, and we've hardly any Candles of Direction left. I sent them to get what we had, and we only have two left."

A young raccoon man looked very panicked as he reported the news to the gorilla man.

"Only two left… We'll barely make it back to Arcatia with this amount of people…"

That reminds me, didn't we have around ten back in Storage that we got at Hero's Rest?

According to Roro, it was an essential item for adventurers traversing the Jungle Labyrinth and who didn't want to get lost. In my case, I used a map and radar to see where we were, and I knew how the space distortion worked, so I did not need to use the candles.

"Please, take these."

"Are you sure? This will be a great help, but don't you all plan on heading farther into the labyrinth?"

"It's fine. We don't need that many, so it won't cause us any problems."

I gave the very thankful gorilla man five candles, and we said our good-byes to the adventurers.

"So not all beastfolk around here dislike humanfolk."

"Yes, Arisa. Working together is the best way to survive, I declare."

"Hmm. Agree."

Either way, I felt like they respected how powerful we were, but I knew better not to say that out loud. No matter the reason, there being more neutral, good-spirited people was a good thing.

"Master, the Candles of Direction those people were talking about before, were those the ones we made at Ms. Roro's store?"

"Sure are. If you're interested in them, why not try using one?"

Back when we used them at Hero's Rest, they were no different from usual candles—except these produced a green flame.

"Interested."

"Pochi is also interested, sir! Curiosity never killed the dog, sir!"

"So does that mean it kills cats?"

"N-no, sir! It doesn't kill cats, sir! It kills pheasants and foxes, sir! They end up as ingredients in a pan, sir!"

While laughing at Pochi mixing up various sayings and stories together as she spoke, I then lit the Candle of Direction that I had set in a stand.

"It's no different from a normal candle."

"Not at all! I can feel a wave of magic energy."

"Hmm, refreshing."

Now that they mentioned it, I could feel it, too.

"Pass it over here."

I passed it over to Arisa, who had her hand out, and she then moved it over in the direction of the boundary of the space distortion.

“Look.”

…Whoa.

The green light from the flame lit up the boundary of the space distortion. When the flame got closer to it, you could see right through the distorted space and see the other side.

“That’s amazingly amazing, sir!”

“Magnifiqueeee!”

“I see, that’s why it’s so indispensable for adventurers.”

The beastfolk girls all nodded in agreement.

“Maybe our scout Tama should have it?”

“No worriiiies. I can sense people even withooout it.”

Tama shook her head at Arisa’s suggestion—the ever-talented ninja Tama.

“No can do. Not being prepared is the greatest enemy. What will you do if an elite monster can avoid even your senses and avoid you completely?”

“Mew…”

Tama’s ears drooped down as Liza told her off.

“I’ll make you a candle that’s like a mobile, so make sure to use that.”

“Okee.”

The candle, which had Tama and Pochi standing on either side of it, surrounding its glass case, soon became Tama’s most prized possession. It made Pochi and the other girls jealous, so we made different versions for them.

◆

“Meat?”

“It’s a cow, sir!”

“It’s holding an ax. It’s no ordinary cow.”

The beastfolk girls were looking at a cowlike monster. At his feet were three corpses of adventurers, covered in blood. The cowlike monster swung its ax and roared.

“Looks like it’s over for those adventures.”

“Death confirmed.”

We had helped similar adventurer parties many times before

since we started offering assistance; however, it seemed we hadn’t made it in time for this particular party.



“Master, are we to begin combat, I ask?”

“We are. Let’s avenge the adventurers.”

“Our opponent is a Taurus, level twenty-five! Aside from his ability with an ax, he also has a skill that allows him to strengthen his muscles instantaneously, so be careful.”

As I confirmed we would be fighting the enemy, Arisa used her **Status Check** ability and informed the group of her findings. The Taurus was a little taller than Liza, but it was bending forward slightly, so its actual height was more likely to be around two and a half yards. It had enough body weight to match its height, too.

“It’s our first time fighting such a creature. Let’s not defeat it immediately and instead study its movements in battle.”

“Roger, roger, cap’n!”

“Roger, sir! Pochi is a pro at measuring up her opponents, sir!”

The vanguard of our group entered combat. The rear guard and I stood back, waiting for our opportunity.

“Isn’t that a minotaur?”

“It’s not walking on all fours, but it is leaning so far forward that its hands are almost touching the floor, plus its upper half isn’t human, so it can’t be a minotaur, right?”

“Inverted triangle.”

“You’re right, its top half is a bit bigger than its lower half.”

We watched on as the front guard memorized the Taurus’s movements. Liza sent the Taurus’s ax flying, inviting it to change up its movements.

“Body hit.”

“When it has no weapon, it goes on all fours and uses its horns.”

“Isn’t that a stronger method?”

The Taurus used a lot of charge attacks and threw up its horns. It left a lot of openings for attacks. However, it was clear it was powerful.

“…Ah, they beat it.”

“Pochi, by accident.”

The Taurus had been beheaded by a single sword flash. Its body hit the ground with a thud.

“For a level-twenty-five monster, it was pretty strong.”

“It looks deliciouuus.”

“It’s a cow, so it’s definitely, absolutely going to taste

delicious, sir! Pochi knows this for sure, sir!"

"It doesn't look poisonous, so let's try it at lunch."

Since it's beef, I guess it would be delicious if we sliced it thinly and fried it.

We carefully took the carcass apart and sliced a few pieces off for later. There was poison in its organs. However, back at Hero's Rest there was a note about Taurus's insides being useful in alchemy. I made sure to store the organs for later.

"Master, what shall we do about the adventurers' corpses, I inquire?"

Nana, who had been gathering up the corpses, asked me.

"We'll take their adventurer passes with us."

"Yes, Master. I will also retrieve any items that appear to be keepsakes."

"Are we going to bury them?"

"We are. I'll get the graves ready."

We lined up the bodies in graves I made with the Earth Magic skill "Pit," then covered them in soil and erected a tombstone for them. We carved the names that were on their adventurer passes onto the tombstones.

"Mew!"

Tama's ears perked up as a small group of six adventurers appeared.

"A smooth-skin, huh? That's not something you see every day."

A mouse man, who seemed to be their leader, spoke as he looked around at us.

"Although we're a while away from the 'Castle' here, for some reason there's been a lot of Tauruses endin' up here lost. Since you're not used to the area, you should fight closer to Arcatia. You don't want gettin' caught in a fight with three, four, or even more Tauruses. You'll die."

I thought they'd join us, but instead, they just passed on some advice and left. I thanked them, but they didn't respond.

"I wonder what they meant by 'Castle'?"

"Is it not the area we're heading to? It's probably full of super-strong monsters."

There were no other places that could be like that. We were attempting to go to an area on the map that was a blank area where monsters ranging from late level 20 up to level 40 roamed. I figured it was the best place for everyone to level up,

but it seemed it was a popular destination for adventurers, too.

We carried on cutting our way through the jungle, taking down any monsters that jumped out of the shrubbery on our way. The venomous bugs were more annoying than the monsters. If I didn't have the daily life spell Bug Wiper, I might have made a swift exit already.

"*Sniff, sniff.* Something smells nice, sir!"

"Can we eat iiiit?"

Pochi brought over a nut she found.

"Looks like it's from a tree known as a 'bread palm tree.'"

"Baked, delicious."

Mia told us how to eat it. They no doubt have similar trees in the Bolenan Forest.

"What does it taste like?"

"Bread."

"Is the tree made of bread?"

"Unbelievableee!"

It looked very different from the breadfruit I knew, but it seemed to be a similar thing.

"Mia, do they also have these in elfin villages, I inquire?"

"Hmm, yes."

It made sense they would be in such a wide area as the Bolenan Forest. We continued along the treacherous jungle-like paths, taking down strange monsters as we went on our way, eventually coming across an open space. It looked like a lakeside area, and there were several adventurer parties battling monsters.

"Oceaaan?"

"It's not the ocean, sir. I can't smell the salt in the water!"

"That's a lake."

As far as I could tell from the map, it was a lake that rivaled Lake Biwako in size.

"Hey, you, over there! Give us a hand with some of these! One of our newbies brought over a whole pack of them!"

They were a lot of ancient land beasts—they resembled triceratops more than they resembled rhinoceros. There were also giant dragonflies and gillfolk coming out of the lake. There were a lot of demi-sahagins that looked like mutilated merfolk; they seemingly had all gathered together, drawn in by the fighting with the ancient land beasts.

"Mia, send the small sylphs out to bring the dragonflies into

the air. I want you to shoot them once they're airborne, Lulu and Arisa. Liza and the others, lure out the ancient land beats and finish them off."

"Hmm, okay."

Swish.

Mia's small sylph's wings swooshed through the air as they swarmed the dragonflies.

"Master, how many pieces of meat—I mean, ancient land beasts—should we take out?"

"There's a lot of people, so at least take out about five of them."

"Understood."

Liza and the others energetically ran over to where the ancient land beasts were. It looked like they were having fun. Since they mentioned meat, and lunchtime was approaching, I left the rest to help the adventurers and set about making lunch.

"Dammit! Run for it! The Golden Alligator—it's immune to hits from swords or spears!"

A large alligator resembling a Deinosuchus emerged from the water, so I unsheathed the fairy sword I had on my waist and swiftly got to work.

"…or so it should be…"

I gave my thanks to the adventurer who alerted us before storing the Golden Alligator's remains in my Magic Bag. I was worried my clothes would get dirty, so I used the magical psychokinesis, Magic Hand, to store away the corpse without getting dirty.

"I guess we're having stew and fried Taurus meat for lunch?"

I continued with my lunch prep with the cheerful chattering of the girls as BGM. I ignored the angry and sorrowful wails of the adventurers. I poured water from the lake into a giant pot. Then, after using the Everyday Magic spell Pure Water to make sure the ingredients were suitable to eat, I took a huge broccoli —from the Evil Broccoli Monster—and cut it up into pieces before putting it in the pot to boil. I was outside, so I wanted to use an open fire as a heat source, but there was a lot of vegetation around us, so I decided against it. Instead, I opted for a Magic Stove.

While that was cooking, I prepared the vegetables that would be going into the stew and put them in a separate pan to boil. I

then cut up the vegetables we had stocked, such as spring onion, garlic, and a type of mushroom that resembled mushrooms back on Earth.

I guess we can just have bacon.

I then coated a large Chinese-style wok in oil and stir-fried the vegetables until they were soft and let a good deal of oil drip off the bacon. Once the broccoli was finished steaming, I put it into a sieve and used the Magic Air Conditioner to cool it down with a cool wind. In an empty pan, I then put the stir-fried ingredients in, along with clean water, and brought it to a boil. While that was simmering, I quickly put together a white sauce in another pan.

Now and then, a monster would try to approach me, but fighting was too much of a hassle, so I intimidated them a little and chased them off.

"Masterrr."

Tama waved at me from the busy battlefield as she singled a few monsters out and eliminated them, before heading back to where the rest of the group was. Thanks to the group thinning the numbers out, the battlefield was becoming a little less hectic.

I poured the white sauce into the large pan and let it simmer for a while before then moving it from the Magic Stove. It was quite humid where we were, so I didn't want to make it *too* hot. When I saw we had broccoli, the first thing to come to mind was making a stew with white sauce, but when I thought back on it, a cold soup or a salad may have been more appropriate.

Oh, well. We plan on having it with the breadfruit—the bread palm tree nut with fried meat.

I separated the Taurus meat into different parts and sliced it to the appropriate thickness based on what my "Cooking" skill taught me, then began cutting it into bite-size pieces. I lightly fried them and tasted them before putting around half of it in a dipping sauce.

I might as well make a lot.

If I kept it in Storage, it wouldn't deteriorate, and I might have ended up giving some to other adventurers, too.

"Mew."

Tama appeared from behind my legs. I warned her not to tell anyone else as I slipped a bit of meat into her mouth, letting her have a taste.

“Deliciouuuus!”

Tama disappeared back into my shadow with a huge smile on her face, before reappearing in the shadow of a monster out on the battlefield. It seemed to be pure luck when she pulled it off in our fight against the sages. However, it seemed she had already mastered moving in the shadows. It seemed to use a lot of MP, so she couldn’t use it a lot.

I broke down the bread palm tree nuts and roasted them, but eventually, my culinary skills helped me work out the best way to prepare them. It smelled like bread. However, it had a springy texture, reminiscent of a roasted sweet potato. The fighting was still going on, so I went on to prepare some shrimp, mushrooms, and vegetables that could go on skewers and be cooked over a grill. They came out more like grilled kebabs than like *yakiniku*, but they looked delicious, so I didn’t mind. Around the time I had set the table and laid out the cutlery, the fighting on the lakeside had stopped.

“Master! Pochi knows, sir! You let Tama have a taste, sir! The truth always hurts, sir!”

It seemed that not even ninja Tama could evade Pochi’s sense of smell. I popped a similar slice of meat into Pochi’s mouth. Her eyes were watery as she held back tears.

“Sorry! Sorry—! Here you go, Pochi.”

“*Chew*, you can’t fool Poch—!”

As soon as the fried meat hit her tongue, Pochi’s expression brightened up.

“*Chom chomp*. The delicious meat has done nothing wrong, sir. I detest crime, but I cannot detest this meat, sir.”

Pochi was trying her hardest to wear a serious expression, but she eventually gave in to relaxing her expression.

“Let’s eat after you’ve all washed your hands.”

Everyone responded enthusiastically and headed off to the bucket we had prepared for washing our hands.

“Just as I thought, grilled beef is so delicious, sir.”

“Shrimp is tasty, tooooo!”

“This part, the tongue, has such a wonderful bite to it. It’s very delicious.”

“The stew is delicious, too, I declare.”

“Broccoli, delicious.”

“Right? The broccoli here is so good! The bread is amazing, too!”

“It has a light, potato-like texture. It could pair well with other dishes.”

Everyone was in good spirits at lunch.

“Lulu’s cooking is delicious, too, but Master’s cooking is just on a different level.”

“I don’t think so. I think it’s on the same level as Lulu’s cooking.”

Though with Lulu’s recent passion for research, I thought she was better than I was at cooking.

“Not at all! I think Arisa is right!”

Lulu surprised us all with an unexpected statement.

“The better I get at cooking, the more I realize just how much attention to detail Master pays when he cooks, and just how close to a miracle it is.”

“I get that, Lulu.”

Liza looked Lulu in the eye as she agreed.

“Liza!”

Both Liza and Lulu gave each other a firm handshake.

“W-what is going on?”

“Huh?”

Both Mia and Arisa struggled to understand Liza’s and Lulu’s reactions, cocking their heads in confusion.

“Master.”

Nana had been eating her meal in silence. She came up and warned me about something.

“Behind.”

I turned to look behind me. I was met with the faces of the adventurers, all drooling.

“Would you like to eat with us?”

Something about how they acted reminded me of Pochi, so I ended up inviting them to join us. We had a lot of food with the grilled meat and barbecue skewers, so it was fine for them to join us. We had enough stew, too. Unfortunately, we didn’t have enough breadfruit to go around, but I wondered if the adventurers would be able to bring some themselves.

“A-are you sure? …Wait. We didn’t come here to scrounge off you guys. We came to say thanks for helping us earlier.”

“Oh, thanks. I’ll gladly join you guys.”

“Same here. I never thought we’d actually get to enjoy a

proper meal here in the labyrinth."

"W-wait!"

A dog man, who seemed to be their representative, had tried to refuse our offer, but the fox man and raccoon man with them had already sat around the grill.

"Pochi will serve, sir! Pochi is a pro at serving, sir!"

"Tama, too!"

Tama and Pochi clacked the tongs together as they spoke, then put huge portions on the wooden plates. The other kids helped out, too, meaning the adventurers didn't have to wait for long. We almost ran out of food.

"I'll help, too."

"I'll give ya a hand."

"Awesome. Give us a hand over here."

The micefolk, who seemed to be porters, also offered to help. They started grilling the meat and vegetables. Thanks to everyone working together, we were able to feed the hungry adventurers without having them wait for too long.

Once they had finished serving everyone, the micefolk were supplied with a huge helping themselves.

"You guys eat, too."

"All right. We allowed to eat the Taurus meat, too?"

"Oui, oooui."

"It looks so delicious. It's my first time having Taurus meat!"

"It's super-duper delicious, sir!"

The micefolks' eyes sparkled with delight, similar to Pochi's and Tama's as they started eating. It seemed they enjoyed it.

"Let's eat some, too. It's cooled down a little, so let's reheat it."

"It's hot here already, so the temperature is fine as it is."

"Hmm, agree."

Just as I thought that grilled meat is best when fresh off the grill, I turned around to meet empty plates. Everyone had already eaten their portions. It looked like they had already eaten their portions around the time the micefolk had offered to help. I grilled more meat and handed it out to those who wanted it.

"I honestly never thought I'd get to eat such delicious food here in the labyrinth."

"Though it's not very adventurer-like, this is nice, too."

"Yeah, you girls are all so lucky."

The adventurers complimented the food as they spoke to the

girls with smiles on their faces.

Hmm?

Liza was unusually silent.

“Everything okay? Did you eat too much?”

“…Master. No, that’s not the case.”

Liza was mumbling. I wondered if she was worried about something.

“If there’s anything you would like me to do, just let me know.”

“No, you’ve done enough. I just…wondered if this is all right. Continuing to have you spoil me like this. I was just doubting myself a little.”

“…Spoil you?”

So that was what Liza was thinking about.

“Yeah, I think I get what you mean.”

Arisa spoke up, agreeing.

“Master supports us all so well, I feel like I’m getting a little soft, due to how helpful it is.”

“Support? All I did was make it so you guys could hunt more easily.”

“Hmm, I don’t know how to put it. It’s always…comfortable? No, not that.”

“You mean we’re in an environment where we can just focus on battle?”

Liza tried to help Arisa articulate her thoughts.

“Yes, exactly that! Usually, we’d have to think about where to rest, what kind of enemies are in an area, and a bunch of other things outside of just hunting efficiently. But Master does all of that for us, so I feel like he spoils us. Right, Liza?”

“…Yeah,” Liza replied, nodding apologetically.

Okay. Now I get what they’re both trying to say.

They did not need to go out of their way and struggle, but they felt as if that sort of struggle may have played a part in their growth.

“I get it. Next time, when it comes to setting up a camp, I’ll just watch over you guys without getting involved.”

“Sorry, Master.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Master.”

“No need to apologize. But don’t suffer in silence, okay? Make sure to let me know if you need help.”

“Hmm, okay.”

“I shall do my best to meet your expectations.”

I made sure to remind Liza to not overdo it. I felt a little upset, but I understood I had to also work to make sure the girls could be independent.

“Meat!”

“Heave-ho! Heave-ho, sir!”

Tama and Pochi were carrying a large cut of meat over. It must have weighed around one ton.

“Master, those adventurers over there finished cutting down the carcass and shared some of the meat with us,” Liza spoke, pointing to a group of adventurers who were carving up a monster’s carcass. Now that lunch had finished, it was time to carve up all the monsters’ carcasses along the lakeside.

“A token of appreciation for earlier!”

“It doesn’t hold a candle to Taurus meat, but you can always sell it for a good price!”

The adventurers waved at us. After having lunch with us, they became a lot more friendly.

“Mew! Mewmewmewmew!”

“What’s wrong?”

Tama’s hair was raised all over. She was restless as she scanned the area. I swiftly opened up the map and locked in on what Tama had sensed.

“Look! On the other side of the mountain!” one of the squirrelfolk porters alerted us. A thick fog had formed suddenly on the other side of the jungle. There was a large silhouette shrouded in the mist. The silhouette itself towered over the trees in the jungle; it was around the same height as a small mountain.

“…A wolf?” mumbled Lulu.

In the mist, I could make out a pure white wolf.

“It’s huge,” Arisa spoke, shocked by what she was seeing.

Pochi hid her White Dragon Egg behind her, tucking her tail between her legs. Tama and Mia hid behind me and clung to my legs. Liza and Nana stepped in front of us as if to protect us, but I could see their hands and legs shaking ever so slightly.



“I-it’s a Divine Beast!”

“Oh, this is the first time I’ve seen one.”

The adventurers struggled to stand up in shock as their voices shook with fear. It was indeed the very race that was often depicted in fantasy works as beings who could rival dragons themselves.

The Divine Beast Fenrir.

“So that’s the real thing. Amazing,” I mumbled unknowingly. Surprisingly, it wasn’t that high-level; it was around the level of a full-grown dragon.

Wait, there’s something else on the display.

Next to where the beast’s level, 62, was written, there was another level, 91, written in brackets. At first, I thought it was hiding its level, but I realized it was suppressing its true strength. As I was investigating its stats, Fenrir silently disappeared to the other side of the mountains.

“…Quick! Aim for the monsters he left behind!”

“Try and hunt as many as you can before the ice melts!”

Half of the adventurers hurried over to where Fenrir first appeared, wearing startled expressions.

“It looks like they’re after the monsters that have been frozen from Fenrir. It won’t be long before they defrost, so if you wanna do the same, don’t get too greedy. Make sure you’re in and out.” One of the adventurers who’d shared meat with us before kindly explained to us what the adventurers were doing.

“We’re gonna head over to the hunting grounds. All the monsters will have run away from the Divine Beast in fear.”

Understandably, it made sense that even the monsters would be shaken to the core by such a presence.

“What’re you all gonna do? Wanna tag along?”

“No, we’re heading to the ‘Castle.’”

“Huh, fair enough. If you’re heading there, you must be confident in your ability. But even so, don’t go pickin’ fights with the Divine Beast, all right?”

“Yes, sir. Pochi won’t do anything silly, sir.”

“Is the Divine Beast strong?”

“Strong’s one way of puttin’ it. When I was a wee lad, I saw it dukin’ it out with a large treelike creature that was bigger than a mountain, but I knew that was somethin’ that us folk shouldn’t be stickin’ our noses in. It pried a mountain out of the ground!”

I wished I could have seen that fight. It was probably around ten years ago, considering the adventurers' ages. Or maybe even earlier than that.

"Does that large treelike monster appear often?"

"Nah, that was just a one-off, as the Divine Beast finished it off. Come to think of it, after that, we didn't see the Divine Beast for years. I wonder if it was a close one for it."

I wondered if it was fighting with the dungeonmaster of this labyrinth to protect the city.

"Is the Divine Beast a kind of divine protector or something?"

"Yeah, guess you could say that. It's never made an attempt to attack the city, but when it's on the move, it doesn't really pay attention to where its feet are steppin', so you gotta be careful." The adventurer told us a lot about the Divine Beast before being hurried off by his group.

◆

"I can see it! Isn't that it over there?"

From a high point in the jungle, we could work out a spire in the distance.

"Lots of cooows," Tama reported, returning from her small scouting trip.

"Lots? Please give us a more accurate number."

"Sixty-four cows. Two with shields, three with axes, one with a staff. One of the ax ones is wearing a lot of armor and looks suuuper strong."

According to my map, Tama had come across a small unit of Tauruses being led by a Taurus leader, the one in the heavy armor. Their unit was made up of Taurus shielders, Taurus fighters, and Taurus shamans.

"So this is the group the adventurers warned us about. Arisa, what do you think?"

"Can't we just do what we always do? Nana can hold off their attacks while Tama and Pochi can confuse the ones holding the shields. Liza can cut through them, then Lulu can shoot for the one holding the staff, then Mia and I can just offer support."

Liza gave an okay, and the rest of the group nodded in agreement.

"…Let's go."

Liza shot ahead, diving into the distorted space. Nana and I then followed shortly after.

BZUUMZOOO.

The Taurus before us bellowed out.

“Olé, I declare. With them being bulls, they’ll probably charge toward me, I suggest,” Nana shouted as she used her “Provoke” skill. The Tauruses began their charge toward us.

BZUMZOOBZUMZOO!

The leader of the Tauruses bellowed as all the Tauruses stopped their charge. The Tauruses wielding shields came to the front line and fell into a line as they proceeded with their attack.

“He even has a ‘Command’ skill. What nerve. Mia, keep the leader in check with Sylph.”

“Hmm, got it. Go.”

Swoosh.

The small sylph flew up into the air like an unmanned robot from a certain robot-themed anime.

“…Haaah!” Liza let out a triumphant shout as her spear punctured the shielder’s flank.

BZUMZOO.

In an unexpected yet smart move, the shielder swung his shield around to his flank. However, Liza was a lot faster as she then pierced the shielder’s neck with her spear. The shielder was wearing heavy-duty armor, but it was no match for Liza’s Magic Spear, Douma. It cut through the armor like paper.

“Akileez Hunteeeer!”

“One-stroke kill, sir!”

Tama stayed low as she snuck up behind the Taurus and slashed at its ankles, whereas Pochi snuck up behind the fighter and hacked at his ankles. Tama had cut deep enough to make it bleed, whereas Pochi had put a lot more power into it and had cut the Taurus’s ankle off. It seemed Pochi was the stronger of the two when it came to pure combat skill. I wondered if it was because Pochi learned her techniques from a samurai general.

“Aim…and fire!” As soon as Lulu fired, her Fireburst Gun flew right over to the shaman’s head.

BZUMZOO.

The other shielder attacked Nana with a “Shield Bash” attack.

“Time to return the ‘Shield Bash’ favor, I declare.” Nana took the Taurus’s “Shield Bash” attack on the chin as she prepared

her large shield, jumped up on top of it, and sent it flying toward the Taurus.

"…Deracinator!"

Arisa used her Space Magic to intercept the shield that hurtled toward the back line.

"Lulu!"

"Fire!"

Lulu's Fireburst Gun had finished recharging. She aimed it toward the defenseless shielder's back and shot.

"'Helix Spear Attack'!"

BZUMZOOBBBBBZ!

Liza attacked with her special attack, defeating the Taurus's leader. The remaining fighters also dropped one by one on the front line.

"They're a bit more resilient than just fighting one alone, but they didn't cause any issues."

"Are they stronger together?"

"Really, sir? Pochi didn't notice any difference."

"Tama is right. The leader had an ability that strengthened those around him." Arisa went on to explain the "Strengthening" ability the leader had to the group.

"While I don't know how much stronger it made them, they weren't particularly difficult to hunt," Liza responded.

Tama had already begun collecting the remains of the Taurus when her ears pointed up.

"Mew! Enemies are coming."

BZUUMZOOOO.

Accompanied by a bellow, a large Taurus that was around two times the size of the one they'd fought previously dropped down in front of them. It was holding two large axes in either hand—both were two types of Magic Ax.

"This guy's powerful! He's a level-forty-one Taurus champion! He mostly focuses on melee combat, but he has several special skills, so be careful!"

"He's a servant of the areamaster."

"We can handle one of them, I declare."

Arisa informed everyone about what they were facing as they all readied for battle.

"Small sylph, restrain."

Swoosh.

The small sylph followed Mia's commands and began to

gather in front of the champion's face.

BZUUMZOOOO.

The Taurus champion bellowed as he frantically wiped the sylph from his face, before then sending the sylph back in a streak of light as he used a special spinning move.

"Hhm."

Mia readied another spell. This time, it wasn't Spirit Magic but a movement-stopping Water Magic spell.

"You're to face me, I declare!" Nana yelled as she fired off another "Provoke" skill, locking the champion's attention on her.

"Akileez Hunter!"

"Pochi will attack from the other side, sir!"

BZUUMZOOOO.

Pochi was pushed back by the champion's tail as he kicked, blocking Tama's attack.

"Not bad."

BZUMZOOOO.

Liza's spear clashed with the champion's ax. There was a spark of red light as the two struggled against each other.

BZUMZOO.

Realizing the disadvantageous position he was in, the champion retracted his ax and stepped back from Liza and Nana, creating some distance between them.

"Aim…and fire!"

BZUMZOO.

The champion intercepted the bullet shot from Lulu's Fireburst Gun with his ax. Although he had intercepted the shot, it still found its way to its target, leaving a hole in his right shoulder.

"I'll latch onto his ankle!" Arisa yelled as she used her "Helix Spear Attack" on the champion's ankle, making him lose his balance.

"Sneak, sneak."

A large black whip appeared from the champion's shadow, pulling him down.

"…Entangling Aqua."

Mia used Debuffing Magic to take advantage of the position the champion was in and entangle him further.

"*Blast Armor*, I declare!"

Nana's spell blasted through the champion's armor.

“*Vanquish Slicer*, sir!”

Using a quick-draw sword technique, Pochi’s strike cleaved the champion in two.

“Now for the finishing strike—‘Helix Spear Attack.’”

BZUMZOOBBBBZ.

Liza’s special attack collided with the champion’s mouth, and the aftereffects of Liza’s “Helix Spear Attack” ricocheted through the champion’s head, exploding it into several parts.

“He was a bit more resilient, but it didn’t cause any issues.”

“You’re right. If we bump into any more Taurus units, let’s focus on our formation.” Arisa and Liza began talking about the battle, while the others from the group began looting the corpse and taking the two axes.

The axes were made out of horns and bone and seemed to be enchanted. They could be used like normal Magic Axes, and they had a good amount of attack power, so we decided to take them with us. It would be an issue if the other Taurus picked it up and used it.

◆

After that, we continued progressing through the labyrinth, often coming up against other groups of Tauruses with leaders. However, we eventually reached the “Castle” and were able to view it in all its glory.

“…It’s pretty big.”

“Is it a ciiiiity?”

“You mean like a Taurus city?”

“Yesh.”

I listened to the group’s conversation with a smile on my face as I checked out the new area on my map. I used the magic skill “Search Entire Map,” which revealed the entirety of the Castle.

“It seems the area the outer wall is covering is around the size of a city.”

There were wide fields within the walls, and outside the inner wall, there was a residential area in a belt-like shape that covered around one hundred yards. It resembled a maze. The normal Tauruses inhabited the belt-shaped residential area, and the small units of Tauruses that were led by leaders were patrolling the residential areas.

Outside the residential areas, there were large fields that were patrolled by Champion Tauruses and various other types of Tauruses. Several Taurus riders rode on ancient land beasts that resembled raptors. There were Taurus pig hunters, too, that were luring in groups of creatures known as “Big Hogs.”

“Are there any adventurers?”

“…There are. There are some making camp in a fortress-like building and doing some hunting.”

There were various-size fortress-type buildings in the field, and there seemed to be around ten to twenty adventurers holed up in them. Including the hunters who were hunting nearby, there were around thirty to fifty in total. In each of the camps, there were more than six high-level golden lion–rank adventurers. There were a lot of silver tiger–rank adventurers, as well as magic and bow users, too. It seemed the melee fighters were mainly supporting the golden lion–rank adventurers. A good sign that this place had a higher difficulty level.

“Whoa, so in that case, shouldn’t we look for a base like that?”

“In that case, I know a good one—”

“Wait a moment, Master.”

I was about to tell them about a camp nearby that was currently owned by thirty-four champions, but Liza asked me to wait.

“Leave it to us this time,” Liza said.

“Ah, sorry, Liza. That’s right, I almost just got caught up and let Master do everything for us again.

The group did say they wanted to experience a lot of different things to gain more experience.

“All right. I’ll leave setting up camp to you.”

As I spoke, Liza apologized again before Arisa outlined their plan. In summary, Mia would use her spirits to search the area, Arisa would use her Space Magic, and Tama would help with her scouting abilities. Once they found a suitable location, they would then set up camp there.

“All right, let’s get going!”

Everyone set off on Arisa’s cue. There were broken gates all around the wall, but as they were far away, we instead snuck in through a gap in the wall.

“It’s so biiiig.”

“Compared to the outside, it feels like a farm here, sir.”

“There aren’t many trees, but there’s a lot of ferns and vines. Some are even waist-height.”

The young beastfolk girls climbed a nearby bush and looked around at their surroundings.

“I can see a structure in the direction of three o’clock. I guess that’s a fortress,” Liza spoke, spotting the fortress with the telescope she had.

“It looks like someone’s fighting.”

“Championoon?”

“They look like they’re struggling, sir.”

“Wait, it’s fine.”

I stopped Tama and Pochi, who were about to spring into action. It was difficult to see from where we were, but there were several golden lion–ranked adventurers bearing shields protecting them from a vicious attack from the Champion Taurus.

“Let’s get a little closer and observe.”

“Hmm, agreed.”

Prompted by Arisa and Mia, we moved a little closer to where the adventurers were fighting when we found several other adventurers hidden among the shrubbery, preparing something.

“A traaap?”

“Is it a trap, sir?”

Tama and Pochi spotted a net hidden in the grass as it shot up and captured the Champion Taurus.

“Mew?”

“They’ve begun their escape, I declare.”

Just as Nana had mentioned it, the adventurers all began to sprint toward the fortress without even looking behind them. The champion gave up on trying to rip the net and instead chased after them with the net on him.

“Ooops?”

“Mr. Champion fell into a trap, sir.”

The pitfall only went up to the champion’s knee, but it restricted his movement and caused him to fall. The adventurers had managed to successfully escape to the fortress. As soon as they had escaped inside, several walls came down to cover the fortress. It seemed they had a Magic Furnace and barriers set up to protect their camp within the fortress.

BZUUMZOOOO.

The champion bellowed as he swung down for an attack. However, he was blocked by the barriers and was unable to cling to the fortress. Even so, the champion was tenacious, and he continued to slam the fortress barriers with his ax.

"Master, the wall will break—"

"It's fine. They have barriers inside, too," I responded.

As long as the Magic Core within the Magic Furnace didn't burn out, the barriers around the fortress would stay firm, and there would be no issue for the adventurers within the fortress.

BZUMZOO.

"The champion doesn't know when to give up."

"Are the adventurers not going to launch a counterattack?"

"They probably think it's too risky taking on a monster class like that," I responded to Lulu's question. Liza, upon hearing my answer, began to channel magic into her spear.

"Master, if they don't fight, then it shouldn't be an issue if we take over for them, right?"

"I see no issue with it."

Using the Space Magic spell Clairaudience, I confirmed that the adventurers within the fortress were hoping that the champion would just hurry up and leave them. They were also irritated at having to use up the Magic Furnace, too.

"Lulu, snipe the champion and have him come over here, please."

"Understood!"

Lulu's Fireburst Gun smashed into the back of the champion's head, causing a small explosion. The champion was sturdy enough that the explosion didn't break through his armor, but it was successful in redirecting the champion's ire from the fortress and toward our group.

"…Nana."

"Yes, Liza. You might be a champion of Taurus, but you're also the champion of *sukiyaki* ingredients. You'll be delicious, I declare," Nana spoke, provoking the monster.

"*Sukiyaki* is deliciooous!"

"Pochi loves *sukiyaki*, sir!"

Both Tama and Pochi drooled, with sparkles in their eyes, in response to Nana's taunt.

BZUUMZOOOO.

The champion bellowed bravely as he raced over to attack.

However, he was unable to match the tumultuous level of the group, who had been buffed by their appetite. It took them less time to take him down compared to last time. The champion had two axes, but they were different from the axes we picked up before—these weren't magic.

"Someone is coming."

"It looks like a representative from the adventurers in the fortress."

The adventurers had gathered together to watch the girls fighting the beast from atop the fortress.

"I'm a golden tiger–rank adventurer named Tiga. I'm the leader of the Divine Beast Devourers," said the very macho lionfolk man as he shook my hand. I heard Arisa mumble something behind me.

"He's a lion, but he's called 'Tiger'?" Arisa cocked her head in confusion, but I thought that the word just sounded similar to the German pronunciation of *tiger*.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Satou from the silver tiger–rank Pendragon group."

"…Silver tiger?"

"Yes, we registered not too long ago. Up until recently, we were exploring the Celivera Labyrinth in the Shiga Kingdom."

"Huh, you started in the world's oldest labyrinth, eh? Now I understand why you all dealt with that champion like he was putty in your hands," the lion man spoke, seemingly impressed.

"So, this your first time in the Castle?"

"Yes. We actually didn't even know this area was known as the 'Castle,' in fact."

"…Huh. In that case, a word of advice. Don't go near the inner wall of the Castle. Don't go near the inner wall even when hunting the Tauruses in the inner maze. It's not common, but sometimes there's a crest-bearer patrolling around there. He's a lot more dangerous than the armored guys."

Although I didn't understand what the lion man was referencing, I had managed to work out that the armored guys were the Taurus leaders, whereas a crest-bearer was a Taurus captain.

"So the armored guys strengthen the Tauruses workin' under them, right? The crest-bearers have a similar skill, except it

doubles the effects of the armored guys' skills. If you bump into one of them outside, you want to focus on getting rid of their leader first."

A monster that got stronger when it was in a group.

"I don't often see them outside the inner wall lately, so it should be fine, but it never hurts to be careful."

According to the information on my map, in the innermost area of the Castle, there were Taurus generals and lords, and they had a different kind of strengthening skill from the Taurus leaders and captains. If their skill further strengthened the effects of the others' skills, then they would make for a problematic group of enemies.

"Though it goes without saying, don't go near the inner wall gate, either. Don't even bother going within a distance where you can see it. Their snipers and archers will shoot your head right off your shoulders."

Lulu's eyes lit up at the mention of snipers. I wondered if she had gotten excited at the idea of a rival.

"If arrows are an issue, can't we just take a shield and block them that way?"

"Well, they're not the most dangerous thing here. If you're noticed at the gate, an elite team of crest-bearers will turn up. While you're busy dealing with them, another unit led by a Taurus *shogun* will come out and overwhelm you with their numbers."

"Sounds like a challenge."

"Hey! The gal with the scales! Don't be thinkin' you can take them on. Once the *shogun* appears, it'll bring the rest of them out, and they'll start attacking the fortresses nearby. That's why I don't let just anyone go marching in for a challenge."

I understood what he meant. If we ended up facing a big group of them, it would be different from fighting a champion and just staying holed up in the fortress and letting the situation get worse and worse.

The lion man went on to tell us about other enemies we needed to be careful around, as well as advised us that it was better to catch a Big Hog alive, as it would sell for a better price.

"Next time, tell me some stories about the Celivera Labyrinth over a few drinks."

"I would love to. You'll have to tell me some stories about your experience in the Jungle Labyrinth, too."

“All right, until next time! May you walk in the protection of the Great Sorceress!”

I exchanged pleasantries with the lion man, and we went back to looking for a place to set up base.

◆

“Tama is waving the flag, sir! All the archers are defeated, sir!”

Tama, who had snuck into the fortress that was controlled by the Tauruses, gave us the signal. The archers in the fortress had all been sniped one by one by Lulu. However, it was Tama who took out the last one who was hiding behind a barricade.

“Arisa, Gate Magic.”

Arisa used her Space Magic spell Portal Door and made a tunnel that linked toward the upper part of the fortress.

“Off I go.”

“Yes, Liza.”

“Roger, sir!”

The front line went through the portal created by Arisa and arrived in the fortress.

“Gate.”

They opened the gate to the fortress and were immediately met with a small group of Tauruses.

“Aim…and fire!”

“…‘Entangling Aqua.’”

Lulu aimed for the feet of the Tauruses and sniped at them, causing them to fall, and then Mia trapped them on the ground.

“Wawee-ho?”

“Tally-ho, sir!”

After taking over the fortress, Tama and Pochi both jumped down and dealt the final blows to the Tauruses that were struggling on the ground. The two were followed by Liza and Nana, who had returned from fighting at the front gate.

“Good work. Was it a little different fighting indoors?”

“Not really. Inside such a small space, the Taurus was simply a huge target.”

“Was there only one inside?”

“Yes. According to Tama’s scouting, there should have been two, so I guess the other one was outside?”

…Right answer.

I gave her an internal round of applause.

“Let’s hurry up and get inside. Mia, are you able to summon an Earth-type spirit?”

“Hmm. Genomos.”

“You can do it after we’ve gone inside, but could you make a trench around the fortress?”

“Of course,” Mia spoke, lightly tapping herself on the chest as she began reciting a long spell. After Arisa used an instant-cast Detection spell with her Space Magic, she then looked at Tama.

“Do you have any proximity-sensing ninjutsu or anything?”

“Wooden clappeeeers?”

“Oh, right. You have wooden clappers. Can you set them up?”

“Leave it to meee?”

“Pochi will help, too, sir!”

“Here we goooo!”

Tama and Pochi leaped from the fortress.

“No need to be super precise with it! Make sure to get back before the Taurus that’s outside does!”

“Aye-aye, cap’n?”

“Roger, sir!”

Once Arisa finished warning Tama and Pochi, she then went on to give out orders to the others.

“Lulu, could you go check out the water sources? I made sure there were no monsters, but there might still be some small bugs and animals hanging around, so be careful.”

“Sure, okay.”

“Liza, Nana, could you take care of the Tauruses’ remains?”

“We’ve already taken care of that.”

“Ooh, good job!”

“…‘Create Genomos.’”

Mia created a spirit made from the stones in the fortress—though the spirit was a young girl wearing a dress made from stone.

“Arisa.”

“Oh, it’s my first time seeing her. All right, could I ask you to make a moat around the fortress?”

“Hmm. Do it.”

The genomos responded with a rumble as the ground trembled under its weight as it headed outside the fortress. I was a little curious, so I followed Mia and the genomos outside and watched it get to work.

“You’re a pro with Earth Magic, huh?”

“Yes.”

The genomos carved its way through the hard ground that was filled with grass roots, then used the leftover soil to make a small wall.

“Did you order it to do that, too, Mia?”

“Hmm. Telepathically,” Mia responded with a smug expression and a thumbs-up. It was cute. I headed down to the bottom of the fortress right around the time Pochi and Tama returned from setting up the wooden clappers.

“I’m hooome.”

“We’re back, sir.”

“Welcome back. Liza, drop the gate.”

Liza operated the hoist and lowered the wooden gate. It was covered with a metal lattice.

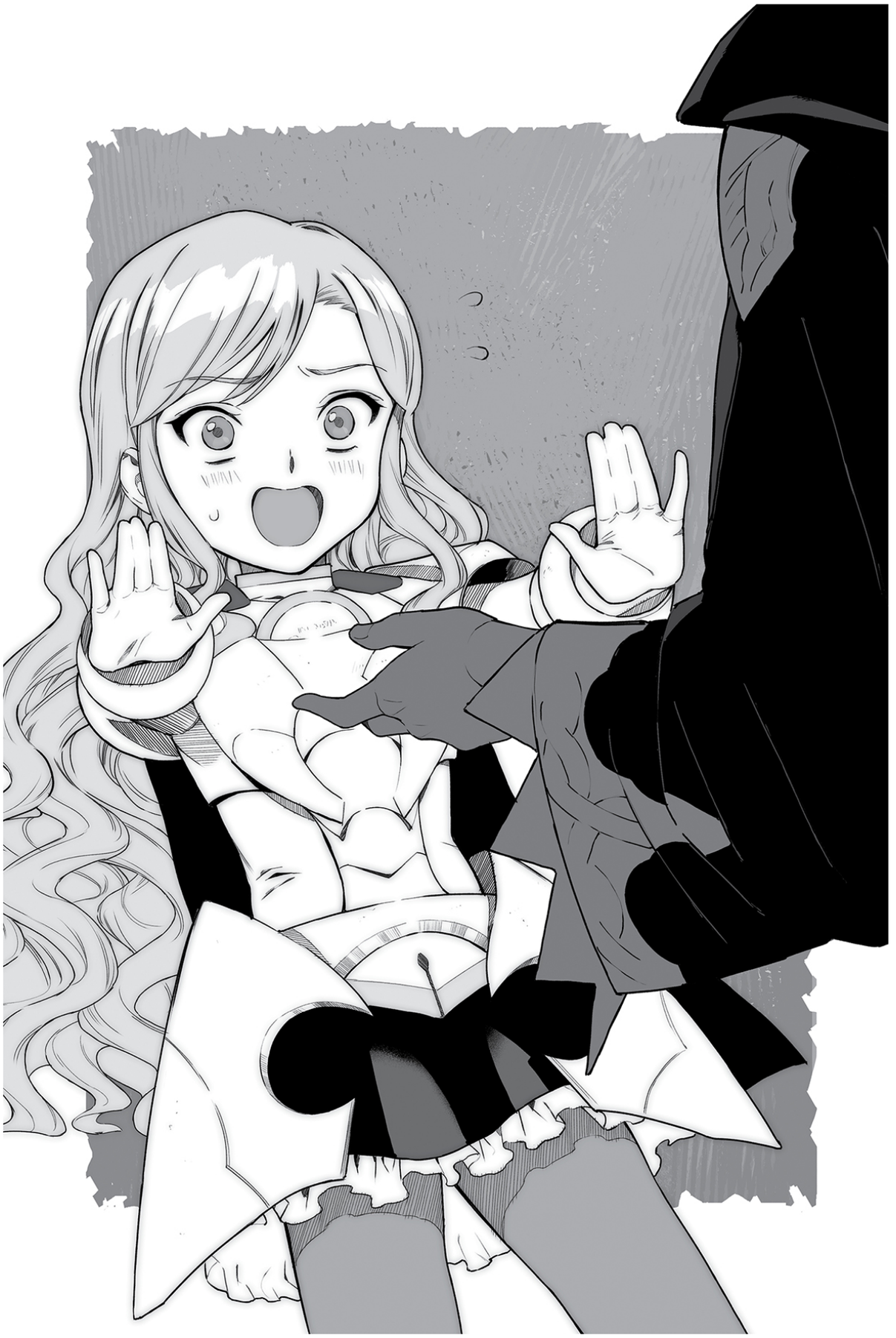
“I got rid of all the dust inside with some Space Magic, so make sure to put all of the furniture outside. You can just throw it all on the second floor from one of the rooms, out the window. Just make sure there’s no one below the window when you do it.” Arisa said something wholly unexpected. Apparently, she’d learned how to renovate old houses on a video streaming site.

“Anything flammable I can dispose of with Fire Magic. Cinders, or anything that can’t be set on fire, can be put in the hole the genomos dug for us and buried.”

Usually, I would just put it into Storage, but it seemed they wanted to do this, too, all by themselves.

“As I thought, it’s a lot quicker when you’re at a higher level. On the video, it took them, like, a year, even though there wasn’t a lot to do.”

Once the genomos had finished making a moat around the fortress, most of the junk from inside the fortress had been put into the courtyard. During that time, the champion that had made its way outside had returned. We were notified about it earlier, thanks to the wooden clappers. A combination of Lulu’s sniping and Arisa’s high-level Fire Magic meant that it was defeated before it even got near us.



I could still remember the image of the young beastfolk girls looking defeated before the charred remains of the champion, sadly whispering "*Meaat*..." to themselves. I decided that when the other champion returned, I'd make sure we didn't use Fire Magic.

"Do we not need beds and a bucket to bathe with?"

"We'll get those when we next go to Arcatia. For now, we'll just use the bedding we have in the Fairy Pack. We don't have a shower, but we do have Mia's Water Magic."

"Hmm, 'Bubble Wash.'" Mia offered one of her magic spells that hadn't seen much use lately.

"What about food and condiments?" I asked.

"That's all fine. Lulu has plenty in her Fairy Pack, and we can gather plenty of meat ourselves. We can stay here for a week or two and level up."

Arisa and the others were determined to go it alone.

"Okay. I won't get involved, but make sure to be careful."

"Leave it to us!" Arisa said as she tapped herself on the chest, wearing a confident expression. I made her promise that if she needed any help, she'd let me know immediately, and I set off for the fortress city of Arcatia on my own.

I felt like a father whose children had flown the nest. I felt a little lonely, but I knew I had to tough it out and look forward to seeing how they would improve.

Hero’s Rest

Satou here. I worked at a drugstore once. The most difficult part about it wasn’t managing the storage of important items or working on the cash register, it was actually dealing with complaints. Though, they were pretty rare.

“Give me ten days’ worth of dry meat.” A regular customer ordered with a clink of copper coins as he spread them on the counter. It had been three days since I’d left the others at the fortress. I spent most of the time fixing up our living quarters and working at Hero’s Rest as a shopkeeper.

“You know, it’s not good to only eat meat all the time,” I advised the customer.

“Really? In that case, I’ll take ten of those disgusting preserved foods, too.”

“Are they really that bad?”

“Sure are. They’re bitter, and they have a weird texture when you’re eating them. If I could boil it, I’d put them in a soup and dump a lot of salt in to hide the flavor, but I can’t really do that in the Jungle Labyrinth, or I’ll soon be surrounded by monsters.”

Huh, I didn’t know they were that bad. I had an idea that the monsters in the labyrinth had a strong sense of smell.

“I can eat the preserved foods from Ussha Company, but they cost more than three times the amount they do here or at the guild. I just wish they were cheap and delicious.”

“If I can find some time, I’ll do some research into making even tastier preserved foods.”

“That’d be great, young lad. Make sure to earn lots of money and let Roro and the others take it easy, eh?” said the regular bear man customer before he left the shop.

“Are they really that disgusting…?”

“Want to try one?” Roro asked me. She looked like a child trying to play a trick on me.

“I guess I’ll give it a shot. I can’t improve the flavor if I don’t know what I’m working with.”

I immediately regretted it.

It wasn’t *that* different from the bread with gabo fruit I’d had in Seiryuu City or the nilbok I’d had in Parion. The preserved foods here were better than those by a slight margin, but it’d be rough eating these all the time.

“It’s not good, right? Since it’s so humid in the Jungle Labyrinth, normal preserved foods spoil quickly and end up attracting bugs, apparently.”

“I see…”

I made a joke to Roro about how any adventurer worth his salt would simply eat the bug along with it. However, she shot right back, telling me that if they don’t chew it properly, the bug starts flapping around in their stomachs, causing them pain—she told me this with a straight face. I didn’t know how to respond.

If anything, I knew I had to come up with a delicious equivalent. Of course, it was paramount that I made it from goods one could get here in Arcatia. As I was lost in thought, someone entered through the shop door. I wondered what kind of customer this would be…

“Stay back.”

I noticed immediately that it was a skeleton, so I moved in front of Roro, protecting her.

“Uhm,” Roro squeaked out.

…Uhm?

I felt something soft touch my hand, so I immediately moved it away. I wasn’t about to get lucky with Roro holding my hand while I was trying to protect her.

“It’s fine, Satou.”

Roro moved from underneath my arm and headed over to the skeleton.

“Thank you for delivering this. Please put it over there. I’ve left a receipt in the basket.”

I had a closer look at the skeleton and noticed he was carrying items, which reminded me that here in Arcatia, the skeletons were put to work by the necromancers. The skeleton took the receipt from Roro, made a motion like he was bowing, and then left.

“Wah!”

“Huah!”

“Ahhh!”

I could hear the small hamsterfolk girls’ yelps of panic coming from the storage room.

“Huh? They should be out weeding the garden.”

Roro and I headed into the storage room to see what was happening, when we found the hamsterfolk children buried under a pile of items.

“Oh no! How did this even happen—?”

I helped Roro rescue the children. As we cleared the items, the cause behind the situation became clear. The basket of evil broccoli—which was on top of the bookcase—was buried along with the hamster children. The youngest of the three was holding it in their hands, meaning we could guess what had happened.

“Didn’t I say you’re not allowed to sneak food?”

“Sorry, Roro.”

“Misunderstanding, Roro.”

“Not allowed to eat them, Roro?”

The three hamster children apologized, tried to fool us, and then straight up begged to have it. The broccoli was presented to them as a souvenir, and it seemed the three hamster girls enjoyed it.

“Hello, is Roro here?”

We heard a voice come from the front of the store. It seemed we had a customer.

“I’m here! I’ll be right with you!” Roro responded, running out to meet the customer. I cleaned up the storage room with the hamster girls and headed to the front of the store. It was someone I knew.

…Why is she here?

“Satou, I’ll introduce you. This is Tia, a regular here. She often places large orders with us.”

“W-wait a sec, Roro. Who’s this? When did you get a humanfolk lover boy?”

“Y-you’ve got the wrong idea! Satou is staying in the basement under the store and helping out here.”

“Staying in the basement? So you’re living together?” Tia responded, her remarks dripping with romantic fantasies. Considering her age, she might have been someone who enjoyed such lovey-dovey tales.

“It’s not just me staying here; my friends are, too.”

“What’s that? And here’s me thinking Roro finally struck out. Nice to meet you… Satou, was it?”

“Satou, Tia is simply amazing! She’s a pupil of the Great Sorceress!”

“Oh, is that so? That’s amazing.”

I realized that Roro wasn’t aware of Tia’s *true* identity. I had no intention of exposing her, so I just kept quiet. Even so, it was a classic example of a trope from a period drama or a light novel. I just never thought I’d see it play out in real life.

“So, what’s the Great Sorceress like, Tia?”

“A stubborn old woman. She’s always working her pupils to the bone.”

“Agh! Tia! You’re always so negative. Satou, the Great Sorceress is an almost goddess-like woman who has looked after Arcatia for hundreds of years. I’ve never met her, but I’m absolutely sure she’s a wonderful, graceful woman!”

Roro insisted. However, Tia was making an array of incredible expressions as she did so.

“Tia, your face looks a little red, but—”

“Ah, red? N-not at all. It’s not red at all!”

Tia seemed visibly uncomfortable.

“He’s right! You are a little red. Do you have a fever or something?”

“That’s it! A fever! I’ve had a fever since this morning.” Tia jumped right on Roro’s explanation and used that as an excuse.

“No, woodland colds are going around lately, but make sure to look after yourself!”

“Yeah, it’s all right. I’ll make sure to rest properly.” Tia looked a little guilty. Roro genuinely cared for her well-being.

“That reminds me, I forgot to ask you if you needed anything. Or are you all done for today?”

“If I need anything?”

In response to my clutch save, Tia simply looked at me with a blank expression.

“…Oh, right, yes. Is Seiko here? She did a fine job making some magic medicine before, so I came to offer my compliments. Even though I’m only a temporary teacher who gave her a few pointers, I feel it’s good to offer compliments where I can aid my pupil’s growth.”

Seiko was the horsefolk woman who led me to meet Roro.

“Uhm, Seiko actually quit. She was headhunted by some big company.”

“Really? Well, as long as she quit after she finished her orders, at the very least seeing out her duty—”

Tia could tell what happened from Roro’s expression alone.

“Don’t tell me she left during an order?”

“Yeah. Well, it wasn’t even *during* an order. She left before she even began…”

“Good timing, I guess. It was a pretty tight deadline, huh?” Tia spoke, looking at Roro with a concerned expression.

…Huh? Didn’t Roro say it was a new customer?

Roro hadn’t noticed it, but it seemed Tia had helped get Roro that customer.

“Satou and his friends helped with the order.”

“Oh wow, aren’t you wonderful?” Tia’s eyes glinted in the light. “Did Seiko leave a recipe?”

“No, there were only fragments and scribbles left.”

“And yet you still made it? Here, take this,” Tia said as she took a small book out of her Item Box.

“Is this a recipe book?”

“Yeah. It has recipes that are only made public to the Alchemy Guild, so you should have no trouble only using it here,” Tia explained.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. I’ll have you work for me as payment.” Tia smirked as she produced a large amount of order slips.

Roro cried out in despair when she saw the number of orders, but it was no problem for me. While the timing was tight, the rewards matched it. All of the materials were sold in Arcatia, too. If I didn’t want to buy them, I could just gather them in the labyrinth.

“So? Think you can handle that?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

“Aren’t you confident? Well, I will be waiting.”

Roro was frozen with surprise, yet she yelled out for Tia to wait, only for it to be ignored as Tia left the store. I spent some time consoling the teary-eyed Roro, then finished up Tia’s orders with zero issue. I spent some time buying all the materials, but there were hints hidden in the recipe book about having a bigger output, so I had an easy time crafting them. By the end of it, Roro and the hamsterfolk children were pale in

the face with exhaustion, but along with the very helpful recipe book, and having received the funds to make it, I thought it was a good order.

I knew I would be free in the coming days, so I decided to tackle researching how to make delicious preserved foods.

◆

"There's so much monster material here."

"Arcatia does have Woodland Labyrinth at its center."

A day after we finished the order, Roro and I went to the Arcatia marketplace together. Hero's Rest was temporarily closed, but customers rarely came around this time, so it seemed to be fine. Plus, we had the hamsterfolk girls looking after the place while we were gone. I checked on them using Clairvoyance—they were sleeping peacefully under the cool shade of a tree.

"There's your usual vegetables and fruits inside, but they're so expensive, they're not something we ordinary people can buy."

Magical food products were incredibly cheap, yet normal fruits and vegetables were expensive. Even their dried versions cost around five times more, and getting them fresh would cost ten times that amount. They probably cost a lot to transport, so it made sense—it was a high-risk high-reward situation.

"In that case, we'll have to make our new preserved foods using magic-infused materials."

"Okay!"

Roro smiled as she went on to explain the taste of foods and how to use them. It felt like I was spending time with Lulu. My friends had been at the camp in the fortress for around five days now. They said they would give it another day and then head back. We contacted one another every morning, afternoon, and evening. They were pretty ecstatic, claiming they felt they had gained a few levels.

…Hmm?

I noticed something in my field of view, so I took a glance around.

…There. I know that face.

It was the young wolf man we'd seen before who was

hunting monsters—the one Ms. Tia called “Fen.” However, he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at Roro. I wondered if he was a stalker. He seemed to notice me looking at him, and he quickly diverted his gaze before disappearing into a crowd of people.

“Is something wrong?” Roro asked.

“No, I’m just a little worried about people getting miasma sickness from eating magic-infused food items—” I didn’t want to worry Roro, so I quickly came up with an excuse.

“The ones here in the market are fine. They only put them out to sell after they’ve been stored in the Purification Storage that the Great Sorceress made. No matter how cheap it is, don’t go buying stuff on the black market instead, okay?”

I checked the items being sold on the market, and sure enough, none of them were tinged with miasma. I was relieved we didn’t have to worry about miasma poisoning, at least.

“So the food here in Arcatia is supplied safely, thanks to the Great Sorceress, huh?” I inquired.

“Hee-hee-hee. Not just food, but water, too. The water we gather from wells is filled with miasma. If you drink that, you’ll either have a sore stomach or end up sick.” Roro giggled.

It seemed the Great Sorceress took care of all their necessary needs. She put up a barrier that stopped monsters from getting in, too. I guessed that was why they were able to have a city within a labyrinth.

“So is there some sort of water Purification Storage or something?”

“There is. It’s the reason why Arcatia has so many towers. We call them ‘clean water towers.’”

So that’s why there are so many towers here.

“Ah, Mr. Satou! Look here!” Roro found something in an open-air stall and ran over with it.

“This is a vegetable called ‘gobo potato.’ You have to really cook it to get rid of its bitter taste, but it’s got a nice texture and is pretty cheap,” Roro explained as she picked up a thin black vegetable.

“All right, let’s buy it.”

We ended up buying a lot of Roro’s recommended food items and seasonings without paying much attention to their prices. Even if we used only a little bit of the more expensive items, we should have been able to get by without raising the prices too

much.

“I can taste a smooth-skin on the air!”

I turned around in the direction of the jeers and saw a group of otterfolk adventurers kicking an old human man.

“Stop! Have some pity for the elderly!”

“Useless smooth-skins need to stay silent!”

A female adventurer wearing a helmet adorned with sheep horns intervened.

“Ms. Nona!” Roro recognized the adventurer.

“Is she a friend of yours?” I asked.

“Yeah, she’s a regular at the store.”

“Gyah!”

“Ms. Nona!”

The female adventurer—Ms. Nona—jumped between the old man and the otterfolk adventurers, taking the blow instead. I didn’t know if it was due to a difference in their level or not, but Ms. Nona seemed weak.

“Heh, bargin’ in, even though she’s weak.”

“You’re fired, smooth-skin. Don’t ever show your face around us again.” The otterfolk adventurers kicked the old man again, laughing out loud. It seemed they were in the same party as he was.

“Ms. Nona! Ms. Nona, are you all right?”

I poured some magic potion into Ms. Nona’s throat, deciding to intervene in the troublesome situation.

“She’s fine.” I handed Ms. Nona over to the worried Roro.

“…Hmph. Outta the way.”

I heard a somber voice say this as the otterfolk, who were beating up the old man, flew through the air. The culprit for this was the young wolf man who’d disappeared into the crowd earlier: Fen.

“The hell you doin’?!”

“You working with the smooth-skins?!”

The otterfolk men threw around such labels in an attempt to get others on their side, but there was no point in trying that in front of such a strong character as Fen.

“You make me sick. Disappear.” Fen hadn’t used any threatening magic or anything, but his threatening presence was so strong that the otterfolk men went into a panic and stumbled over themselves as they tried to scurry off together.

“…Hmph.”

Fen then came over to where we were standing.

“No need to cry. Are you injured?” Fen asked Roro.

“N-no, I’m fine.”

“I see.” Satisfied that Roro was safe, I noticed that for a slight moment, Fen shot Roro a kind look before leaving. I wondered if he’d heard Roro’s concerned scream for Ms. Nona and had come running over.

◆

“Mr. Satou, want me to take over?”

“It’s fine. I’m quite strong, despite how I look.”

Not wanting to leave the unconscious Ms. Nona, we stopped our shopping trip for the day and headed back to Hero’s Rest. I was carrying Ms. Nona on my back.

“Roro, looks like there’s a customer.”

In front of Hero’s Rest, there stood a lizardfolk lady.

“Mr. Satou, this is your first time meeting them, right? This is the owner of the candle store. They supply us with candles.” Roro introduced them.

They weren’t carrying anything with them, so they weren’t delivering anything, so I wondered if they were going door-to-door and taking orders, or here to pick up a payment.

“Hello, miss.”

“Welcome back, Roro. Sorry to disturb you, but would you happen to know where my son is?”

“Son… You mean Shashi? Isn’t he usually at the Necromancer Guild around this time?”

“He hasn’t come home in three days. I thought with you being old friends, you might have an idea where he could be…”

Judging from Roro’s expression, I doubted she kept in touch with this old friend much. I checked my map and found the person in question in a corner of the entertainment district. He’d been drinking with two older necromancer coworkers since the morning. He’d probably already be rather drunk.

“While I’m not sure it’s your son, I did find a lizardfolk necromancer in the entertainment district.”

The lady seemed desperate to find her son as I told her the name of the establishment he was drinking in.

“With it being that sort of place, I’ll head there with my

husband. Thank you, Mr. Roro."

"M-miss?!"

The lady completely ignored Roro's attempts at rectifying the misunderstanding as she hurried off. She must have cherished her son a lot.

"Agh, everyone just assumes the wrong thing…," Roro lamented, her face a bright red. Though I could see the corner of her lips rise ever so slightly—she wasn't all that mad.

"By the way, Mr. Satou." Roro looked up at me as she smiled. It was a little scary.

"When did you go to the entertainment district, huh?" Roro asked, putting her hands on her hips. She was putting herself in older sister mode, readying her lecture. It seemed that Arisa and Mia had asked Roro to keep an eye on me in that regard. I'd decided to go home ahead of them while we were in the labyrinth, so how on earth did they manage to agree on that?

The Fearsome Iron Wall Pair…

I laid Ms. Nona down on the couch and then headed into the kitchen to begin developing the preserved foods. I had made some before when we were in Labyrinth City Celivera, so I carried on with my work while using the Space Magic spell Telephone to get advice from an elfin chef, Ms. Neyr, and from Lulu when she was on a break.

"…Like this?"

I used the Everyday Magic spell Dry to process the materials for the food rations. It was different from Mia's Water Magic and Arisa's Space Magic in that if you were careless, it could dry the materials out to the point that they resembled dried bonito flakes. It was hard to find a balance.

"Satou, it's hard."

"Satou, it's sweet."

"Satou, they're rolling around."

The hamsterfolk girls gathered up the hardened leftover bits of dried fruit and popped them in their mouths.

"I'll give you some better ones, so please don't spit them out."

The hamsterfolk girls spat out the leftovers they found on the floor—the youngest one was a little greedy and took most of them, so I gave more of them out. They stared at the completed rations with greedy expressions on their faces.

“Satou, are they delicious?”

“Satou, are they all yours?”

“Satou, can we have some?”

“Once I make sure they’re safe, you can.”

I then popped the tester product into my mouth. They tasted fine, but they were a little too dry—they sucked up all the liquid in my mouth as a result. It would be safer not to eat these when lacking water.

“Next is to work out mass production…”

I made the trial products with magic. I could have mass-produced them with magic, but for Roro’s sake, I wanted to come up with a method that didn’t require magic so that they could continue to sell it even when I wasn’t here.

“Ms. Nona!”

I could hear Roro’s voice coming from the direction of the couch. It seemed Ms. Nona had woken up. The hamsterfolk girls tumbled over one another running over to where she was, and I followed.

“Oh, you guys are here.”

Ms. Nona gave the hamsterfolk girls a ton of pats. I only had just realized it, but Ms. Nona wore a rather revealing outfit. It was probably due to Arcatia having a tropical climate, but she wore a chest strap, short-shorts, and bone armor. She had covered herself in oil to ward off insects, so her skin was glossy, almost resembling a powerful Amazon warrior’s.

“…Who are you?”

“I’m Satou. I work here at Hero’s Rest.”

Ms. Nona looked surprised when she asked me, so I gave a simple introduction.

“He healed your wounds and brought you here, Ms. Nona,” Roro added.

“Huh, really? I bet I was heavy.”

Ms. Nona turned red while looking at me with upturned eyes.

“Not at all. I’m rather strong.”

I could pick up a several-ton stone, after all.

“Fair enough. There’s a weird sweet taste inside my mouth.”

“That’ll be because we had you drink a magic potion. I made it taste sweet.”

“A magic potion? Did…did you feed me mouth-to-mouth—?”

Ms. Nona looked at me, her face beet red.

“Don’t worry, I poured the potion out of the bottle and into your mouth.”

“O-oh, okay, yeah, that makes sense.”

Ms. Nona wore a complicated expression, a mixture of both relief and disappointment, as she let out a sigh. She seemed surprisingly young.

“Oh, that reminds me. I’ll pay you for the medicine. When my leader kicked me in the stomach, I thought I was a goner, so you must have used up a lot of good medicine.”

“You’re fine. I just used a low-ranking healing potion.”

Its effects were similar to a mid-level healing spell, but there was no mistaking the fact that it was still a low-level potion. It was just very high-quality.

“Oh really? I guess that Seiko improved a lot.”

“Uhm, well… It was Satou who made it. Ms. Seiko quit.”

“Really? You found yourself a nice husband, I see. I should really tie the knot soon, too. Though, at the very least, I’d be happy to take anyone’s seed and have kids.”

According to the AR display, Ms. Nona was around twenty-three years old. I thought she wasn’t at the age to start worrying about that just yet.

“Oops, got onto a bit of a weird topic there, apologies. I’d like to buy five more of those potions before I go. Including the one from before, that’ll make it six. I’d also like ten Candles of Direction and thirty of those awful preserved foods you have.”

Ms. Nona ordered enthusiastically.

“…Uhm, Ms. Nona.”

Roro told Ms. Nona about how Ms. Nona’s party fired her earlier.

“Huh, you don’t say? Well, I planned on leaving that damn party anyway, so I’m glad I got them off my case.”

Ms. Nona spoke without putting on a strong front.

“I’ll be heading off once I’ve paid for the items.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I heard there was an outbreak of goblins in the Demon City, and the Adventurers Guild is putting together a group to deal with it urgently, so it’s fine if I leave their party.”

Roro seemed relieved.

She wasn’t happy she was able to secure some sales, but she

was more relieved that Ms. Nona had somewhere to go.

“If they’ve gone so far as to ask for a smooth-skin like me, I wonder if they are approaching all starving wolf–rank adventurers? The Demon City is big, and goblins are good at hiding.”

I asked Roro about the Demon City later on. She told me it was the name for a hunting ground that was known for having incidents like a huge outbreak of goblins every few years.

“Roro, candle.”

“Roro, provisions.”

“Roro, compliment.”

The hamsterfolk girls brought out Ms. Nona’s order from the stockroom. They looked cute as they trotted out, holding the goods high above their heads—I almost wanted to take a picture and store it away in a photo album.

I was worried about them dropping the medicine, so I had stored that behind the counter in a storage case under the floor.

“…Huh? That’s a lot of preserved food.”

Ms. Nona paid for the goods and noticed some extra goods that were hidden away when she picked up the order.

“The food wrapped up in the white cloth are some trial items. I’ve also added in some insect repellent, too. Please let us know what you think.”

I had developed the insect repellent for when my party did separate activities from me. I’d just used the Everyday Magic spell Bug Wipe when they were with me.

“Are these those ridiculously high-priced foods they have at Ussha Company?”

“I think we’ll be able to offer it at around twenty percent higher price than usual.”

“Hmm, all that’s left is how good it tastes, then. Looking forward to giving it a shot.”

Ms. Nona shot us a confident smile as she left the store. I left looking after the store to Roro while I returned to developing new products. Now and then, I got distracted by dissecting the magic that the Goddess Karion gave to the paper golem performers, letting the hamsterfolk girls taste my new creations and secretly contacting the house fairy Lelillil, asking how the chimera restoration was going back at Ivy Manor located in Labyrinth City Celivera.

This was an excerpt from our evening call.

“Master, everything is going fine here. Today, we went to the lower Castle town and hunted a lot of Tauruses there. But we’re running out of the materials you left, so we’re considering coming back the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s fine. I’ll treat you all to a nice meal. Do you have any special requests?”

“Hey, guys! Master’s asking if we have any requests for food when we get back.”

I could hear Arisa relaying our call to the other girls.

“Master, they can’t decide among themselves, so is it okay if you get in touch with them all individually?”

It seemed Arisa couldn’t get them under control. I decided to start with the smaller girls first.

“Master! It’s Pochi, sir! Pochi is doing her absolute best, sir! Today Pochi—”

It might have been a mistake contacting Pochi first. She spent most of the call telling me about what she had done and what kind of food she found delicious.

“Pochi’s been filling her tummy with Taurus meat every day, sir! But Pochi has a separate stomach for Master’s cooking, so I’d be happy with more meat, sir! I like Mr. Hamburg, steak, whole roasts, and *sukiyaki*, too, sir! Pochi likes anything, sir! Even just being with Master is enough for Pochi, sir!”

It cheered me up to hear how happy Pochi was. I then contacted Tama, Nana, Mia, Lulu, and Liza, asking their preferences and listening to what they had been doing. I didn’t have enough ingredients, so it looked like I needed to go shopping. It was about time I showed my face at the Echigoya Company, and I thought I should go see how Hikaru and Shizuka were doing.

I told Roro that I would be heading out until around afternoon time tomorrow and used the Return spell to head back to Shiga Kingdom. Considering the time zone, it was close to dawn in Shiga.

Intermission

Satou here. Even if I plan everything perfectly, there's always some act of God or delays that pile up, often making me insanely busy. Even so, if I just stick to a list of priorities, it usually works itself out.

"Wake up, it's morning."

I sat down on a bed with a canopy over the top and spoke to a very special person. I loved how she looked when she was awake—her smile was bright as the sun, but I also liked her innocent expression when she slept, too.

"…Satou."

She ever so slightly opened her eyes to look at me, her smile blooming like a flower. It was a delicate beauty, one gust away from colorful petals being strewn around the room. I wanted to give in to my feelings and pin her down on the bed, but I was a little scared of the handmaiden Lua, who was watching from behind me, so I shoved a ton of points into my MND stat and maintained the gentlemanly act.

"Good morning, Ms. Aaze."

"Morning, Satou."

Startled, Ms. Aaze's eyes shot open. She hid her face behind her blanket, with only her eyes peeking out over the top.

"Did you see me sleeping?"

"I did. It was adorable."

I responded in earnest, causing Ms. Aaze's face to turn vermilion red. That just made her more adorable, though.

"Lady Aaze, the sprites in charge of your wardrobe have arrived. If you think you're going to be a bit longer, shall I just leave them waiting outside?"



The handmaiden, Ms. Lua, wore a sour expression as she spoke.

“I-it’s fine. They don’t have to wait. Let them in.”

“Understood. You can come in now.”

Several house spirits scuttled in through the door. They all looked like young girls. Everyone looked at me, shocked, and then they all erupted into giggles, as if they were middle school girls sharing lovey-dovey romance stories.

“All right, girls, let’s concentrate on work.”

Ms. Lua clapped her hands together as the sprites energetically got to work brushing Ms. Aaze’s hair, taking off her thin fairy-silk negligee—

I felt my eyes being drawn to Ms. Aaze’s porcelain white shoulders, but I made every fiber in my body deny myself a look as I turned away. I had forgotten that elves and half-elves didn’t pay much mind to exposing their naked bodies.

I let both Ms. Aaze and her handmaiden, Ms. Lua, know that I’d be waiting in the room next door. The flowers in the corridor produced a sweet aroma, which helped cleanse my wicked mind. I decided to take the scene of Ms. Aaze’s white shoulders that I had ●REC’d in my mind with me to my eventual grave.

“Hee-hee. How long has it been since we ate breakfast together?”

I was enjoying a lavish elfin meal that would make even a royal meal in the imperial court look like a bland affair, with Ms. Aaze, who was in good spirits. Although every item was perfect, I felt a lot of it could have been attributed to the fact that I was enjoying it with Ms. Aaze.

“So, where are you at the moment? Last I heard you were sightseeing in the inland sea nations.”

I found myself lost in Ms. Aaze’s refined movements, almost forgetting to even enjoy the meal.

“We’re currently in Woodland Labyrinth within the southwestern continent.”

“Training for Mia and the others?”

“Yeah. They’re there at the moment, trying their best to stay there on their own.”

“If they’re strong enough to be able to do that, isn’t that enough already?” Ms. Aaze asked. She stopped moving her fork

and cocked her head in confusion. It was a rare expression, but a cute one.

“It seemed they felt they weren’t strong enough when we fought in Parion and the Pialork Kingdom.”

I didn’t mention we’d fought a demon lord and the Discordant Ones. It would only make Ms. Aaze worry.

“Oh, really? When I saw Mia before, she looked around the level to take on a high-level demon…”

“I still think that’s too difficult for her.”

Although I thought she could take one on without dying if they planned on fighting one without losing anyone, then they would have been around level 60 before that—although it did depend on the enemy. If we wanted to be completely safe, level 80 would have been ideal.

“Phew, that was delicious. Satou, shall we have dessert on a branch of the World Tree?”

“That sounds lovely. Let’s do that.”

I thanked the sprites for setting everything up as I snatched the basket of fruits that Ms. Aaze was trying to pick up, and instead I took her hand and escorted her to our destination.

“What a luxurious location for dessert—a branch of the World Tree.”

“You think so? There’s a lot of mana circulating here, so it’s nice. Look, even the small spirits are enjoying themselves.”

When I activated my “Spirit Vision,” I could see colorful, fluffy spots of light that resembled dandelion seeds flying around Ms. Aaze, who was surrounded by a golden aura. I enjoyed the view as I used the Practical Magic spell Multitool to cut the fruits into slices.

“Here you are, Ms. Aaze.”

I used the Multitool fork and stabbed into one of the pieces of fruit and offered it to Ms. Aaze. She looked a little embarrassed but then nibbled on the piece of fruit with a smile that almost made me melt. I planned to pass her the fork, but this was cute, and a lot better. We enjoyed a lovely morning together without Ms. Lua looking at us like a merlion with a mouth full of salt.

I wished I could stay here for a couple more days, but I had a lot of places I needed to go to, so I passed on souvenirs from the fortress city of Arcatia and took my leave. It seemed the broccoli was a huge success among the elves.

◆

“Good morning, Mr. Satou!”

I left the Bolenan Forest and visited Paradise Island located in the Southern Seas, where I was greeted with a hug from Rei, who was in her adult form. Usually, she was in the form of a young girl, to preserve her magic energy, so it was a surprise.

“Morning, Master Satou.”

Her younger sister, Yuuneia, seemed a little tired. I didn’t mind her large yawn, but her pajamas were wide open, so I quickly fixed them for her, using Magic Hand.

“Morning, Rei, Yuuneia.”

I returned their greetings and then gave them the souvenirs like the giant broccoli and the small items from the fortress city of Arcatia. Any form of miasma was strictly off-limits for Rei, so I made sure to thoroughly purify the items before handing them over.

“We prepared breakfast. Let’s eat together.”

“Thank you, I’d love to join you.”

I had already eaten a lot in the Bolenan Forest but there was no way I could refuse such an invitation when it was accompanied by a lovely smile. I went to enjoy a voluminous breakfast made up of southern delicacies, as well as their two smiles.

“Mr. Satou, I have something I want you to see.”

As we were enjoying a cup of tea, Rei handed me a small bundle of paper bound with a string. My eyes were drawn in by the text at the top of the paper.

—Regarding the downsizing of Heavenslight Protection.

Something I had once deemed impossible.

“Rei, what is this about?” I accidentally blurted out, sounding very excited.

“I need a certain jewel for it, so I’m unsure if I can do it…”

Rei spoke as she nervously played with her hands. The jewel in question was a divine stone that originated from the gods. Among the eight kinds of stones, I already had two in my possession—I had received them both from the Goddess Karion and the Goddess Urion for defeating the Discordant Ones. To use them for what they were made for, you needed all eight of them, but having one or two was enough to generate enough

energy to power a single car, so they could be used for some things. It seemed like they consumed a lot of magic power, so I wondered if it would be difficult to incorporate golden equipment without expanding the Holytree Stone Furnace.

"Would this help you, Mr. Satou?"

"Yes! It would, it would! It'd help a lot! Thank you, Rei!"

I squeezed Rei in a hug and then began to spin around on the spot, dancing. With this, I might be able to incorporate the Castle function, an upgraded version of the Fortress function for enhanced defense, which previously couldn't be downsized from the battleship version, into golden armor. In fact, I might be able to make it even more effective than the battleship version. I spent some time talking about it with Rei and Satsuko on Paradise Island before saying a reluctant good-bye to them as I set off for the Shiga Kingdom.

◆

""""Sir Kuro, welcome back!""""

When I showed up at the main Echigoya office, the company management found me immediately and gave me a very gaudy welcome. It seemed they had changed the layout of the rooms—the rooms seemed wider, and more people were working for management. I had heard in a report that a man had been promoted to management, but it didn't look like he worked here. The lively blond-haired manager, Eluterina, and the manager's secretary, the docile beauty with silver hair, Tifaleeza, appeared from the adjacent manager's office.

""Sir Kuro, welcome back.""

Looking at the two of them felt like looking at a gorgeous painting. However, the two of them weren't here simply because they looked good. They were two influential figures who had elevated the Echigoya Company to one of the most powerful trading companies within the Shiga Kingdom.

"Fill me in on the latest."

I spoke, becoming the cool character Kuro. In reality, I wanted to hurry back home and work on developing the Castle function for golden armor, but I couldn't do that. As a functioning adult, I had to first complete my work before indulging in my hobbies. I brushed off my reluctant feelings

and turned to face the managers.

“We increased the number of managers. To be honest, they’re still novices, but we hope to have them as fully fledged managers in around half a year.”

The managers then introduced me to the recruits. There were a lot of talented women who were graduates from the Royal Academy and regular schools, but there weren’t many self-made merchants or scholars from prestigious schools. As a result of that, I felt like the average age of the managers had been raised by around 20 percent.

“As the business continues to expand to accommodate profits, we intend to continue to increase the number of managers in training.”

“I see. Do you have everything you need for training?”

With rapid growth, employee training could sometimes fall behind.

“Everything is fine regarding that. We are training the management trainees according to the educational procedures provided by Advisor Tachibana. Some are affiliated with nobility, but we are managing that by assigning them to branch offices in various regions or utilizing them in new development projects, so please rest assured.”

Advisor Tachibana—it seemed he was helping out with the educational program put together by Arisa. With the conversation about management completed, Tifaleeza then came to the front.

“The fleet of thirteen merchant ships led by Captain Looklar set sail as scheduled from the Port of Tartumina, heading for the Holy Kingdom of Parion.”

Tifaleeza wore a proud expression on her ice-cold beautiful face. The trade agreement between Cardinal Dobbunaf and Satou had been entrusted to the Echigoya Trading Company. I used Return to bring the Parion’s Lampfire and the priest, both necessary for the trade, from the Holy Kingdom of Parion to Tartumina.

“However, it seems that about five merchant ships belonging to nobles and trading companies, who caught wind of the rumors, decided to follow along.”

“Is that all right?”

“Our ships are protected from monsters by Parion’s Lampfire. However, I imagine they are probably aiming for the

leftovers.”

“Even if they do attack our main ship, they won’t do much damage. They’re more than likely acting with an understanding of the risks involved, so I don’t think there is any need to worry.”

The manager and Tifaleeza confidently spoke. They essentially said we needn’t feel sorry for those who were unfairly acting against us.

Next up, the manager who worked in immigration came forward.

“Regarding immigration to Muno County, thanks to magistrate Lottel’s negotiations with Duke Ougoch and the royal government, we have been granted the use of the Eastern Route and a large airship for immigration purposes.”

“Oh, that’s valuable.”

The Eastern Route is an established route that connects the royal capital, the ducal capital, and the territory of Marquis Ganika, while the Northern Route is a new route that links the territory of Count Seiryuu with the royal capital.

“In return, it seems that the second small airship, which was originally scheduled for delivery to the royal government, will now be prioritized for lease to the territory of Count Seiryuu instead of to the territory of Count Muno.”

The management member filled me in on all the inner workings. It all made sense now. While I didn’t understand what Hikaru had meant, I figured out the reason why Ms. Zena’s plans to return home had been canceled by the immigration plans. I felt like we’d messed up.

After that, I listened to the report on the royal capital, the surrounding cities, and their respective businesses. Aside from the welfare program, several other departments were operating at a loss, but since their purpose was to invest in and support research, it wasn’t an issue. Plus, the rest were operating at a profit.

Once we finished discussing internal affairs, we moved on to international affairs.

“We’ve received a few reports and requests from Merina, who is based in the branch in Parion Province.”

“Requests?”

“Yes. She wishes to employ more staff members, and it seems they want to add the folk crafts of the sandfolk to the trade items with the Shiga Kingdom.”

“I approve. It’s fine if she can’t make a profit at first.”

I then glanced over the report from Merina. The goods I had transported there had all sold, and it seemed she had gained substantial profits and established connections with the inland sea nations. Merina was talented and reliable.

“She also asked about having a few close-distance ships to allow for direct trades with the inland sea nations.”

“That’ll put us in competition with Cardinal Dobbunaf. Isn’t it a little too premature for that?”

“I thought the same.”

While I didn’t mind making such a move, I thought it would be best to mutually enjoy the profits at the beginning.

“It seems that the procurement of sheep and goats requested by Viscount Pendragon, as well as the shipping task to the Kuvork Kingdom, have been successfully completed. The person in charge, Costohna, plans to travel around the central small countries to establish branches of the Echigoya Trading Company in the main cities of each nation.”

“Do they not plan on taking a break?”

Being on long business trips was a surefire way to accumulate stress.

“They want it to be that way. They will be avoiding the unsafe Yowork Kingdom, so please don’t worry.”

“All right.”

I felt the women working for the Echigoya Trading Company were all workaholics.

“Louna requested to travel around the Vistall Duchy. However, they are currently rebelling, and it seems to be dangerous over there, so we denied the request.”

“Mhm.”

Among all the knights and soldiers partaking in the rebellion, there would be some who would soon become vagabonds.

“Is that all for the international reports?”

“No, there is one more. We have dispatched the advance trading team we discussed earlier.”

I had forgotten about that. We planned to conduct research as a preliminary step before establishing branches in the

eastern Siruga Kingdom and Makiwa Kingdom, as well as in the northern Kazo Kingdom and Saga Empire.

“Is everything all right with the convoys?”

“Yes. We were able to hire several mithril explorers, so as long as we don’t encounter any dragons or demons, we should be fine.”

I’d have preferred if she didn’t throw out death flags like that.

Once we had finished the business talks, we moved on to talking about research.

“How are the researchers doing?” I asked, curious about the rather unconventional studies they were engaged in. This included Mr. Joppentelle, the transforming tool professor who became a patron of the craft in Kalisork City.

“They’re all doing well.”

“A new workshop has been established near Dr. Jahado’s workshop, where everyone is conducting research. Aoi is acting as a liaison, and it seems there is a lively exchange with Dr. Jahado.”

Tifaleeza added a bit more detail to the report.

“As for Dr. Jahado’s re-established new ultra-high-speed airship equipped with an aerodynamic engine, it has achieved three times the lift and flight speed of conventional models, but the output of traditional Magic Reactors is insufficient, preventing its practical use.”

“All right. I’ll head over there later.”

As usual, Dr. Jahado was continuing his extreme modifications. I decided I’d drop by when I went to the factory and the main store.

“Anything else?”

“Ryuona of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen still visits once every few days.”

The manager wore a slightly troubled expression.

Are the Shiga Eight that bone idle?

“Recently, as the official supplier of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen, our weapons and armor have been selling well.”

The manager in charge of selling weapons and armor added this, wearing a nice smile. I thought there was no need to get involved if the Shiga Eight contributed to good sales. It didn’t

seem like anything urgent, after all.

I complimented the red-haired Nell and the others working on the sales floor at the main store, listening to Polina's worries and concerns at the ever-expanding factory as I spurred her on. I watched how the factory worked. Then I observed the realistic combat training conducted by Sumina's squad from the Security Division and moved on to the bustling workshop district.

Although they should have been busy with their work, for some reason, the manager and Tifaleeza were accompanying me everywhere.

"Why? Why did the new propulsion system stop halfway?!"

"Like I told you, it needs more output."

Aoi, a young Japanese boy who looked more like a beautiful young girl, was currently in the middle of a debate with the professors.

"Aoi, how about implementing the Twin Magic Reactors I thought up?"

"Didn't they both fail at the same time and cause a massive explosion?"

"Should I just dismantle it and put it back together from scratch?"

"All you professors want to do is dismantle stuff!"

"How about adjusting the airship's structure to transform in response to its speed?"

"Rejected! Didn't I just say we don't have the magic power for that kind of transformation?"

It looked like Aoi was playing both the role of the devil's advocate and the moderator of the debate. It was just a group of strange doctors, such as Dr. Jahado, the rotation fanatic; Dr. Joppentelle, the transformation professor; and two other professors who were obsessed with explosions and dismantling, all sharing their opinions. The new type of airship placed near them had been freely modified with added transformation mechanisms and specially processed armor.

"Ah! Sir Kuro!"

Aoi noticed me and gave me a big wave.

"Master Kuro! Could you give me some spare hulls and Magic Reactors? Everyone's gotten carried away with modifying them,

and it's been hard to get it under control."

"Sure. I have some spares, so use them how you like."

After I promised them that, they then gave me demonstrations of the magic improvements they had made. All of them were interesting, but among them, the automatic ejection seat jointly developed by Dr. Joppentelle, known as the "Transforming Doctor," and by Dr. Kaiber, known as the "Unkempt Doctor," was particularly interesting. The mechanism involved the automatic fastening of the seat belt, securing the occupant to the chair, while a protective shell expanded around the chair and ejected it.

"Is it able to be put into practice?"

"Not yet. We've only managed to get the chair to eject so far."

"The test dummy was left in shambles when we tried it."

Equipping itself automatically was a good idea. I could change my appearance with a quick Changing spell. However, it took time for my party members to get their equipment on during emergencies. There was nothing like what you would see in Sunday morning anime, where they'd equip their armor using a special command word. The two professors told me all the ins and outs of the automatic ejection seat, giving me a better understanding of its workings and the materials used. As thanks for the information, I presented them both with a parachute I had put together a while ago.

"Whoa, it's Sir Kuro!"

A small-framed girl embraced me as she greeted me with a cheerful tone. It was Sekiro's daughter, Louna. The fact that they were still in travel attire suggested that they must have come to see me as soon as they returned to the capital.

"Louna! Don't be so disrespectful to Sir Kuro!"

"They're right. Let go, Louna."

The manager spoke in a panic. Tifaleeza shot her a cold stare that could freeze over an open-air fire, causing Louna to let go.

Huh?

I didn't know if I was imagining it or not, but there were more professors.

"Louna, who is that?"

"He's a floating stone researcher. I recruited him!"

He was working as a researcher in the Saga Empire.

However, he didn't receive any funds for his research and found it difficult to buy materials, so he left and began working with us.

"…Floating stones?"

"Yeah. You know the ones that float in the sky?"

I recalled seeing them in the Bolenan Forest. I distinctly had a memory of them floating beside a waterfall as I was practicing using my "Spirit Vision."

"Louna, please be more polite when speaking with Sir Kuro."

"Yeah, yeah. I forrrgo—forgot. Anyway, isn't it interesting, Sir Kuro?"

I assumed she was referring to the floating stones.

"I don't mind your language. I have an idea on where to get some floating stones, so I'll get my hands on some of them soon."

There were plenty of rocks just floating about, so I was sure the Bolenans wouldn't mind splitting some with me. It also gave me another excuse to be with Ms. Aaze, so it worked out.

"Really?! I heard that floating stones were a rare resource found only in a nest of a giant monster fish in the northern part of the Saga Empire!" the researcher responded.

There's a giant monster fish there? That's good information.

We still had around sixty-four pieces of whale meat, so I didn't really need to stock up or anything.

"Have you figured out what makes the floating stones float?"

"I believe it's linked to the small fragment of dark stone that can be found in the center of them, but I don't have enough samples to really research it."

The researcher had no real-life samples to study, so I shared some dark stones with him.

In the workshop district's vacant lot, I placed three spare hulls for small airships, along with a few mana reactors in various sizes. The mana reactors were ones I had salvaged from the Southern Seas before or taken from pirates.

"You might have enough power if they're this big," I offered.

"We can't put something as heavy as that on it," one of the researchers scoffed.

"Then it looks like you'll need a strong Magic Reactor for the propulsion system."

Though I'm pretty sure they were talking about that just before.

“Want to try and use this?”

“What’s that?”

“A blue coin.”

“A Philosophium from the Flue Empire!”

“I never thought I’d see one with my own eyes!”

All the other professors flocked around Dr. Jahado as he lifted the Philosophium. I would have preferred to put it in the Holytree Stone Furnace, but I felt that it would be able to help the researchers with their research and inventions, so I felt this was the better move. It riled all the researchers up, and they dove headfirst back into their research. I headed back to the main Echigoya store along with Louna. The luncheon, which was also meant to celebrate Louna and the others’ return, became so popular that the streets were overflowing with people, making it difficult to pass through. If Tifaleeza hadn’t anticipated the situation and informed the guard posts and nearby residents ahead of time, things could have turned troublesome. You’d be pushed to find a more capable secretary.

◆

Once I finished what I needed to do in Echigoya, I went to meet with Hikaru. It was midafternoon, so I found Hikaru sweeping up outside a dormitory near the Royal Academy.

“Same as ever, eh, Hikaru?”

Since I couldn’t show up as Kuro, I stood before Hikaru in a sloppy disguise, only wearing a fake clip-on mustache.

“Huh? Ichirou? Ichirou! Ichirou!”

Hikaru ran up and embraced me. Confused, I accepted the hug from Hikaru but realized I had made an awful mistake.

“Sorry, Hikaru. It’s me, Satou. I’m not Ichirou Suzuki. This is just a weird disguise I’m wearing.”

I took off the fake mustache, revealing I wasn’t the Ichirou Suzuki that Hikaru wanted to meet with most.

“H-huh? There’s no way.”

Hikaru was on the verge of tears. I hugged her. If I was going to disguise myself, I should have picked a better disguise. I didn’t realize her Ichirou had a mustache.

“Bad guy spotted!”

“How dare you make the manager cry!”

I heard children's voices behind me, followed by a kick to my backside. I figured it was due to my high VIT stat, but the children who kicked me ended up falling over. They would soon figure out I was Satou if this went on any longer, so I covered my face with a mask.

"Get away from Ms. Hikaru!"

The children kept their distance as they surrounded me. I recognized their faces. These were the children who were moved from the private orphanage in Labyrinth City Celivera to the Royal Academy for younger children. I saw the face of Daigo, who I'd saved and rescued back in Parion. Now that I think about it, the girl crouching at my feet was Chinatsu, a Reincarnator who, like Daigo, had lost her Unique Skill. The last time I'd met her, she was rather weak. The low-level elixir and Shizuka's nursing abilities must have worked, as she seemed to be a lot healthier. A relief.

"It's all right, everyone. I'm doing fine!"

Hikaru wiped away her tears and forced herself to smile in order to calm the other children. The other children seemed to understand she was faking it, but they feigned ignorance as they listened to her order to go back inside the dormitory. I felt a little awkward, so I moved away from the dormitory and changed into a different disguise: Akindoh, the Pendragon shopkeeper. Then I returned to the dormitory.

"Mr. Akindoh!"

"I've never been here before."

"What souvenir do you have for me today? Is it something sweet? Or is it something savory?"

All the children began to flock around me. It was Daigo's and Chinatsu's first time seeing Akindoh, so they were asking the other kids who I was. I handed out souvenirs to the children and then went into the manager's office, where Hikaru was.

"Sorry I got so upset earlier," Hikaru spoke.

"It's fine, I should be the one saying sorry. I should have been more tactful."

"You didn't mean anything bad by it, did you? It was a disguise so obvious, I could see it was you."

"No, I'm really sorry. There's no other way around it."

The truth was I had made Hikaru cry, so I continued to apologize for it.

"It's fine. The Goddess Parion has already assured me I'll be

able to meet my Ichirou someday—so that's the end of that topic!"

Hikaru slammed her hand on the table, forcibly changing the topic. I decided it was best not to talk about it anymore.

"Anyway, Sete had some official letters from the Saga Empire and Parion arrive."

Sete was Hikaru's nickname for the king of Shiga.

"Official letters. From those two kingdoms. Let me guess, were they about me defeating the demon lord?"

"Bingo. They said, 'The Birth of a Legend: A Hero and Two Others Defeated the Demon Lord!' It's all the news in the royal palace."

…Really?

"They said two people, but Hayato's followers, Dark Knights, and Holy Sword users were there as well."

"Yep. The official report says it gives its thanks to a hero's party for helping, but it seems that the duke's daughter, Ringrande, who was serving as a retainer, sent a letter detailing Ichirou's accomplishments, and that information has spread among the nobility of Duke Ougoch's territory."

…Just what is Lady Ringrande up to?

Hikaru gave me more background information. The gluttonous Marquis Lloyd and Count Owen were going around enthusiastically spreading the news. Knowing those two, their actions were probably driven by good intentions, but you never knew.

"Don't worry, I haven't said anything about you being in Arcatia. Sete and the others sent summons for Satou to the ambassadors of the western countries."

The decision to head to the Forest Labyrinth was indeed a stroke of luck, as once the summons was received, there would have been no way to avoid returning to the Shiga Kingdom.

"In the meantime, for now, I'll send a report with nothing controversial to the prime minister and Count Muno."

I decided to send letters to two other individuals: Lady Celivera, the wife of the lord of Labyrinth City Celivera, and Countess Ema Litton, a prominent figure in the social circles of the royal capital, who wielded considerable influence. I could ask for their help in quelling the rumors. Fortunately, I had a good number of accessories and works of art from the western regions that they would fancy, so I had plenty of gifts to offer

them.

“That reminds me, I saw Daigo and Chinatsu here.”

“They’ve been coming to the school for around three days now, just to try it out. Shizuka said she wanted the children to go to school, and both Daigo and Chinatsu seemed interested.”

“Interesting. Did you ask about their past lives?”

“Daigo was around high school age. Chinatsu was in the later years of elementary school.”

“That’s a weird way to put it.”

“That’s because—the two of them struggled to remember.”

According to Hikaru, ever since Daigo and Chinatsu lost their Unique Skills, their memories became more and more vague.

“Don’t say anything about it in front of Shizuka, though. She gets worried.”

“Got it. My lips are sealed.”

Although I had been forced, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of responsibility for them losing their Unique Skills.

Shizuka was depressed and stressed enough that even the slightest thing could send her mental state over the edge and turn her into a demon lord, so we had to avoid any needless statements.

“Is Shizuka doing all right?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. She said she wanted a dog, so I mentioned it to Sete and got her a cute puppy. She’s hard at work looking after the puppy and working on her creative activities.”

I guessed she’d have no time to worry about things if she was occupied by something else.

“Go see her. She’s not allowed to leave here until Daigo and Chinatsu get used to being here, so I’m the only one she really sees.”

“All right. I’ll visit her.”

We rode in Hikaru’s carriage to Duke Mitsukuni’s mansion. I cast the spell Secret Field so the driver couldn’t hear us as we continued our conversation.

“Have you heard anything from the Labyrinth City group?”

“They’re regularly participating in boot camp. Karina and Zena have hit level forty. Adin and the other sisters are almost at level forty!”

“That’s amazing.”

It was amazing that Zena, who had some experience training as a magic soldier in Seiryuu City, and Karina, who I met in

Muno County, and who'd only had straight training after that, had level 40. In Karina's case, it was still impressive, even though she was strengthened by the Intelligence Item, Raka. I made a point of mentioning the sisters' progress to Nana.

"Kajiro is approaching level fifty. Ayaume, Iruna, and Jena are past level thirty. As for the Pendra children, the child with the highest level is close to thirty, I guess?"

Kajiro, who was a samurai of the Saga Empire who worked as a teacher in the Labyrinth Explorer School in the fortress city Celivera, the female ninja Ayaume, Iruna and Jena, who used to be teachers and former labyrinth explorers, and finally the Pendra children—those who had graduated from the Labyrinth Explorer School—were all doing their best.

The carriage soon arrived at the manor, and I enjoyed hearing about their activities. I didn't want any weird rumors to start about Hikaru, so I used my "Quick Change" skill to change myself into a female merchant who resembled Hikaru before we headed to her room. The driver of the carriage was surprised, but I just ignored him. The reason the disguise resembled Hikaru was because I only had the female mask I used to disguise myself as the Nameless Hero—and I'd made it look like Hikaru back then.

"That reminds me, I forgot to say—"

As we headed to the hideout, Hikaru went on to tell me that Mr. Gouen and his band of slave prisoners had left for the Azure Land. His wife and daughters would be staying at a different manor to stay safe.

"Next time, can I call Sky?"

Sky— A sky dragon.

"I don't mind—but I will ask that it's just an avatar and not the actual thing."

"Ah-ha-ha, of course. If the real thing came here, it'd take all of the trees with it. It'd be quite the situation."

Sky dragons were huge. We walked along the side of a fountain as we headed to Shizuka's house.

"Do you know where the White Dragons live?"

"White Dragons? I saw a full-grown White Dragon in the north of the Saga Empire back in my adventuring days. There were a lot in Dragon Valley, so I'm sure you could find more if you went looking."

Shame. I guessed just saying "White Dragon" wasn't enough

to pinpoint what I meant.

We arrived at Shizuka's house while we chatted. Hikaru rang the bell. We heard the patter of feet as the door opened.

"Hikaru! Look! My latest creation!"

Upon hearing the joyful, high-pitched voice, I beheld a manuscript that featured two naked men entwined in an embrace.

Yep. BL.

"Shizuka! Put it away!"

"…Huh? Wah! Mr. Satou?!"

Realizing who she had proudly shown her manuscript to, Hikaru hurriedly tried to hide it behind her back. I felt like it was a little late to be doing that now.

"Shizuka, hide! Ichirou… Ah, he's already looking away. Good instincts."

My "Spatial Awareness" skill alerted me to Shizuka, who had rushed out in nothing but her underwear, now frantically spinning around in a panic.

"I'msorryIshowedyousomethingsocrudethisisn'ttherightmanuscript
itdoesn'tmeanI'mnotworkinghardIjustdidn'twanttochangeandIforgotIwasn'twearinganyclothessorryaboutthatpleasedon'tgetthewrongideaI'mdrawingnakedcharacterssoIendedupnakedmyselfwhatamIeventalkingaboutIdon'tknowit'sallamisunderstanding."

Shizuka apologized, not even stopping for breath. I struggled to hear what she had even said.

"Shizuka, it's fine. Go put some clothes on. I bet you've been working this whole time and forgot to have breakfast."

"I've been eating properly. It's preserved foods, but I've been feeding Wanta proper food, at least."

I noticed Shizuka pouting like a child as she spoke to Hikaru. I stood in the doorway, listening to their conversation as I waited for Shizuka to get changed. I noticed a puppy trot up to me and lick my hand. He looked like a long-haired chihuahua. As I waited, brushing the puppy's fur as he rubbed himself against my hand, I heard noises that sounded like they had started cleaning up the house.

"Need me to help?"

"We're fine! Don't worry about us. We won't be long!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha. Ichirou's gotta wait outside a little bit longer."

I was pretty good at cleaning up dirty rooms—I remembered Hikaru had an especially messy room. I didn't mind waiting. Time flew as I played ball with the puppy named Wanta. I treated Hikaru and Shizuka to dinner in the now freshly cleaned room, and I even made some puppy-safe food for Wanta. Before I left, I asked for a *doujinshi* to gift Arisa, but I was made to pinkie-promise that I wouldn't open it. Lucky for her, she needn't worry—I had no interest in taking a peek.

Once I returned to Arcatia, I told Arisa about the souvenir over the telephone. She was excited and wanted to read it immediately, so I sent it using Material Transfer magic. It seemed Liza and Mia asked Arisa not to read it near Pochi, Tama, and Nana, to not teach them things they weren't ready for. It would be something they would be free to enjoy once they were older.

The New Product

> ***Satou here. While not limited to game development, a finished product often differs a lot from what it was initially planned to be. Often, the higher-ups are determined to change all of it, but most of the time, just like a stone flows down the river and is shaped into something magnificent, so, too, does the product find its way to being something wonderful.***

"Some tea, Mr. Satou."

I was in one of the Hero's Rest's inner rooms working on some magic potions when Roro brought me a cool, fragrant tea made with well water.

"Thank you, Roro. I hate to ask, but could you bring about seven people's worth of tea?"

As soon as I finished speaking, the door opened with a *bang*.

"We're home!"

"Hyooome."

"Byack hyome, sir!"

The voices of my cheerful party members traveled through the store.

"Master, sir!"

"Found yooooou."

Pochi and Tama clung to my face with a speed that could rival even the art of *shukuchi.*

I embraced the two girls as they hopped onto me for a hug.

> Skill Acquired: "Soothing Qi."

I knew I had a "Parry" skill, but I assumed, since I didn't avoid the girls and took them in for a hug, I ended up learning a new skill. I wondered why it wasn't a "Gentle Art" skill, but I needn't worry about the small things. It sounded interesting, so I put points into it and activated it.

"Master, Master."

"Stocking up on Masternium, sir!"

Both Tama and Pochi were vigorously rubbing their heads

against me. It seemed like it wasn't just me who missed them.

"Satou."

Mia plodded on over and took my hand as she giggled.

"I would also like to participate in storing up on Masternium, I declare."

Nana came from behind me and clung to me. She was wearing her white-silver armor; the pointy parts of it stabbed me in the back so it hurt. I decided to use my "Magic Armor" skill to defend myself against the pointy bits.

"I would like to request some magic replenishment later, I plead."

"Of course."

I readily agreed to Nana's request as she looked up at me with an expressionless face, trying to act sweet.

"Ah-ha-ha. I'll stock up on some Masternium, too."

"Me too."

Arisa laughed as she gave me a hug, followed by Lulu, who gingerly approached me. Everyone was wanting to be spoiled today. Liza looked shy, but her tail kept moving about, so I called her over to join us.

"They're all so close."

Roro smiled, surprised.

"Roro, too."

"Roro, close."

"Roro, love."

The hamsterfolk children were seemingly inspired as they all clung on to Roro's legs.

◆

"What was the Castle like?"

Once all my friends had gotten their fill of me, I decided to ask about their experiences. Roro was working out front with all the hamsterfolk children, apart from the youngest one, who Nana had captured.

"Hmm, to be frank, it was hard competing for prey."

"Really?"

"Yesh."

Tama nodded, her face wearing a conflicted expression as she licked a lollipop.

“But Tama did a good job at catching prey for us, sir!”

“Ah-ha-ha. She did it so much, the other parties around us actually approached us teary-eyed, begging us to hunt somewhere else.”

“Mew.”

Tama lay down on top of the table. They were so focused on hunting, they kind of overdid it, it seemed.

“I feel like there was a lot of prey around the Castle, though…”

“It was mainly the ordinary Tauruses and Big Hogs we ended up fighting over. It was difficult to find a safe spot to run to when bumping into a group of Tauruses led by a leader or a champion. The only people actively hunting outside were Mr. Tiga and the golden lion–ranked adventurers.”

“Didn’t they make camps in the fortresses?”

“We only did that when going up against several small groups or groups of riders. The adventurers who lack confidence in their abilities tend to hunt weak monsters around levels three or four as they move around. If they didn’t do that, there would be no monsters left.”

It was similar to a grinding spot in an MMORPG.

“The more proactive adventurers who went up against stronger monsters often had necromancers using undead Taurus or Earth mages controlling golems to act as shields, I report.”

“There was also a tamer who used an ancient land beast.”

It seemed only the parties with a tank who could take head-on attacks were able to go up against the groups of Tauruses.

“We ended up finding a less populated space and hunted the small groups of Tauruses and the Taurus riders.”

“We fought the riders using trenches and anti-cavalry palisades, I declare.”

“Hmm. Genomos. Talented.”

So they had Mia’s Earth spirits dig trenches to stop the Taurus riders and their raptor mounts and then hunted them down from there.

“Raptor meat is like chicken. It was delicious. We brought a lot back as a souvenir, so please try it later.”

“Thank you, Liza.”

Judging from Liza’s expression, it seemed to be a favorite of hers. I decided to put extra effort in when I cooked it.

“Big Hog is very juisheee?”

“There’s a lot of fat, so it’s a little rich, I declare.”

“Big Hog fat is sweet and delicious, sir!”

“I won’t deny it’s tasty, I declare.”

So Big Hog had a high fat content.

“Miasma. Annoying.”

“It did take a lot of time to purify the miasma.”

“Yes, Lulu. I confess that replenishing the magic power to the sacred monument after the battle was hard work.”

Nana remained emotionless, but there was an air of exhaustion around her. It seemed Big Hogs had a high miasma content. It was said that the higher-ranked the Taurus, the denser the miasma and the tougher its meat.

“Liza was the only one who liked the champion’s tendon meat.”

“It was firm and chewy, very enjoyable.”

“Mew.”

“Pochi was a little scared.”

“It tasted nice. I’ll try and cook it in a pressure cooker next time, at least until it’s tender.”

Lulu spoke as she patted the heads of Pochi and Tama, who didn’t seem too fond of the idea.

“We ended up overhunting in the area, and the field area around the Castle became underpopulated, so next time, we’re going to aim for the Castle town.”

“Remember what the veteran lion man said. Don’t go near the inner wall, okay?”

“We know. We’ve no plans to start a stampede or anything.”

If it were Arisa and the others, they would be able to take on an elite unit led by a captain. They should shake them off with Space Magic such as Labyrinth and Teleportation, but they wouldn’t take any needless risks.

“If you do start a stampede, don’t try and deal with it on your own. Leave it to me or those around you, all right?”

“Okay, we’ll do that.”

It’d be dangerous if they were stubborn about it and tried to deal with the stampede, so I made sure to drive that point home.

If they repeatedly used concentrated lasers and Explosion Magic, they would be able to take care of a stampede, too.

“Accessories.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Prompted by Mia, Arisa pulled several ornaments out of her Magic Bag that was used for loot from fights. All of them were large, bulky, and heavy, and were mostly made of metal and bone. It seemed some of them were made from human skulls.

“The commanding officer of the riders and a leader nearby the Castle had these equipped. They seemed to be cursed items, but I haven’t researched what they can do yet.”

“It’s just that the miasma is dense; only the one with the skull is cursed.”

According to the AR display, it seemed the person wearing the accessory would gain a “Human Slayer” attack that would attack others. I wondered if a human or a beastfolk equipped it, would they be cursed and have a debuff?

“I wonder if the accessories with metal and jewels in them are worth anything?”

They would be too heavy for your ordinary beastfolk to wear, and what would be even more difficult was finding someone who liked them.

“According to Tiga, if we take it back to the guild, we’ll receive a reward.”

“That may also result in a rank promotion.”

Arcatia was similar to Labyrinth City Celivera in that Magic Cores were to be bought by the guild no matter what. Magic Cores were an important strategic resource, so it made sense why they were so important.

“According to Lord Tiga, Taurus horns and skin sell for a lot. Meat sells, too. However, since it doesn’t fit in the Magic Bag, it’s usually eaten at the fortress or burned.”

“We also did too much hunting and couldn’t fit it in our bag, either. I transported it in my Garage, but I expanded the internal space too much, so the usual magic consumption is high, and it’s a bit tough.”

Arisa’s Garage was a small airship that usually had plenty of space for storage, so it was a little odd hearing her say that. Just how much meat did they bring back?

“If Mia didn’t freeze it with her Ice Spirit, the meat might have been damaged on the way back here.”

“Ice Spirit?”

“Mhm, Frau.”

I asked Mia to show it to me later, as it had piqued my

curiosity.

“All right, I’ll bring it in.”

In the garden, I used Magic Hand to reach into the Garage and retrieve the frozen Taurus remains. There were around 104 Tauruses alone, and combined with everything else, there were over one thousand items in there. It would take a lot to get through. Though, Taurus tasted like beef, so there were plenty of ways to prepare it. I could make a lot of beef jerky with it.

“We leveled up in such a short time, too. The Castle is a great hunting ground.”

“Hmm. Not enough.”

I patted the unsatisfied Mia on the head and pulled her close. Everyone had leveled up, but Mia was the only one who needed a lot of experience points and remained at a lower level than the rest. From what I could see of her experience point bar, before Mia would reach level 55, the others would already be at level 59. They wouldn’t be able to level near the inner wall, so they would have to find a place appropriate to level. I heard Pochi’s and Tama’s stomachs grumble as I was lost in my thoughts.

“Nyeheh.”

“Seeing the meat made me hungry, sir.”

“It’s a little early, but shall we have a banquet to celebrate you guys coming back and you all leveling up?”

Everyone rejoiced at the idea. Roro and the hamsterfolk children joined us as we all enjoyed a lavish feast. I had prepared the food in advance, so all that was left was to prepare the area. There were no large dining tables in Hero’s Rest, so we put down a large blanket in the courtyard.

“Nom, nom, nom.”

“Master’s hamburg steak is the best, sir!”

“Taurus tendon meat is delicious, but Master’s chicken is unbeatable.”

The beastfolk girls were all enjoying the meal.

“Roro, how is it?”

“Everything is delicious, but my favorite is the hamburg steak! Meat dishes aren’t that rare here in Arcatia, but it’s my first time having this. I was surprised at how different the flavor was compared to the meat dumplings!”

“I made it with two kinds of meat that I minced in the mincing machine. It makes it so soft when I use the mincing

machine that was made in a dwarf village."

"Oh, I see! The dwarves are so good at what they do."

Lulu and Roro were enjoying a lively conversation about food.

"Larvae, you don't only have to eat vegetables. You can eat the meat, too, I guess."

Nana was recommending food to the hamsterfolk children that were gnawing on stick vegetables. When Nana tried to offer them some meat, they fervently shook their heads.

"Vegetables, we like."

"Vegetables, delicious."

"Meat, not delicious."

"Protein helps your body, I inform."

Nana kept trying to recommend them meat, but Mia stopped her.

"Force. Bad."

"Yes, Mia. I will stop."

Nana looked disappointed as she looked at the faces of the hamsterfolk and despondently moved the meat away from them.

"It's fine, sir. Pochi will make sure to eat the meat, sir."

"Tama help, too?"

Pochi and Tama both chomped on the piece of meat that Nana still had in her chopsticks. Liza came over and pulled the two away as they happily munched on the meat.

"Beans."

"That's right, peas are often called the 'meat of the fields.'"

"Good idea, I say. The larvae should eat the peas, too, I suggest."

"Peas?"

"Peas, eat."

"Peas, like."

Once they finished eating their stick vegetables, they began to chomp down on a large pea offered to them by Nana. They had to use both hands to hold it. Perhaps they liked it, as they stuffed their cheeks full and began munching happily.

"Looks like they like it."

"Yes, Roro. Children need protein, I declare."

Seeing Nana's relieved face, I returned to my meal. Her eyes were fixed on the hamsterfolk children. When she saw the youngest one almost choke, she handed them water quicker

than a flash of lightning.

“Did you not get sick of eating only meat when you were hunting? There’s plenty of vegetables, so feel free to dig in.”

If I left the beastfolk girls to it. They would eat nothing but meat, so I encouraged them to eat some vegetables, too.

“Yesh.”

“It’s fine, sir! I have a separate stomach for meat, sir!”

Pochi spoke, her other hand clutching on to a hamburg steak.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t made any elaborate meals for a while now…”

“You would have been exhausted from fighting every day, so it’s no wonder you only made simple meals.”

I cheered Lulu up. She was a little upset.

“Ah-ha-ha. That’s not it. You said you spoke with Master, and as a result, you jumped headfirst into making preserved foods, didn’t you?”

“…Sorry.”

Lulu shrank away.

“No need to apologize, Lulu. You’re not the only one responsible for making our meals. Everyone should know that.”

Liza spoke as everyone nodded deeply in agreement.

“In fact, why don’t you show Master the results of your research?”

“Okay, Ms. Liza!”

Lulu pulled out five different types of preserved food from her Fairy Pack and handed them to me. They were mostly brown and black, though one of them was yellow.

“H-here you are, Master!”

“Thanks, I’ll give them a try.”

I accepted the preserved foods and tried them all.

“They’re all delicious.”

She’d made them using materials that could be gathered around Arcatia. I asked if everyone else had tried it, and they all nodded that they had, so I offered some to Roro and the hamsterfolk children to try.

“Pirrim flavor, delicious.”

“Polarri flavor, delicious.”

“Fruit flavor, delicious.”

The hamsterfolk children nibbled on the yellow preserved food made with flavors from fruit. The hamsterfolk children had claimed all of the yellow preserved food, so Roro tried the

remaining four foods.

“They all taste like meat. The black one is really tasty, but it’s made from Taurus meat, right? Only people who are silver tiger–rank would be able to buy this. This one made from Big Hog is delicious, too. The burnt brown-colored one tastes like Big Hog meat, but the texture of the food is like ant meat—it’ll be cheap to make, I guess.”

Roro gave us her thoughts on the flavor as she thought about how they’d sell at Hero’s Rest. Regarding the cost, the latter two seemed good, but she also seemed to like the flavor of the former as well. I decided to combine them with the preserved foods I made with potatoes and meat to improve them.

“Then there’s the dried vegetables. I dried out both the evil broccoli and evil cauliflower and hardened them into blocks. If we put these into soups, we’ll not need to worry about now getting enough vitamins—”

Lulu placed the dried vegetable blocks on the table. The hamsterfolk children all jumped up on the table and started desperately chewing on them from three different sides. It reminded me of when I gifted them some broccoli as a souvenir from a labyrinth, and they did the same thing then.

“Larvae, I will bring back evil broccoli and evil cauliflower on my next excursion, I promise.”

“Nana, happy.”

“Nana, excited.”

“Nana, like.”

Once they finished eating the dried vegetables, they rubbed their heads on Nana.

“Such opportunistic children.”

“I find that cute about them, I declare.”

Nana nodded with a serious expression as Arisa sighed with an exasperated expression.

◆

“Master, the shop that has the Taurus skull on its signboard is the shop that the golden lion–rank adventurers told us about.”



The day after we celebrated the girls returning and them leveling up, Liza and I went to a weapon store near the Adventurers Guild.

“Looks like a nice store.”

As a result of the hot climate here in Arcatia, there were a lot of open-air stores with no doors at the front. *Can’t they have a poster girl outside?* Even the shop had some old beastfolk dude trying to bring customers in. Oddly enough, more stores specialized in weapons made from bone and horns than in weapons made from metals.

“We got a customer, Toppa.”

“Looks like we got a customer, Tappo.”

Two dwarves welcomed us to the shop. They were both wearing something on their heads that resembled cow skulls. They also had a lot of accessories made from bones.

“Yo, we don’t serve new faces ’round here.”

“That’s right, we don’t do business with new faces ’round here.”

“We’re here on Lord Tiga’s recommendation.”

Liza spoke before handing the two dwarves a letter.

“Surprising, it really is from Tiga.”

“Shocking, it really is a recommendation from Tiga.”

The two of them looked at the letter, then looked at Liza, then back to the letter several times.

“Well, all right. Have a look.”

“Well, okay. Have a look for something you want.”

The dwarf called Tappo sat down, while the other dwarf, Toppa, disappeared into the workshop.

“They have weapons made from metals here.”

“That’s right, there are some stubborn folk who insist they only use weapons made from metal.”

Minus the mithril-alloy longsword on display behind the counter, every item in the shop was made from iron. That being said, only about 10 percent of the weapons were made of metal, while the rest were all crafted from bone or horn materials.

“Were the white weapons crafted with necromancy?”

“Most were. Once I learned how to craft them with necromancy, I realized how bothersome it was crafting them with ordinary tools.”

“Mostly, yeah. A lot of the handmade stuff is cheap, but some of it is sturdier than what I can make with necromancy, which

I'm not very good at."

The dwarf who went to the workshop returned and joined in the conversation.

We looked around at the weapons while listening to their explanations. Most bone weapons didn't perform as well as steel weapons, and there was nothing better than weapons made from the mithril alloy.

"Aren't metals, like mithril, more durable?"

"You think we can make that outside our village?"

"We can't craft anything with mithril if we're outside our village."

When I thought about it, even in Bolehart, the dwarven autonomous region, the only place where mithril could be processed was the special furnace hidden underground.

"Depending on the item, bone can be more durable than steel."

"Generally, steel is better at cutting."

"In that case, why are there so many items made from horns and bones?"

I was curious, so I asked.

"It's hot here, so steel weapons are more likely to rust."

So it was a problem unique to areas with humid climates.

"There's even a monster known as the 'last ivy' that causes rust with the liquid it secretes."

We had fought and defeated a last ivy before, but our weapons were protected with magic, so we didn't know how dangerous the liquid it produced was.

"Well, that's not all."

"Yeah, that's not all."

"…Which means?"

"There's no steel nodes around here."

"It's not cheap moving materials out of the labyrinth."

It made a lot more sense why weapons and other items made from metal were more expensive.

"Adventurers usually bring their materials."

It reminded me of a popular game where adventurers would hunt monsters and then improve their equipment with the parts that got dropped.

"Do you not have any magic weapons?"

"We do, inside."

"They're inside."

I asked them to show us, and, surprisingly, they quickly led us farther into the store. No doubt thanks to Lord Tiga's recommendation.

"Most of them are items that dropped from monsters in the Castle and the Demon City."

"There's a lot of cursed items here, too."

"Naught we can do about that. Necromancy works better if the miasma is thick."

"Naught to do about it.

"It's only natural that curses are most likely to appear."

I didn't know necromancy had those sorts of conditions when using it. If I used the miasma stored in the Malice Urn and Chaos Jars we recovered from the demon lord–worshipping cult Wings of Freedom, I might be able to craft a weapon on par with the saber dropped by the demon lord, the Golden Boar.

Well, if we're talking about that kind of weapon, there's still the Black Flame Bone Sword made from the rib of the Boar King sitting in my Storage.

"This is a Magic Spear."

"That's a rare one. Someone found it in a shrine in the Demon City."

It was a Magic Spear with both a large ice stone and a small dark stone slotted into it. It seemed to be named the "Frostbane Bone Spear." I assumed when one charged it with magic, the spear would coat itself in frost. I wondered if the dark stone was there to suck the heat out of it. The base material for it appeared to be Taurus horns. It was a little heavy.

"How much is this?"

"Around two hundred copper."

"I think twenty thousand copper is a more suitable price."

Since their copper coins were smaller than those in the Shiga Kingdom, I figured it would equate to around 180 gold coins. Well, I assumed that was accurate.

"I don't have that many copper coins on me at the moment. Would some gems or precious metal ingots be okay instead?"

"Sure, that's fine."

"Yeah, we prefer that."

I lined up the gems on top of the table. I had put them in my Storage earlier in preparation. Each of them was worth around ten gold coins.

"Whoa! That's perfect!"

“This ruby is huge. One of them would go for around thirty thousand copper coins.”

“This steel is somethin’ else! That’ll fetch around ten thousand, no, twenty thousand copper.”

They were more pleased than I imagined they would be.

The ruby was man-made. I’d taken an old, bashed-up ruby and repaired it with the Stone Object magic spell. The steel was also made from confiscated goods of thieves and pirates, turned back into ingots using Forge Magic. The latter was reworked a bit to adjust the carbon content, but it didn’t take much effort. The dwarves argued over whether they would make them into ingots or keep them as gems. Eventually, they decided on ingots. I handed the Frostbane Bone Spear to Liza. Once she finished analyzing it and comparing its abilities, she decided to add it to her collection.

…Hmm?

I didn’t notice it when I entered, but there was a barrel haphazardly stuffed with bone weapons, the price of which was written on the barrel. The weapons with low durability could be bought for around five copper pieces.

“”Those are traded-in items and newbie necromancer weapons,”” the dwarves explained as I peered into the barrel.

“They’re rather cheap.”

“Only necromancers can repair bone weapons. Bone weapons that are just tied together with a string for a quick fix will break after a few strikes. They can be sharpened, but they become fragile at a much faster rate compared to metal weapons, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

It seemed cheap bone weapons were for one-time use only. I told the dwarves I’d come again as I took my leave from the store.

◆

“Let’s add the bone armor to the new items the Hero’s Rest sells.”

The day after my friends set out on another expedition into the labyrinth, I laid out the prototype weapons and armor and showed them to Roro.

“Bone armor? While I don’t know a lot about equipment,

they look well-made."

While Roro was checking out the bone chest plate and helmet, it seemed she noticed the one-handed longsword that had been singled out from the rest.

"…Is there something different with this longsword?"

"Can you work out what? This is a magic weapon."

I'd tried to make a downgraded version of the Frostbane Bone Spear I'd bought with Liza. However, I'd messed it up. I didn't know if I messed it up due to using a Taurus champion's horn, or if I got too carried away and poured too much magic power into it, or if using an ice crystal in place of an ice stone was a bad idea. Thinking back, it was no surprise I messed it up. I needed to be more careful.

"A magic weapon?! I can't sell such a wonderful product here! It won't sell!"

"Don't worry, we'll keep it behind the counter on display. It'll be something new adventurers can set their sights on."

Knowing that you'd be able to eventually use a strong weapon was a huge point of motivation in a game, after all.

Even with its special abilities, in terms of performance, the weapons I had given to my friends were two ranks above it, and it was around one rank higher than the late-model, forged Magic Sword that was touted as the "Hero's Blade," so it wouldn't cause that many problems. I decided to place a golem in the shop as a deterrent against thieves.

As I was talking with Roro, a customer entered the shop.

"Hello!"

"Ms. Tia! Hello."

Both Ms. Tia, the self-proclaimed "pupil of the Great Sorceress," and Fen, the man who looked like a wolf, entered the store. Fen didn't say anything, instead choosing to lean against the wall near the entrance and stare at Roro.

"Roro, do you know him?"

"No. He's Ms. Tia's bodyguard. I think."

Roro responded as I whispered in her ear.

"Don't mind Mr. Fen. He doesn't mean any harm," Ms. Tia said, shrugging her arms.

Fen mustn't have been too pleased with how Ms. Tia worded that, as he approached the counter where Ms. Tia was speaking with us. He had a fierce look in his eyes.

"Ah, you frightened me. Did I upset you, Mr. Fen?"

“No. This weapon—may I touch it?”

As I gave Fen my approval, he picked up the failed longsword and channeled magic into it. The air surrounding the blade began to freeze—I could tell without holding it that the temperature of the blade had dropped, too.

“That’s a lovely Magic Sword. Did it drop somewhere around the Castle—? Wait, Hephaistos… If I can see the name, it wasn’t found in a treasure chest somewhere… Someone made it, right?”

I was shocked by Ms. Tia’s accurate appraisal, when she lunged at me over the counter. I wished she wouldn’t press against me with her chest—albeit it was rather small.

“Yes, I asked a blacksmith versed in magic weapons to craft it for me.”

Of course—that was a lie. Hephaistos was one of my many aliases. Ms. Tia went on to ask me how I got to know him, so I said I knew him from my time in the Shiga Kingdom.

“Tia, pay for it.”

“Huh? What did you say?”

Fen gripped the weapon as he tested its weight, before asking Ms. Tia to deal with the payment as he sauntered out of the door. I’d never even said it was for sale, so it didn’t have a price, but he seemed enamored enough by it to forget himself and walk right out with it, so I didn’t mind.

“U-uhm, how much is it?”

“One thousand copper pieces.”

““One thousand?!”” both Ms. Tia and Roro said.

“Y-you’re kidding, right?”

“Yeah, it was a joke. I’ll take three hundred pieces for it.”

“Oof…”

“Is that too much? You can still return it, if so.”

Compared to how much I paid for the Frostbane Bone Spear for Liza, I thought three hundred copper pieces was a decent price.

“Ugh, I doubt I’ll be able to. All right, then. I’ll have the money by tomorrow.”

Roro recommended Ms. Tia sit down. As soon as she did so, she drooped her head on the counter like a salaryman who’d just finished an all-nighter.

“Ms. Tia, cheer up.”

Roro spoke, offering her one of our new items—fruit water.

“Wow, that’s so good! What is it?”

“It’s a type of magic medicine. It’s a nutrient supplement.”

I noticed that many of the fruits I bought at the market could be used as materials for potions, so I decided to create something like a nutrient supplement version for Arcatia, using the products introduced by Echigoya. Since stamina-enhancing materials are inexpensive, I could make it much cheaper than those sold in the Shiga Kingdom.

“That wasn’t in the recipes I gave you, right?”

“You’re right. There wasn’t a recipe for it, but when I was reading the explanations about the materials, I realized I could use them, so I tried making it.”

“You made it? In this short amount of time?” Ms. Tia almost squeaked out in surprise as she clutched her empty cup.

“Just…*what* are you?”

“I’m an employee at Hero’s Rest and a relative of Roro’s, I guess.”

I wished she wouldn’t look at me with such doubt in her eyes.

“Ms. Tia, would you like another?”

“Yes please.”

Roro refilled Ms. Tia’s cup with fruit water as Ms. Tia gulped it down, reminding me of a salaryman who was going through a hard time and self-soothing himself with alcohol.

“How much is this?”

“Once cup is around five copper pieces, we’ll say.”

“That’s so cheap! At least make it twenty copper pieces.”

“Is that considering our competitors?”

“Well, that too, but it’s so cheap, I can see some idiots getting addicted to it.”

I had a similar worry. When I worked back at my company, there was someone who drank way more energy drinks than recommended and really did a number on themselves.

“Got it. Then we’ll change the price.”

If it was too expensive, our regulars wouldn’t buy it, so I decided to offer a more watered-down version for five coppers, and the one that Ms. Tia drank for twenty coppers.

“It goes without saying, but I’ll keep the recipe a secret, okay?”

“I’ll make it public eventually, but for now, please buy it here at Hero’s Rest.”

“All right. Looking forward to it.”

After Ms. Tia stretched and sorted her feelings out, she made a huge order for magic medicine. Of course, she also ordered the new fruit water, too. Since she chose a large bottle the size of one sho (about seven and a half cups) to take home, it seemed she really liked the fruit water. As we were chatting, I mentioned to Ms. Tia that I had mastered all of the recipes she had given me, so she told me a place where I could buy new recipe books and find materials that explained all of the ingredients. I decided I’d visit there the next day.

◆

Five days after Ms. Tia’s order, Roro and I, having finished preparing the order, went out to buy materials.

“Big yawn.”

Roro smiled, pointing out my yawn. I hadn’t had much sleep.

“Even though we’ve plenty of time till it’s due, you really pushed yourself, didn’t you?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

The reason I was so exhausted wasn’t because of Ms. Tia’s order. It was because I had been struggling to incorporate the divine stone Castle circuit board into Nana’s golden armor. Since the weight of the armor increased as a result, I wondered if I should have installed emergency thrusters so she could evade attacks quickly. As I was busy scanning through the notepad displayed on the AR, I looked at Roro walking beside me.

“Are you finished shopping?”

“Yes, Mr. Satou,” Roro confirmed.

Her beauty rivaled Lulu’s. She was beautiful enough to cause kingdoms, even continents, to fall, but as we were in Arcatia, an area with a low human population, it was hard to find anyone who would agree. Though, even if there were more humans, it seemed they shared the same beauty standard as that of the Shiga Kingdom, meaning she would become a target of ridicule, similar to Lulu. It was probably best that Roro lived in an area where they didn’t care much for humanfolk.

“You blasphemous fool!”

I was startled by the sudden insult, but it didn’t seem to be

aimed at me.

“Mr. Satou, over there.”

Roro tugged on my sleeve, pointing me in the direction of the insult. There were some men who looked like necromancers arguing with a group of ratfolk priests, who were being led by a head priest. I realized I hadn’t seen many head priests around. That was because there weren’t any temples here in Arcatia.

“You necromancers, you just toy with the dead!”

“Come again?! We only use the skeletons of those who made a pact with us when they were still alive!”

“Hmph! A pact, you say? You force them into servitude, denying them peace in death! It’s unforgivable!”

“I don’t need your forgiveness! Are you denying a poor man’s wish to provide for his family even after death?!”

“You heretic! You prey on the poor!”

Their argument was really starting to heat up.

“I’ll release you from this evil, so-called necromancer! ■—”

“Stop!”

Some children threw an object covered in dirt right at the side of the priest’s face as he began to chant a spell. It hadn’t rained here for a few days, so I assumed it was runosaur dung.

“What are you doing?!”

“Don’t kill our dad a second time! Thanks to Dad working even after death, our sick mother and younger sister are able to eat!”

“That’s right! Our town wouldn’t be here without the necromancer’s skeletons doing all the dirty work!”

“If we didn’t have necromancers, it’d be difficult to turn bones and fangs into weapons.”

“We can’t mine steel around these parts, so weapons would be stupid expensive.”

Other villagers and adventurers spoke up in support of the necromancers and the children.

“Grrr, what on earth is this? To think the necromancers have their Magic Hand in every pot like that.”

The priest groaned with a look of unbearable frustration on his face.

“There’s nothing I can do now. I’ll need to negotiate with the chief priest back in my nation for a holy war—”

“Sir Mokro! You’re here!”

Just as the priest was mumbling threats, a woman wearing a

robe intercepted him.

“…Ms. Tia? Mr. Satou, that’s Ms. Tia.”

Just as Roro said, the woman in the robe was the Great Sorceress’s pupil, Ms. Tia.

She calmed the crowd that had gathered before persuading the priests to go to the Great Sorceress’s tower with her. She was good at that.

◆

“I’m back.”

“Roro, welcome.”

“Roro, lonely.”

“Roro, souvenirs?”

As we opened the door to Hero’s Rest, the hamsterfolk children came bounding toward us, almost tripping over themselves in the process. The youngest one actually did fall over, only coming to a stop when Roro gave them a hug. I put the paper bag I was carrying on the counter and took out an imperfect branch cucumber that was given to us while shopping. A branch cucumber was exactly as it sounded—it was a vegetable from a plant that grew in the labyrinth. The cucumbers were small and thin like branches.

“Mashter, cucumber.”

“Mashter, please.”

“Mashter, quick.”

The hamsterfolk children that had just previously been getting attention from Roro had all gathered around me suddenly, their eyes sparkling as they looked up at me. Ever the opportunistic bunch. Just as Nana said, that was one of their cute features.

The reason they all called me “Mashter” and not my name was thanks to Nana correcting them. When they called me that, it reminded me of the seal children in the capital.

“Wait a moment—”

The branch cucumber I received had a damaged, broken end, so I cut it with the Magic Blade I summoned with my fingertips before giving it to the hamsters, who then began gnawing on it as soon as I handed it to them. The three of them were gluttons. As they chomped down on it, I saw them

reaching for the damaged part I had cut off.

“This part isn’t good.”

I quickly picked up the damaged end, causing the hamster children to look at me questioningly.

“It’ll make you sick.”

Hearing my reasons for it, they gave up, wearing sad expressions as they did so. Of course, that didn’t stop them from feasting on the main part of the branch cucumber.

“Is Roro here?”

Before I could change the sign outside from “PREPARING” to “OPEN,” a customer had come in. It was one of our regulars, Ms. Nona.

“Welcome, Ms. Nona.”

“Sorry for barging in before you open, but I would like three Candles of Direction and twenty of those delicious preserved-food meals. Oh, and one of those insect repellents—the trial version.”

“Guys, could you bring the preserved foods out for me? The ones that smell nice!”

“Got it.”

“Nice smell one.”

“We’ll bring it.”

The hamsters all ran to the storage cupboard, battling it out among themselves to be the first.

“How many insect repellents would you like?”

As the main climate here was a tropical one, insect repellents were a must-have.

“Oh, Mr. Satou is here, too. I guess how many I want depends on how much they cost. I’d like at least one, but if it’s too expensive, I mightn’t be able to buy it.”

“Is it all right if I make it the same price as the Candles of Direction?”

“Huh? That cheap? I’ll take five! Five insect repellents!”

I didn’t make much profit off them, but they were cheap to make, so I didn’t need to make them any more expensive. I had secured Hero’s Rest’s future profits with the recipe, after all. I planned to share it with the Alchemy Guild.

“Thank you for your patronage. I’ve prepared a basket for the insect repellents. Care to try it? It’s a test product, so it’ll be

free.”

“I’ll try it! Thanks, Mr. Satou! This is awesome!”

Ms. Nona smothered me with a hug. I peeled her off me as I headed toward the front door of the store, changing the sign to “OPEN.”

“Ack! Ms. Nona! Touching is forbidden!”

“Ah-ha-ha. My bad, my bad. I won’t go touching your sweetheart, Roro.”

Roro flushed bright red as she turned away.

“M-my sweetheart…”

“Ms. Nona, the shop manager is rather innocent about these things, so please don’t tease her.”

“Sure thing.”

While I told Ms. Nona off, the hamsterfolk children returned from the storage room with the preserved foods. The youngest one fell over—like always—but the other two acted quick and saved the preserved foods.

“Yo, Roro. Are the weapons I asked you to sharpen done yet?”

“I heard you came up with some new preserved foods. Do you have any left?”

“Insect repellent! Sell me an insect repellent! The ones that don’t smell weird!”

While Ms. Nona was paying, more customers flooded in. It seemed it was worth stocking up on various new products as the number of regular customers increased.

“I heard you buy scrolls here for a high price…”

“Mr. Satou, there’s someone who wants to sell their scrolls.”

Oh, my first one since I put out an advertisement.

I Warped over to the count and moved in front of the man holding the scrolls. He looked like a merchant.

“Thank you for waiting. I’m Satou. I hear you have some scrolls to sell?”

“I have around ten.”

“Ten! That’s wonderful!”

The other customers and Roro all looked shocked—probably because I jumped for joy.

“Look and be amazed! Eight of them were made in the Shiga Kingdom, an official item from the Siemmen Workshop.”

“That’s amazing.”

I could see the official Siemmen Workshop stamp on the scrolls. However, unfortunately, it was all magic I already had. I

was excited to see the remaining two scrolls.

“They’re two scrolls that dropped in the Bloodsucker Labyrinth, Sticky Net and Holy Light.”

The first one was a sticky throwing net, a nonlethal binding spell, and the latter was a spell that shot a holy beam at the undead. There was a Holy Magic spell with the same name. However, this certain spell was Light Magic. The Holy Magic spell was an offensive spell that shot out something like a laser, whereas the Light Magic spell worked similarly to Turn Undead.

“This is some rare magic. I’ll buy both of them for thirty coppers each.”

“Huh?! You’ll buy them for that much? And what about the other eight?”

“I’ll pay one copper for each.”

“Why is it that cheap?”

I don’t know how he got his hands on them, but it shouldn’t put this merchant in the red.

“My apologies, but it’s a request from my friend who is a collector. I can buy scrolls that don’t have a high price, but he has a direct trade with the Siemmen Workshop and gets them that way, so that’s why they’re all the same price.”

The merchant accepted the price and took jewels that equaled the full amount as payment before leaving. I gave the merchant a set of some of our new products as a gift. Since he was the kind of person who would come to Arcatia, which was deep in a labyrinth, I felt he would be able to open up a lot of new trade routes for us.

◆

“Is Roro here?”

Once the customers left, a tired Ms. Tia came to the store. Everyone who came to the store always asked the same thing.

“Welcome, Ms. Tia. You look exhausted.”

“Aah, I’m exhaaausted. I can’t deal with stubborn priests. We were so right not to build a church here.”

Dear, dear, Ms. Tia. If you keep talking like that, Roro will find out who you really are.

“What did those priests come here to do?”

“Hmm, apparently, a high-level undead was sighted in the Temple of the Evil God. The Temple of the Evil God that Ms. Tia was referring to was the common name for a temple in the labyrinth created for an evil god. I checked on my map, but there was no sign of any demons or demon lords.”

“It’s a popular hunting spot for beginner adventurers, and there’s only ever low-level undead there, so they wanted to get rid of it sooner than later.”

“If they just want to get rid of a high-level undead, can’t they just send a mage or a Magic Sword user?”

“If they just want to defeat it, then yeah, but we need to purify the area so it doesn’t come back, you see.”

I handed Ms. Tia, who was slumped over on the counter, a fruit juice nutrition drink.

“Ahh, this is what I need. I’m nothing without it.”

Ms. Tia perked up as soon as she saw the bottle. She hurriedly opened the bottle.

“You didn’t put anything weird in this, right?”

Ms. Tia grinned as she gulped the drink down.

“Mr. Satou would never do such a thing!”

Roro immediately shot back. She took Ms. Tia’s joke too seriously.

“I’m sorry. It was just a little joke.”

Ms. Tia shot me a look asking for backup—Ms. Tia had a soft spot for Roro, it seemed.

“Lady Tia!”

The door to Hero’s Rest shot open as a woman dressed in a similarly designed robe to Ms. Tia’s rushed through.

“Lady Tia, Lord Mokro is causing a stir again.”

“Aghhh, agaaaain?” Ms. Tia groaned, obviously displeased.

“Sorry, Roro. I’ll be back another time.”

She spoke as she reached for the bottle, gulping down the remaining drops before giving us a small wave and leaving the store.

“Roro, you here?”

Once Ms. Tia left, the lizardfolk woman came into the shop. She was a business owner who supplied Hero’s Rest with candles.

“Hello, madam.”

“I hate to ask again, but do you know where our Shashi has gotten to? He’s disappeared again.”

Didn't she mention he disappeared last time, too?

"Have you seen him anywhere?"

"No, sorry, I haven't. Do you have any idea where he could be, Mr. Satou?"

I opened my map and found him in the Woodland Labyrinth, not too far from Arcatia. It looked like he was with a necromancer who was a friend, and they were being escorted by undead that were controlled by the necromancer. Their tank was a level-20-ranking undead, so I figured they were out hunting.

"I saw him walking toward the main gate with a friend who looked like a necromancer earlier. They had some undead with them, so I wonder if they were going out to work?"

"Is that so? I hope that's the case…"

The woman seemed worried as she mumbled to herself before thanking us both and leaving.

It seemed mothers worried about their children even in *isekai* worlds, too.

Interlude: The Stray Necromancer

“Whoa, a monster!”

The lizardfolk necromancer Shashi fell on his backside, surprised by a monster that appeared from the distortion layer.

“Skeletons! Attack that monster!”

“My servants! Protect us! Hey, get up, Shashi! You need to order your slaves, too!”

The older necromancers Shashi was traveling with all jumped into action, ordering the undead they controlled to attack the monster.

“O-okay! Fight, slaves!”

Responding to Shashi’s shaky command, the undead raised their staffs and scythes and joined in on the attack against the monster. The undead older frogfolk necromancer, Zanzasansa, commanded, and all were equipped with weapons. However, the skeletons only had farming tools. They were low-level and thus unable to withstand the monsters’ attacks, resulting in a lot of the skeletons’ bones being broken, rendering them unable to move.

“They’re not even able to withstand such an easy opponent. They’re useless, just like their master.”

Shashi bit his lips in response to the criticism from the middle-aged ratfolk necromancer, Zozo. The fact that Zozo, a small ratfolk man, was criticizing a frogfolk who had a more impressive body made a comical scene, but that had nothing to do with Shashi.

Perhaps to avoid watching any longer, an older necromancer stroked his beard as he intervened.

“Let’s not speak ill of one another. Shashi, repair the broken skeletons with necromancy. If you’re able to.”

“Y-yeah. I can do it. I’ll do it. ■■■■■■ *Kokkaku Shuufuku* Repair Skeleton *Kotsugou Shuufuku*.”

Shashi didn’t use a general repair spell, instead opting for a spell specifically for skeletons.

“You did well learning such a minor spell.”

“Eh-heh, i-it’s handy.”

“Don’t compliment him. Using Repair Lesser Under would have been more handy. It can be used on all low-level undead.”

“T-that’s true…”

Shashi sulked in response to the middle-aged necromancer’s scathing criticism.

“Repair Skeleton uses less mana. He made the right choice using it on skeletons.”

“Th-that’s true, yeah.”

“Anyway, get back up. We need to make it to the Temple of the Evil God before nightfall.”

“Y-yessir.”

Shashi stood up after repairing the skeletons, and the necromancers continued their journey. They came up against more monsters, their number of undead decreasing steadily as they finally reached their destination, the Temple of the Evil God.

“Ugh, since we had deadweight slowing us down, it’s already late at night.”

“S-sorry.”

Shashi lowered his head in response to the middle-aged man’s criticism.

“Now, this is the real thing, so make sure to pay attention.”

“That reminds me, what was the high-level undead that was spotted here? Was it a wraith or a wight? There’s no way it’s a ghost, right?”

“We’ll have to investigate that, too. From the information we did get, it doesn’t seem to be a ghost.”

“In that case, it’s a wight or a wraith… If it’s a wight, I’m pretty confident we can get it under control. However, if it’s a wraith, I’m not so sure. Do you guys think you can get it under control?”

“Don’t worry. Just in case, we’ll use the demon lord’s relic, Dark Lord of Necromancy. There’s no undead that will be able to withstand it.”

“That’s a relief. All right, let’s go.”

“Y-yes.”

The middle-aged necromancer took the lead as the three of them followed him to the Temple of the Evil God.

“…That’s right, there is no undead it can’t control. Even if it were simply fighting the remaining traces of the Dark Lord of Necromancy,” the older necromancer mumbled to himself

quietly.

“Did you say something?!”

“Don’t worry yourself about it. It’s just the mumblings of an old man.”

“Huh? Okay. I guess we should head inside.”

“Precisely. There won’t be a path to follow, so we’ll just keep going forward.”

The three necromancers vanished into a darkness where no light could reach, as if resembling the dark fate that awaited them.

The Young Lady's Challenge

Satou here. My friend once said that the typical "ohhh-ho-ho-ho" laugh came from a Showa-era shoujo manga. These days, it's a staple in villainess stories, but I've never heard anyone laugh like that in real life.

"Ta-daaa!"

"We're home, sir!"

The girls had returned from the labyrinth. They went under the pretense they would get Mia her much-needed experience points. However, they ended up staying in the labyrinth three days longer than planned.

"Master, we collected as many ancient land beasts as we could."

"Thank you, Liza."

Taurus materials were a dime a dozen, and it seemed the dinosaur-like ancient beasts were one of the main material resources in the labyrinth, so I just wanted to get my hands on some.

"Larvae, I brought you some evil broccoli as a souvenir, I declare."

"Nana, thank you."

"Nana, happy."

"Nana, pat us."

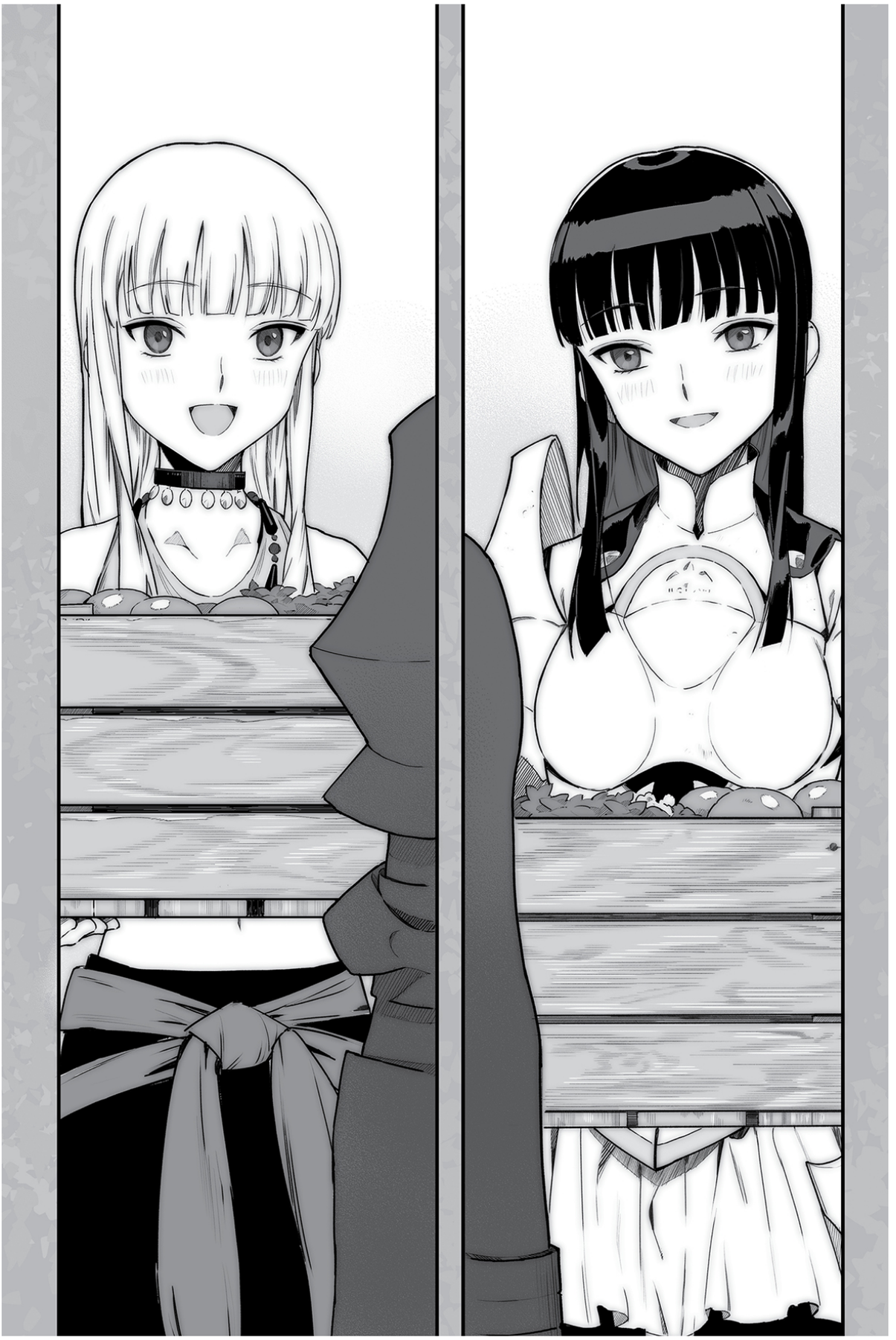
Nana handed the hamsterfolk children some parboiled broccoli. They clung to it and started nibbling on it—they really loved it.

"Mhm, broccoli delicious."

Mia seemed delighted that more people enjoyed the vegetables. Nana also watched over them with a delighted expression as the hamsterfolk continued to chomp down on the broccoli.

"Ms. Roro, here are the herbs and fruits you requested."

"Thank you, Ms. Lulu."



Lulu and Roro really looked like twins when they stood next to each other. It was a miraculous coincidence.

“Master, could you quickly store all of our items? My Garage is filled to the brim. It’s a little rough on me.”

“Sure, let’s do it in the garden.”

Arisa opened her Garage just enough so I could reach in with the Magic Hand and retrieve all the items. There were a lot of small monsters and various types of Tauruses. However, this time there were also a lot of brontosaurus-like ancient land beast carcasses in there taking up most of the space. The size of the brontosaurus-like creatures completely dwarfed a T. rex.

“Each of the smaller ones is separately frozen.”

Before they had put all of the smaller items into one large ice cube, however, this time they had chosen to freeze them all separately.

“That was all thanks to Ms. Liza.”

“Liza?”

“Yes, thanks to the ability of the Frostbane Bone Spear you bought.”

Liza responded from behind me.

“When we defeat the monsters, they freeze, so it’s good for hunting smaller creatures.”

“Yeah, it was really helpful.”

It seemed Liza had come to help us move their spoils, but there wasn’t much else to help with, so I asked about their time in the labyrinth.

“We went to a new place this time. There were a lot of enemies popping out of unexpected places, which made for a good challenge.”

“Oh, it was a challenge, all right. It’d been a while since we had such tough fights.”

“Was it that difficult?”

I thought it would be a piece of cake for them, with the levels they were.

“It was rough in the Castle town. There were champions that would just burst out of walls, champions that would jump down from buildings, a completely red champion that jumped down from a tower on the inside wall… They all just came at once.”

“So, it was all just champions, huh?”

They were large and fast, so it must have been difficult dealing with them.

“Once, we were chased by four units all led by leaders, I report.”

I turned around and noticed everyone else was there, along with Nana who had the hamsterfolk children in her arms. They didn’t seem to like being lifted, as they were struggling and trying to push away from her.

“Oui, oooui? I did my best with Reverse Stooone?”

So she did it with stones, and not with a rug. She’s turning out to be a brilliant ninja.

“Yes, you helped us a lot.”

“Nye-hee-hee. Tama helpeeed?”

“Pochi, too! I did my best with Mr. Fallinks, sir!”

“That’s right. Your reactions were great.”

Pochi and Tama squirmed with embarrassment in response to Liza’s compliments.

“Mia’s spirits helped us with one group, and my Labyrinth spell stopped one group in their tracks, while Nana helped with the champions. After that, we whittled their numbers down as Lulu shot at them and Liza and the others fought them off.”

It seemed some of them ignored Nana’s “Provoke” skill and charged for the rear guard.

“We managed to escape a hairy situation, thanks to Lulu’s ‘Air Cannon.’ Right, Lulu?” Arisa asked Lulu, wearing a cheeky grin.

“Ugh, Arisa, I told you to keep that a secret from Master.”

“Ah-ha-ha, my bad, my bad. I forgot about that.”

“Ms. Lulu, that’s amazing! Even golden lion–rank adventurers avoid fighting champions—they’re so strong! I think that’s so cool!”

“Um, ah, thank you?”

Roro got excited and clasped Lulu’s hands while waving them around, though Lulu just looked troubled. It was cute seeing them like this.

“Pochi was in a bit of a pickle, too, sir!” Pochi declared, jumping up and down.

“Were you injured?”

“No, sir, sir. Mr. Egg appeared and protected me, sir!”

Pochi spoke, lifting her White Dragon Egg to show me.

“The egg protected you?”

When I thought about it, I remember the egg jumping out of the Fairy Pack back in the Pialork Kingdom, too.

“Yes, sir! Mr. Egg knocked the champion out with an uppercut, sir!”

“That’s amazing.”

“Dragons were impressive as always. Even as an egg, it’s looking for a fight.”

“Yes, sir. Pochi and Mr. Egg have a strong bond, sir.”

Pochi embraced the egg and rubbed her cheek against it.

“Pochi, while it’s fine to thank the egg, you should think about what got you into that dangerous situation in the first place.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do some thinking on it, sir.”

Having been scolded by Liza, Pochi put the egg back in its usual spot and sat down for reflection, with both her ears and tail tucked in.

“Roro, you here?”

“Oh, sorry, a customer is here. I’ll be right back.”

“Ms. Roro, I’ll come help.”

Roro and Lulu both headed to the storefront.

“Roro, help.”

“Roro, together.”

“Roro, wait.”

“Larvae, I want you to wait, I say.”

The hamsterfolk children escaped Nana’s grasp and ran after Roro.

“You fussed over them too much, and now they’ve run off,” Liza noted as she watched it unfold.

Mia, with a face that said *This has nothing to do with me*, played a tune for the game of tag.

Tama had curled up in a ball and fell asleep in the shade of a tree. I had taken all of the items out of Arisa’s Garage, and the cooler seemed to be working, as all of the frozen foods were still cold.

“I’ll come help, too.”

“Master, we’ll come as well.”

“You just got back from the labyrinth. You should go rest,” I said as I headed back onto the store floor.

◆

“Ah, so this is the hidden gem of a store!”

“Look at this bone sword. Although it’s that sharp, it doesn’t feel weak at all.”

“Not to mention that’s a decent price.”

“What’s even better than that are those delicious preserved foods that guy had!”

“And the candles that don’t stink!”

“You idiots, don’t forget the insect repellent and magic potions!”

Both Lulu and Roro were seeing the influx of customers in the small shop. The hamsterfolk children who were helping out were so busy, they kept bumping into one another, falling over and making themselves dizzy.

“There’s so many customers here.”

“I wonder if it’s because word got out about our new products?”

Recently, the store had been packed from morning until night.

“Is the person who made this bone sword here?! Please let me study under you!”

“Sorry, I don’t think they’re taking on students.”

Roro rejected the hopeful necromancer—like always. Since I was already at maximum level, it seemed my craftsmanship was a lot better than that of other crafters.

“Master, have you been keeping up with the accounting?”

“All sales and expenditures should be in the account books.”

Roro dealt with all that stuff, so honestly, I wasn’t too sure.

“Ugh, what’s this? All that’s been noted down is the date, the item, and how much it costs. I’m not asking for perfect bookkeeping, but at least manage it with a bit more organization.”

Arisa grumbled as she flicked through the book.

“Tonight, I’ll drum some proper account-keeping skills into Roro.”

“Go easy on her.”

Arisa used to work in a finance office in her past life, so she was pretty serious about bookkeeping.

◆

“Ohhhh-ho-ho-ho!”

A villainess-like laugh reverberated through the busy store. Arisa and I made our way to the storefront. Lulu was talking to the owner of the high-pitched laugh with a complicated expression on her face. Roro was nowhere to be seen. It seemed she had gone inside to bring more products out to the front.

“Why, it’s rather busy here for a backwater store.”

A young girl with blond hair and twintails spoke in a curt tone. Slightly curious about her pointed ears, I checked my AR display. The young woman was a type of fairyfolk, a leprechaun. And just as the stories on Earth went, leprechauns were fond of playing pranks on people.

“Backwater store? Are you lost, by any chance?” Arisa responded in a very unfriendly tone.

“What was that?”

The young girl flinched a little, before puffing out her chest and wearing a smug look as she introduced herself.

“Is that how you think you can speak to me, Kerina Gure, the eldest daughter of the owner of the Ussha Company, one of the biggest stores here in Arcatia? I’ll have you know—”

“Karina Gray? I remember a commercial with an actress like that.”

Sorry, Arisa. I’ve no idea what commercial you’re talking about. It was probably some old commercial.

“Please, have some respect! My name is Kerina Gure!”

Arisa gave in, apologizing to the young lady who had gotten rather riled up.

“Our Ussha family is such a distinguished house that in my great-grandfather’s time, we were granted the title of ‘Merrymaker’ in the Kingdom of Blybrogha!”

I also received the title of “Merrymaker” when I was in Blybrogha Kingdom from Prince Smartith. Was it that important of a title there?

“Ah, uhm! So, Kerena Gure—”

“Again? Ke-ri-na Gu-re! My name is Kerina Gure!”

The young girl scolded Lulu for her honest mistake. She looked a little teary-eyed, too. I felt sorry for her. She reminded me of Lelillil, the Ivy Manor’s house fairy in Labyrinth City Celivera.

“So, may I ask what brings the daughter of the Ussha Company to the Hero’s Rest?”

Since the conversation wasn’t going anywhere, I decided to

ask what brought her here.

“Hmm, hmph! You should have asked me that in the first place!”

The young girl wiped the tears from her eyes as she pointed at me and declared we were in a contest. Just then, Roro returned with the hamsterfolk children.

“…Huh? Keri, long time no see.” Roro addressed her casually.

“Who are you calling ‘Keri’? I’m always telling you to refer to me properly!”

“I call you Keri because if I get your name wrong, you get mad at me.”

“Of course I do! We Blybroghaian leprechauns take pride in our names! You’re not allowed to shorten it or get my name wrong! Absolutely not allowed!”

Lady Keri continued to get really riled up in response to Roro’s sulky response.

“Ms. Roro, is she an acquaintance of yours?”

“Yes, Ms. Lulu. Keri—Kerina Gure—is a childhood friend of mine.”

Roro responded to Lulu’s question. My legs felt a little weird, so I looked down. The hamsterfolk children were hiding behind them.

“Mashter, don’t look down.”

“Mashter, she’ll see us.”

“Mashter, hide us.”

The hamsterfolk children whispered to me. It seemed even they didn’t like her.

“Bah, I’ve long forgotten all of that. I’m too busy working as the vice-representative of the Ussha Company, the number one store in Arcatia! We don’t concern ourselves with the likes of this trifling, insignificant store!”

Keri swatted one of her twintails, which was resting on her shoulder, with enough force to make a plonking sound. Arisa mumbled about how much Keri’s smug expression matched her twintails and about how much she wanted Keri to have drill curls instead, but I ignored it.

“Is that true?”

“Yes, ever since Keri was young, she worked hard for the sake of her company. She’s amazing.”

Roro replied to my question, praising her childhood friend.

“I—I said, don’t shorten my name!”

Lady Keri shouted, though there was a touch of crimson to her cheeks.

“Master, the store is frozen, I declare.”

“Hmm, inside.”

Nana and Mia appeared and brought my attention to all the customers we had left waiting.

“Master, leave the store to us.”

“We heeelp?”

“Pochi is a pro at helping, sir!”

The girls took over managing the store for us, while Roro, Lady Keri, and I moved away from the counter and headed toward a meeting room. Arisa came along, too.

“What are these fried sweets? Why are they so delicious?”

Although she remained polite and ladylike as she did so, she practically inhaled the fried sweets. She seemed to really like them. The hamsterfolk children were hiding behind Roro’s couch, sharing some of the fried sweets among themselves as they chomped down on them. Tama and Pochi seemed curious about the fried sweets, too, so I gave them both one each.

“That reminds me, didn’t she say something about a contest?”

“I wish she’d forget about it and leave.”

I was having a secret chat with Arisa, using the Space Magic spell Telephone. Ever since moving to the reception room where Lady Keri was offered both tea and homemade cookies, she seemed entirely occupied by that instead. I made the cookies with local ingredients back when I was developing sweet recipes when I had some time away from the store.

“Madam, did you run all the way out here just for a tea party?”

“Tomali!”

A beautiful woman called out from the store. Liza had blocked them from going any farther, not letting them come into the room. I signaled to Liza that it was okay to let the girl through, and a short beautiful woman came into the room. Judging from her pointy ears that resembled Lady Keri’s, I assumed she was also a leprechaun.

“Nice to meet you all, I am Lady Kerina Gure’s secretary and Ussha’s salesclerk, Tomali Toloole.”

Do all female leprechauns have names that are difficult to say?

Lady Keri kept making a point of us not shortening her name, but I wondered if people of the same race could do it.

“Madam, if you’re finished with your conversation, shall we head back? All the golden lion–rank adventurers are anxious to meet you.”

“What?! I’m not finished! They trapped me with their delicious baked sweets, and I almost left without doing what I came here to do.”

Damn. She remembered what she had come here for.

“It’s a contest!” Lady Keri jumped up from her chair and declared.

“I’ll let you join the special request from the Great Sorceress! If you can complete this task, this store will also receive the Great Sorceress’s seal of approval!”

“Her seal of approval?”

Roro shouted out—something unusual. It seemed like a big thing.

“Madam, even though multiple trading companies have agreed to join the contest, isn’t it a bit reckless to increase the number of competitors for no good reason?”

“It’s fine! If you lose, I’ll have you teach me your trade routes for Hero’s Rest’s special preserved foods! That’s the wager for participating in the contest!”

I see, if we win, we gain the Great Sorceress’s seal of approval, and if we lose, we have to give up our trade routes.

Well, we wouldn’t have to give anything up. I was the one behind it all. It would be different if we were talking about delivering a certain percentage of the incoming shipment.

“Before we accept, could you let us know what it’s all about? While I don’t think this is the case, you haven’t already finished collecting all the materials for the contest, have you?”

“Of course not! The contest was only issued this morning! No other trading company has it in storage, hence the request from her!”

Feeling insulted by Arisa’s suspicions, Lady Keri got riled up again.

“What are the items?”

“They’re written here.”

There were three items written on the scroll that Lady Keri opened up: masher’s frog tongue, underground lily pulp, and three parasitic mushrooms that grew on the back of a giant ancient land beast. I checked the map, and none of them were available in the city. The young girl was telling the truth.

“I’ve never heard of them before. How about you, Master?”

“I know where to find them, at least.”

According to the map search, the frogs were located in the advanced area, the Sewage Ruins, to the west of the jungle; the lily bulbs could be found in the intermediate upper area, Bloodsucker Wetlands, to the south of the jungle; and the parasitic mushrooms seemed to be in the Castle, designated for the highest-level players.

…Hmm?

I remembered seeing some of the parasitic mushrooms somewhere, so I checked my Storage, and there they were.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wait a moment.”

I pretended to head into the store’s stockroom, took the mushrooms out of my Storage, and returned to the reception room.

“Th-those are the parasitic mushrooms!”

“I thought this was them.”

“How do you have those?”

“The girls got them from the monsters at the Castle.”

“Whoa, so that’s the first objective done already!”

“Wa-waitwaitwaitwait—!”

“What’s wrong, Keri? You sound like a broken record.”

Arisa tilted her head at Lady Keri, who was stuck staring at them.

“Wait!”

Lady Keri tried to reach for the parasitic mushrooms, so I moved them higher out of her way.

“You can’t do that! That doesn’t count!”

Lady Keri seemed very flustered. It didn’t seem she expected me to already have one of the hardest items to get.

“Huh, isn’t that a bit too convenient for you?”

Arisa stood in front of Lady Keri.

“W-well then, I’ll share one of our supply routes with you.”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound that appealing.”

“Then what do you want?!”

Arisa shot a look at me. It was time for me to take over.

“In that case, whenever Roro or the Hero’s Rest needs help, will you come help at least once?”

“Deal! Let’s agree on that!”

She responded immediately. It didn’t take her too long to

decide.

“After all, you’re no doubt in tons of debt. Do you want me to lend you some money or something?”

Lady Keri looked at Roro. Roro blinked in surprise, as if she hadn’t expected to be brought into the conversation.

“Ah, actually, we’ve been making a profit!”

“A profit? The Hero’s Rest? That said, you did have a lot of customers before.”

Lady Keri closed her eyes, deep in thought.

“It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the one making a profit here!”

She pointed right at me.

“I just help Roro out a little.”

“What? That’s not it at all! We make a profit because you keep thinking of new products!”

Roro looked a little mad.

“Hmm.”

Lady Keri had a devilish smile.

“I’ll hire you at the Ussha Trading Company, then.”

“Y-you can’t do that! He works here at the Hero’s Rest!”

Roro clung to me as if trying to hide me. Seeing Roro so desperate, Arisa looked like she was having trouble deciding whether to use her “Iron Wall” or not.

“You’ll make three times more than you do here. Can you start today?”

“Three times more? Mr. Satou?”

Roro continued to cling to me as she looked up.

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan on leaving the Hero’s Rest.”

Roro nuzzled her head into my chest, relieved at my response.

“*Tch*. You’re not like the horse. So loyal.”

Ms. Keri looked disappointed at her failed attempt at a trade.

“…Horse. Wait…”

“It’s not what you think. I only heard about the Gorgoru Trading Company poaching them. You borrowed money from them, didn’t you?”

I see, so that trading company was planning to take over the Hero’s Rest as collateral for the debt?

“Madam, you’re going a little off the topic at hand.”

The secretary whispered in Lady Keri’s ear.

“Hmph, okay, Tomali. Make a request, but no parasitic mushrooms this time. We’re down to the last two chances—let’s

go!”

Lady Keri spoke as she pointed at Arisa. Shouldn’t she be pointing at Roro, the owner?

“Would you like an introduction to the Adventurers Guild?” Lady Keri asked Arisa.

“We don’t need one. Roro has us, after all!”

“You? What level even are you?”

“We’ve not long been in Arcatia, so we’re still silver tiger rank, but we’ve managed to keep up with those at golden lion rank!”

“Is that so?”

The young girl spoke as she looked at Liza and Nana, who were working on the shop floor, almost as if she was sizing them up. She then mumbled a “Well, good luck” to us before leaving the store. Her secretary had been trying to urge her to leave for a while at that point.

◆

Once we saw them off, Roro looked at us apologetically.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get you all involved.”

“No need to worry about it. With conditions like that, even if we fail, we’ve nothing to lose. Plus, it’s not like these girls will lose.”

All the girls smiled confidently as I complimented them. I asked Roro to look after the store while I took the girls into the reception room to let them know where we could find the other items.

“So, what do we need to find?”

“Give me a moment.”

I used “Search Map” to find the item and target it, and then activated the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to observe it and sketch its appearance. I noticed that the range on Clairvoyance had improved. It was probably due to me getting used to using it.

“The masher frogs that live within the Sewage Ruins look like this. When predators appear, they all hide in the sewage to escape, so be careful when hunting them.”

I made sure to warn the girls.

“Frog meat, *karaageeee*?”

“Pochi likes frog meat steak and teriyaki, sir!”

Both Pochi’s and Tama’s appetites ignited at their seeing the sketch.

“Girls, this is a contest that puts Master’s dignity on the line. Please take it seriously.”

“Yesh.”

“Okay, sir. Pochi is maximum-level serious, sir!”

Pochi pointed her fingers to her cheeks and smiled.

“As for the underground lily pulp, which is located in the Bloodsucker Wetlands—”

I tried sketching it like I did the masher frogs, but as they were underground lilies and were in the actual ground, I was unable to faithfully recreate them. The more I concentrated, though, I managed to work out the outline and was able to draw that.

“The outside of the lily pulps look like this. They’re all low-level and mostly roam about a few yards underground.”

I showed them my sketch as I explained.

“Their stems are underground? I thought lily bulbs were like plant bulbs. Why do they grow like potatoes?”

“No idea. Isn’t it just because that’s the kind of plant monster they are?”

Arisa had a good point, but I didn’t know the answer to it. I thought if you cut it open, it would probably grow like a potato, yet it looked and tasted like a lily bulb.

“Lily bulb, delicious.”

“If we get a lot of them, I’ll make us savory steamed egg pudding and other dishes with them.”

“Mhm, excited.”

Unfortunately for Mia, according to the recipe book I received from Ms. Tia, lily bulbs were highly poisonous. I wasn’t sure if there were any recipes for them, but I decided I’d look for a way to enjoy them.

“Both locations are pretty far from each other, so would you like me to go to one of them?”

As I suggested that, Arisa and Liza looked at each other for a while before nodding.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. There’s no way we plan on letting Roro lose this one.”

“Both are new hunting grounds to us, with new monsters, so we won’t do anything unreasonable.”

I felt relieved that they both chose to let the more important matters take precedence.

“All right, which one do you guys want to take?”

“Froooogs.”

“Pochi wants to take the frogs, sir!”

“Lily bulbs.”

Tama and Pochi chose the frogs, whereas Mia chose the lily bulbs. The rest of the group were fine with either. I figured the lily bulbs would be harder for them even with Arisa’s Space Magic and Mia’s Genomos, so I decided to go with that.

“All right, I’ll be in charge of getting the lily bulbs.”

“Hmm…”

Mia didn’t look pleased.

“Why don’t you come with me, Mia?”

“Mhm, go.”

“W-wait!”

“Mew!”

“Pochi also wants to go with Master, sir!”

“I would also like to travel with Master, I declare.”

The girls all got excited when I invited Mia to join me. I had planned to kill two birds with one stone—gather materials and gather some levels for Mia, but it seemed that would have to wait until another time. In the end, because of that so-called no-jumping-the-gun rule, I ended up going alone. As I would be leaving the store for a while, I made sure that the storage was stocked sufficiently and even put a security golem in place, just in case there was any trouble while I was gone. I also made sure to summon a Shadowdive Bat and hide it in Roro’s shadow. It was perfect. I returned Nana’s golden armor that I had borrowed to work on. I had since installed the Castle function onto her armor, but I had yet to try it in an actual battle, so I told her not to try it when I wasn’t around. I had done trial runs with it, but that wasn’t to say there may have been issues in actual battle.

We left Arcatia the next morning, with Roro waving us off.

And on the day we set out, a massive army of the undead attacked Arcatia.

Interlude: Army of the Dead

“Obey me, wraith!”

The old frogman necromancer Zanzasansa held up the Dark Lord of Necromancy’s remains and shouted out a command. The wraith, who had been raining down arrows of ice, stopped. The wraith then slowly lowered down to the ground and stood before the old necromancer and bowed his head.

“Amazing! It actually listened.”

“That’s so cool! Zanzasansa, you’re so cool!”

Both the mousefolk necromancer Zozo and the beginner lizardfolk necromancer Shashi raised their voices in excitement. Managing to control a wraith was something that not even the most skilled necromancers could do. It was an amazing feat.

“Hmph, I managed it somehow.”

The older necromancer had broken out into a cold sweat, but he sounded proud as he stroked his beard and responded.

WZRRRAITTTYH.

The wraith moved its face closer to the old necromancer’s and let out a guttural roar.

The old necromancer fell silent as he stared at the wraith.

“H-hey, are you okay?”

“Za-Zanzasansa…”

Zozo and Shashi both looked at the old necromancer in fear as he began to wordlessly walk off.

“Wh-where are you going?”

“Underground,” the old necromancer responded quietly.

“Underground?”

“Yes. Beyond the hidden passage lies an ancient mausoleum.”

“A mausoleum…?”

“That means there’ll be old remains.”

Zozo picked up Shashi’s muttering.

“Precisely. If I can control the ancient hero, even the Great Witch Arcatia is nothing to fear!”

“That’s it! Let’s go, Shashi!”

“O-okay.”

The necromancers proudly headed into the underground mausoleum.

◆

“Wh-whoa…”

Shashi looked upon one hundred high-level undead soldiers all standing in a line. The old necromancer had turned all of the remains resting in the mausoleum into undead with the power of the Dark Lord of Necromancy’s remains.

“The items they were buried with are amazing. Gems and golden candlesticks so thick with magic power, it’s forming a small mist around them.”

Zozo began putting the items into his robe as he wore a devilish smile.

“I’m a little tired. Shashi, could you revive the rest of the remains?”

“Huh? Me? Are you sure?”

Shashi’s eyes began to sparkle as he looked at the relic the old necromancer was pointing to.

“Wait! Let me use it, Zanzasansa! I’ll be able to do it a hundred times better than Shashi!”

“Mhm. Fine, try and use it.”

After some consideration, the old necromancer handed it to Zozo instead of to Shashi.

“Man… That’s unfair…”

“What’s that? You complainin’?”

Shashi had grumbled about how unfair it was, but he soon looked away after Zozo shot a glare at him.

“Obey me, undead!”

As Zozo shouted, the lids of all the coffins lined up in the mausoleum opened as undead knights rose from them.

They look weaker than the undead Zanzasansa raised earlier, Shashi thought, but he dared not speak that out loud.

“It really does tire you out.”

“Once we get used to it, it should be fine. If anything, you’re better at it than me.”

Shashi tilted his head in confusion upon hearing the old necromancer’s compliments for Zozo. No matter how one looked at it, it was plain to see that Zozo’s undead were weaker.

“Huh, you’re right. I am pretty good at this.”

Not knowing what Shashi truly thought of him, Zozo accepted the compliment, putting him into good spirits. If there were a tree nearby, Zozo probably would have climbed it out of happiness.

“Zozo, the wraith has told me some more information. There are more suitable remains for making into undead just ahead.”

“Nice, I was starting to get a little tired of just having knights.”

Zozo bragged, even though there was a strong look of exhaustion on his face. They made their way forward, occasionally getting their feet caught on stuff when they finally arrived at the destination. Standing before them was an old, rotten throne—with a corpse seated upon it. The corpse was missing its hands, feet, and head.

“What’s this? Only the torso is remaining.”

“It’s the remains of a great king. Once we animate him, he won’t have a need for flesh.”

The old necromancer spoke to the doubtful Zozo. Shashi watched from behind; he felt as if he was stuck in one spot, unable to move forward.

Even just standing here, I feel like the life is going to be drained out of me…

“There’s something…off about this.”

In Shashi’s mind, something akin to a sixth sense, separate from fear, was ringing alarm bells intensely.

The other two necromancers paid Shashi no heed as they continued their conversation.

“I wouldn’t be able to reanimate it, but Zozo, you should be able to do it.”

“All right! Leave it to me. Let’s do this!”

Spurred on by the old necromancer, Zozo rolled up his sleeves and marched toward the remains.

“W-wait. There’s something not right about this, man. Don’t touch it.”

“Heh, stay quiet and watch, coward. I’ll show you just how good I am.”

Zozo was too carried away and disregarded Shashi’s warning as just meaningless noise.

“S-something’s not right—”

The old necromancer silently stopped Shashi as he tried to

stop Zozo.

“…Zanzasansa?”

Shashi looked up at the old necromancer but was rendered speechless by the hateful look resting in his eyes.

“Wake up, you old corpse! The greatest necromancer of this century, Zozo, commands it!”

A black mist began to ooze from the remains. The black mist soon molded itself into a human figure. The human figure looked at its body, then looked around at its surroundings.

“Good, you’re finally awake. Come here.”

Although Zozo was visibly sweating, he still wore a confident expression.

“C…ome…?”

“Yes, I’m your new master. I’m ordering you to come here.”

“Or…der…”

The misty human figure slowly approached Zozo.

“Stop there.”

The misty human figure ignored Zozo’s commands and continued to approach him. It stood right in front of him, the figure’s hollowed eye sockets staring right at him. Zozo was terrified of the deep darkness that seemed to lead to the abyss.

“In the name of the Dark Lord of Necromancy, I order you to do as I command!” Zozo shouted, as if trying to mask his fear.

“Com…mand—”

Zozo grinned at the humanoid figure of mist as it appeared to obey him.

“I… comm…and?”

Realizing the meaning of the misty humanoid figure’s words, Zozo felt his expression freeze in place after the humanoid began to pour dark mist into his eyes, nose, and mouth. It was as if Zozo was paralyzed. He was unable to run or even to turn his face away. All he could do was endure.

The hair in Zozo’s hand writhed like a living creature, coiling around Zozo’s body in multiple layers, tearing through the clothes and digging into the flesh.

“Who-whoaaa! Zanza, Zanzasansa! This is bad! Zozo is, Zozo is…!”

Shashi clung onto the old necromancer in a panic. However, the old necromancer’s devilish grin only deepened. Absorbing all the mist, Zozo heard his cries and screams soon change into unintelligible guttural roars. Zozo then fell onto the floor and

began convulsing, then stopped moving.

"…Zozo?"

Shashi gingerly approached him as he called his name. Zozo's eyes shot open, surprising Shashi and causing him to shout out and fall on his backside. Shashi was so frightened, even his butt cheeks were shaking.

"Is it you, my Majesty, the Dark Lord of Necromancy?" the old necromancer asked with conviction.

"I know not. I hath no name, for I am but a spirit of the dead."

The entity in possession of Zozo's body responded in a dreadful, terrifying voice that would never come from a living being.

"Can you lend us your power?"

"I am weary. Disturb not my slumber."

"Very well. Please rest. I will lock the entrance so that nothing will disturb you."

"Cast away the husk of the churlish one as well."

The being spoke as a gust of mist blew out of Zozo's body and disappeared back into the corpse sitting on the throne. The old necromancer asked Shashi to move Zozo's remains to the outside of a hidden door.

◆

"Zanzasansa, what do we do now?"

"We do what we necromancers always do."

The old necromancer reanimated the body of Zozo, which had combined with the old relic.

"Did it fail? I can't hear the death call coming from Zozo's body."

Talented necromancers were able to hear a sort of groan coming from a body or an undead not too long after their death. However, Shashi couldn't hear it.

"This is a cursed item."

"Really?"

"Yes. Zozo's spirit and body were both tainted by the Dark Lord of Necromancy, resulting in his body becoming a cursed object," the old necromancer responded.

We really wanted to control him, but as expected of a demon

lord, even in death, he was able to control us instead. It was impossible to control him, even with the relics. I felt bad for Zozo, but I'll make sure to put his remains to good use.

The old necromancer had spurred Zozo on—he was trying to get him to take the risk instead of himself.

"If we have this power, our necromancy will grow even stronger. Just like the Tauruses strengthen their underlings, this cursed item will make our cursed knights even mightier."

When the old necromancer grasped Zozo's head and channeled his magic, black mist overflowed from Zozo's mouth and eyes, swirling around the knights lined up in the mausoleum. Shashi was terrified, but he felt a strange feeling, as if a connection had been cut with a warm yet cold blade.

"Zanzasansa! The skeletons at the entrance have been attacked!"

Shashi's connection to the undead he controlled had been severed.

"Adventurers?"

"There were some adventurers, but it felt like they had been cleansed by Holy Magic, too."

"Priests?"

"I think so!"

The old necromancer ordered his familiar, the undead owl, to scout out ahead for them.

◆

"I knew it! There's undead here!"

The head priest Mokro pointed at the cleansed white bones as he jumped for joy. The risen were adventurers and priests summoned from nearby countries' temples to exorcise the wraiths that had emerged in the Temple of the Evil God.

"I can sense something! I can sense evil!"

"Head Priest Mokro, I would much prefer if you didn't go running off on your own!"

The adventurers ran off after Mokro as he jumped into the Temple of the Evil God. The remaining adventurers and priests followed suit, entering the temple.

"Uooooooooh!"

In front of them, Mokro suddenly appeared wearing a

desperate expression.

“S-Sir Mokro?”

Mokro ignored the concerned priests’ questions and ran as fast as he could from the Temple of the Evil God.

The priests were left dumbfounded but turned pale when they heard a cacophony of growls inside the temple.

“R-run!”

There was a huge group of undead behind the adventurers who were late escaping after Mokro.

“You guys are priests, right? Get rid of them with Turn Undead!”

“No need to tell us twice. ■■ *Jouka* Turn Undead!”

The priests all chanted spells, casting holy spells one after another. However, it did nothing to defeat the undead, nor did it stop them in their tracks. The adventurers and priests threw their belongings to the ground and ran for it after Mokro.

“Why are you unable to do anything about them? Weren’t you all just bragging about being impressive priests?!”

“We can’t do anything against high-level undead like that! We’re just ordinary priests!”

“If ordinary priests can’t do anything, how about that dawdling mouse?”

“…Dawdling mouse? Heh-heh, Sir Mokro may be able to do something. After all, he came here to get rid of the wraith.”

The priests let out small laughs at the accurate nickname for Mokro.

“Sir Mokro! You can deal with these, right? Do something!”

“You think I can deal with a group of high-level undead like that?! Once I got done with the front line, I was swarmed by another group after them!”

“So, what are you gonna do? We can’t really run away.”

“That’s right, Priest Mokro. The dead will seek out the living. If we leave them like this, they’ll find their way to Arcatia.”

“Let’s look at it this way. As long as there is a wall outside of Arcatia, it’ll defeat all of the undead one by one!”

The adventurers and priests all made a break for it, heading for Arcatia while out of breath. Following them were undead who would simply not tire.

◆

“Hah, hah, hah, charge! My soldiers!”

The old necromancer stood among the army of undead as he chuckled to himself. The old man was standing in a watchtower placed high on the shell of a giant turtle undead—Grudge Turtle.

“This is bad, man. At this rate, everyone will die, man.”

Shashi, who was currently seated on the shoulder of an undead Taurus, mumbled to himself. The whole situation had gotten a lot worse than he anticipated, and he had played a part in it. He no longer knew what to do.

“I can see it, the Great Sorceress’s tower.”

Shashi looked up in response to the old necromancer’s cheerful voice. Through the gap in the dome-shaped wall over Arcatia, there stood a tower. It was a tower Shashi was used to seeing since his childhood—and there was a possibility it would no longer be standing, due to their actions. That scared Shashi.

“Just wait, Arcatia! You’ll fall by our hands!”

The old necromancer exaggerated his disdain toward Arcatia, as if blissfully unaware of Shashi’s feelings.

The Defense of Arcatia

Satou here. You often hear stories overseas of countries defending their cities, but I feel like there are hardly any such stories in Japan. I guess attacks on castles were more common in the Warring States period.

“So this is the Bloodsucker Wetlands—?”

I had come to the Bloodsucker Wetlands to collect the underground lily bulbs for the contest between the lady from the large trading company and the Hero’s Rest.

“…According to the map, it should be around here.”

I had been avoiding other adventurers at the Wetlands by traveling just above the height of the weeds. The Wetlands were filled with crocodiles and ancient land beasts—the adventurers here weren’t looking for the lilies deep in the ground, but instead had their sights on the monsters here.

“I’ll dig around.”

I chose the magic spell Pit from my magic menu and used that to dig a hole around sixty-five feet deep to gather the lilies. As I was waiting, a lily bulb popped out, and I used my Magic Hand spell to grab on to it and pull it out. It looked like a writhing underground stem, twisting and squirming in a creepy way. After using the new spell Sticky Net from my magic list to immobilize it, I gouged out the core with my fairy sword and delivered the final blow. When I used it from a scroll, even the weakest enemy could only be held for a few seconds, but the Sticky Net from my magic list showed impressive immobilization power. Since it disappeared when the supply of magical energy was cut off, it seemed like it would be a handy, nonlethal binding spell in the future.

“Well, I’ve come all the way here. I may as well gather a few samples—”

I spent around three hours collecting various samples of the monsters, vegetation, and other items I could use in alchemy

from the Wetlands. There were a lot of weak creatures in the labyrinth, but there were plenty around, so I didn't have to worry about overhunting them. I found a place that looked like no one else went to and used Pit and Create House and built myself a small shelter underground. I marked it as a return point and engraved a seal so I would be able to return to do gathering in the future.

Kiikii.

I heard the sound of a bat. It was the bat I had hidden in Roro's shadow. It seemed like something was happening where she was, so I used my Return spell and returned to the Hero's Rest.

"I'm back, Roro."

"Ah! Welcome back, Mr. Satou. What a relief. You didn't go to the Wetlands yet, did you?"

Roro seemed relieved that I had returned. I didn't want to confuse her and explain that I had just gotten back from the Wetlands, so I didn't bother to correct her.

"If you're here, you'll be fine. All right, I'm heading off now. I need to quickly take refuge in the guild!"

It seemed the regular shopkeeper, Ms. Nona, was here, too. She didn't say much more than that before she dashed out the door. She seemed to be in a rush.

"Did something happen?"

"Yes! Apparently, there's a large group of undead headed for Arcatia!"

I checked my map to confirm what Roro was saying—and she was right. There was a huge group of undead headed here. There were a lot of monsters in the labyrinth, and with the distortion, it was difficult to see which way they were moving, so I didn't notice until Roro mentioned it. It seemed to be a large group of various undead. There were a lot of them, but most of them were under level 20, and around a hundred of them were cursed knights that were around level 30 to 40. There were also undead Tauruses and ancient land beasts, too.

It didn't seem like demons were involved this time. I couldn't see any demons or demon lord believers. We probably had Ms. Tia and Fen to thank for that.

"Mr. Satou! It's fine! We have the Great Sorceress here, after all! She'll defeat all the undead with her amazing magic!"

"Mashter, relieved."

“Mashter, okay.”

“Mashter, souvenirs?”

Roro and the hamsterfolk children tried to cheer me up. It seemed I had worried them as I had stood silently looking at the map. However, the youngest hamsterfolk child didn’t cheer me up and instead asked about their souvenirs.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m not worried or anything. I was just wondering if there is anything we can give the adventurers who are defending the city.”

“In that case—”

Just as Roro began to speak, the door opened with a *slam!* as a rhinocerosfolk wearing Adventurers Guild staff clothes came in.

“Hmph, a smooth-skin store, eh? As we’ve entered a state of emergency here in Arcatia, in according with the charter, I am to confiscate all your goods!”

He glared at us before slamming three sheets of paper on the table. I scanned over the contents.

“One hundred stamina potions, twenty antidotes, twenty Cure Paralysis potions, three hundred preserved foods, and as many arrows as we have—”

We had all of that in Storage, but it was a little difficult for us to give up as a store, I thought as I frowned, looking at the first sheet of paper.

“I see the other two pieces of paper are for other stores. I’ll hand you those back.”

I passed it back, but then the staff member angrily pushed it back to me.

“They’re not. I hear you’ve been profiting excessively through unscrupulous business practices lately. The other two stores are owned by tigerfolk and lionfolk who break their backs running them. This time, you’re covering for them.”

The staff arrogantly leaned back, gesturing for me to hurry up with a cocky motion of their chin. I used my “Pickpocket” skill to steal the other two pieces of paper from Roro’s hands as she picked up the three sheets of paper. I then rolled them up into a ball and threw them straight at the staff member’s throat.

“I refuse. Please hand these sheets out to the stores written on the sheets.”

We had more than enough at Hero’s Rest, and if I was helping out a store that needed help, I wouldn’t have minded,

but the staff member's attitude ticked me off. If the other stores were struggling that much, I'd help them.

"Huh?! What do you think you're doin', smooth-skin?!"

The enraged staff member grabbed me and Roro. Before he could wrestle me to the ground, Fen swooped in like a gust of wind, grabbed the staff member's head from behind, and lifted him off the ground.

"What are you doing to Roro?"

"Ack, ackackkk."

The staff member seemed to be in pain. I looked closely and noticed Fen's claws were digging into the man's head. It looked painful.

"Mr. Fen, that's enough."

Since it seemed like things were about to turn gory, I asked Fen to release his hold.

"Ack, you idiot! Yo—? You're, you're the Great Sorceress's mooch—"

The staff member angrily turned his head around, only to turn pale when he realized who Fen was. He seemed easily intimidated.

"…Get lost."

Fen abruptly spoke as the staff member, confused, ran out of the Hero's Rest. I checked my radar and noticed around five skeletons were waiting outside—they seemed to be his escort back to the Adventurers Guild.

"Uhm, uh, thank you."

Roro appeared from behind the counter and thanked Fen.

"Don't mention it. I owe you a lot more," Fen responded.

"Huh? What did I do?"

Fen ignored Roro, who didn't understand what he was referring to, then looked at me.

"I'll deal with the enemies outside. Look after Roro."

"All right."

Fen left the store like a gust of wind—just like he had entered. It seemed he was worried about Roro and came to check on her. Plus, it also seemed like he owed Roro for something, not that Roro knew what she had done for him.

"I wonder what that was all about?" Roro asked.

"Who knows? Maybe Ms. Tia asked him to come check on you."

Roro first tilted her head in confusion, but then seemed to

accept my explanation as she returned to preparing the special items the guild requested.

“I guess so. Guys, help me with this, please.”

“Roro, help.”

“Roro, do our best.”

“Roro, like.”

The hamsterfolk children followed Roro to the storage room. I finished preparing the potions and produced several barrels of a basic health recovery potion equivalent, enhanced with a Water-Boosting spell. With Fen getting involved, I doubted they would be fighting the undead for long, but I suspected there would be a lot of injured adventurers if they got involved, too.

“That’s everything. All right, please take them to the guild.”

Roro politely bowed as the skeletons nodded, their bones creaking as they made their way to take the goods to the guild. I didn’t like horror movies or anything, but I found the skeletons endearing.

“All right, should we take refuge?”

“Please wait. There may be more customers, so I want to wait here at the store a little longer.”

Since I was there with her, Roro wouldn’t be in any immediate danger, so I decided to go along with her wishes.

“Fine with me. But if no customers come, we’ll go take refuge, okay?”

“Okay, Mr. Satou.”

I prepared a variety of good-value item sets to hand over to customers if any came to the store. Then there was a voice calling for Roro as she returned to the storefront.

“Roro! Have you seen my son?”

It was the lizardfolk lady. She saw Roro and had come running up to her.

Her son was a necromancer Roro had known since she was younger.

“Shashi? No, I haven’t seen him.”

Roro shook her head. The lady then looked at me, a pleading expression in her eyes. I looked at the map and noticed he was right in the center of the huge mass of undead. He was riding on the back of an undead Taurus, trying to flee. Judging from the speed he was going, it didn’t seem like they’d catch up to him.

“Your son is a necromancer, right? Maybe they’ve summoned

him to the guild."

If he made it back to Arcatia, there's a high chance he would report to the guild. It would be better than searching through the city in this state of chaos.

"Good point. I'll try asking at the guild."

The lady thanked us several times before leaving. She seemed to half believe us and half doubt us. Once she had left, a bunch of our regulars came in and bought up all the potions and support items.

"I'm so glad you're still open!"

"We've just gotten back from the labyrinth. We had no time to restock."

"Is it really okay to take all this?"

"Yes, of course it is. Please come back safely."

"All right! Leave it to us! We'll protect Arcatia no matter what!"

The regulars all left wearing smiles. We had given the regulars trial calorie bars that could be eaten in battle, antidotes, stamina potions, and wooden tags with lucky runes carved into them. We had a lot of them in Storage, so it was no big deal. They cost mostly nothing—other than the work I had put in. The regulars never called Roro a smooth-skin, so we ended up being fairly generous with them. Once we had finished serving customers, I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to inform Arisa and the others about what was happening in Arcatia.

"Oh, my goodness! I know it's probably fine with you there, Master, but we'll finish up here as soon as we can and head back."

"It's really fine. You don't need to rush back."

"In that case, we'll hurry back—but we'll be careful."

Arisa spoke and then hung up the call. Judging from where they were at the moment, they weren't far from the place they needed to be to get the frogs, so I couldn't imagine it taking them long.

Around the time the store quieted down, I heard the sound of a gong in the distance, followed by a cacophony of voices.

"It looks like the battle has started."

"Don't worry, Roro. Believe in Ms. Tia and our regulars' abilities."

I used the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to monitor the battle from afar.

◆

“Don’t attack recklessly! Follow the commander’s orders!”

The defense team and adventurers seemed to be attacking the large horde of undead advancing on the ground from the balcony-like towers built on the dome’s outer walls.

“Shoot your arrows after applying magic to them, or a Decaying Enhancement potion! If you fire them as is, it’ll do nothin’ to the undead!”

“The Fire Magic team, along with the Fire Staff squad, burn the enemies’ front lines! Don’t accidentally incinerate the thorn barrier and speed up their advance! Leave the flying undead to the wind mages!”

“Light Magic team, don’t attack, focus on defensive spells! They’ll be throwing Dark Magic spells and curses at us!”

The veteran adventurers were advising the new adventurers in the fight against the undead. Thanks to their efforts, it seemed their attacks were successfully ravaging the undead’s front lines. It seemed Fen had no long-range attacks. I found him standing in the defensive unit command post, arms crossed as he watched over the battle. Even the Great Sorceress herself wasn’t attacking the small fry undead with her advanced-level skills. I wondered if they were aiming to let their subordinates handle the attack, allowing them to improve and level up, rather than just preserving their mana and power. The commander was skilled, and so far, there had only been light injuries and no victims. However, it seemed that the sheer numbers of the undead were overwhelming.

“The leading undead have clung to the outer wall… They’re climbing up!”

The undead were climbing up the steep wall.

“Shall we use the oil?”

“Yeah… Actually, wait.”

A small bird flew to the commander and perched itself on his shoulder.

“We’ve received an order from the Great Sorceress! Ignore the undead climbing the walls! Focus on the undead that are closing in!”

It seemed they trusted the Great Sorceress, as both the defensive team and the adventurers followed the orders

without question. When the undead climbing the wall got close to the balcony, the wall shone with light and sent the undead flying backward. The undead fell around thirty-two feet, colliding with the undead beneath them, inflicting enough damage that they were unable to move afterward. It was a pretty efficient way of defeating them.

It didn't seem like the enemy had revealed their true power, and if it continued as it was, I wouldn't need to get involved. Fen and the Great Sorceress were covering the rear guard, too.

◆

"Roro, screams."

"Roro, outside is strange."

"Roro, scared."

Hearing the hamsterfolk children's voices, I returned to the present situation. The hamsterfolk children that were peeking through the store entrance to the outside came running up to me.

Red markers.

On my radar, several red markers appeared. I used Warp to move toward the entrance, and I carefully kicked the skeleton that appeared after the hamsterfolk children, making sure not to destroy it as it landed in the street. I made sure no one was in the street and then used a Sticky Net spell to restrain it. Considering that this may be someone's ancestor, I was gentle with it.

"That's the post office's…"

I heard Roro mumble in a daze. Now that she mentioned it, the skeleton I had ensnared was wearing a sash from the post office. I heard another cry.

"Roro! Close the door and wait here!"

I shouted as I ran toward the source of the scream. Its owner was a deerfolk woman surrounded by skeletons. I knocked the skeletons down and trapped them in place with a Sticky Net, making sure the woman didn't see.

"Please take refuge at your home."

"O-okay! Thank you!"

The woman fixed her clothes before running off toward her home. Luckily, she recognized me as someone from the area. I

checked the map and noticed that skeletons were attacking the humans in the center of the city and various battles were taking place. The damage wasn't as severe as I expected, likely because some of the adventurers stationed on the outer wall had returned to the city.

Normally, I would have spammed the Remote Stun spell for crowd control, but against low-level skeletons, that could lead to total destruction. Considering the feelings of their families, I hesitated to choose that option lightly, but at this rate, it seemed like the civilians might become victims.

"Kyaaah!"

I heard Roro's scream from the direction of the Hero's Rest and the sound of something smashing. My radar informed me that one of the skeletons had broken in through the back garden. I used Warp to return to the Hero's Rest and rendered the skeleton useless using Sticky Net. The golem I had left for protection already had a hold of the skeleton, so it got caught in the Sticky Net, too.

"Are you all right? Roro?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine."

The hamsterfolk children had passed out near Roro's feet, though they were still stuck in fighting poses. It looked like their fear had gotten the better of them. I should have fortified the Hero's Rest more. I took the Sticky Net off the golem—who seemed less than impressed by it—before tying the skeleton up with the one from before and throwing them outside.

"The streets are safe! The civilians who were late to evacuate, head to the guild for safety!"

I heard a man's voice shout in the streets. He didn't seem like an official from city hall but instead an attendant to the Great Sorceress—though, it reminded me. I remembered Ms. Nona telling Roro to go to the guild for safety.

"All right, let's head to the guild, too."

"Okay."

I picked up two of the hamsterfolk children as Roro picked up the youngest one, and we left Hero's Rest. As far as I could see on the map, the skeletons were drawn to the living, and there were no skeletons in the empty buildings and areas. As we headed to the guild, we came across others who were also looking to take refuge there, and they joined us. There were some skeletons attacking civilians, but I didn't need to get

involved, as there were various capable beastfolk already taking care of them. It seemed there were a lot of people who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty—after all, they did live within a labyrinth.

"…Ah!"

Roro was looking toward a timber storage space. Hiding in the shadows there was a young necromancer. He was curled up in a ball, trembling as he mumbled something.

"Shashi?"

It was the lady from the candle store's necromancer son. He had managed to escape the horde of undead and was hiding within Arcatia.

"Something seems off. Roro, wait here with the children."

I handed over the hamsterfolk children, who were sleeping soundly, to Roro, and then I approached the young man—Shashi.

"I'm not bad, man. The bad one is Zanzasansa, man. He told me to do it. I'm not bad, man."

Was he being crushed by guilt and trying to escape reality? He said a name I didn't recognize, so I searched for it and found someone by the name of Zanzasansa standing behind the horde of undead.

"…Are you the one behind this?"

"Wh-who're you, man? I—I don't know. It's not my fault, man. I'm not bad."

I figured I'd ask him directly, but he seemed to be far gone.

"So, who is bad, then?"

"Wh-who? Za… No one. It's society's fault. Society exploits us."

He didn't want to rat out his friend, so he used society as a scapegoat instead.

"Shashi!"

The lady from the candle store saw Shashi and ran over to us. Since he wasn't at the necromancer guild, she probably took to the streets to look for him in the chaos.

"M-Mom…"

"I'm so glad you're safe."

The lady embraced Shashi.

"Let go of me! Why are you here? Why are you always like this? Everyone treats me like an idiot. Everyone says I can't do anything by myself, that I'm some idiot that can't do my job.

Why does no one see me for who I really am?”

Shashi pushed his mother away and began yelling toward the sky. It was no way for him to be talking to his mother. Even if he was trying to escape reality, something seemed off. Even if he was suffering from some sort of mental affliction, something really didn’t sit well with me. I used my “Miasma Vision” skill and noticed his chest was filled with stagnating miasma.

“Excuse me a moment—”

…Ugh.

Within his heart, there was a bluish-black hand clinging to it. It was the source of the miasma. It could have also been the cause of the skeletons turning violent, too. I activated the Spirit Light at full strength and purified the spreading miasma.

“Shashi! Wh-what’s with that hand?” the lady asked as she looked at his chest.

“Shut up! It’s got nothing to do with you!”

“What *is* that hand wrapped around your heart?”

Although she was scolded by Shashi, she asked again. This time, Shashi actually answered. It could have been the result of my “Interrogation” skill.

“My friend put it there. He said I had a big part to play, man. I said I didn’t like it. But he said if I refused, I’d end up as a cursed object like Zozo.”

Shashi closed his upper jacket that had come undone and grasped it tightly as he mumbled. It seemed his friend had used and discarded him as a tool.

“Why—?”

“Don’t touch him.”

I pulled the mother away as she reached for the cursed object, and I summoned a tower of purifying light using the Holy Stone I retrieved from my pocket. It was a little flashy, but this was the best way to stun someone. I restrained the stunned Shashi with Hand of Reason, and, just like when I removed the remnants of the demon god from the hero’s body in Parion Province, I peeled the cursed object from Shashi’s chest. It was a little difficult, but it was a lot easier compared to the demon god remnants. I stored the cursed object and Holy Stone in my Inventory while overlaying the illusion of Light Magic that showed them turning to ash.

I then removed the light and informed Shashi’s mother that I had removed the evil. The mother clung to her son and burst

into tears.

“You said you’d play a big role, right? What was your role?”

I figured it was to send the skeletons haywire, but I decided to wait for him to confirm it.

“I don’t know, man! I was just told to go right into the center of the city!”

“And you just went along with it?”

I at least thought he would have asked what was going to happen.

“I just followed along! I don’t want to die, man. If I die, then I’ll just be treated like other undead, just made some random necromancer’s slave for an eternity. I don’t want to be a slave!”

He spat out his true feelings. His face was wet with his tears.

“Father isn’t a slave! He’s working hard to ensure we’re happy, even in death!”

A group of children interrupted, grabbing Shashi by the scruff of his collar. Before I knew it, we were surrounded by people who were all looking at us. It seems the Holy Stone earlier attracted attention.

“The kid is right. My dad also became a skeleton, but he helped raise me. Once I was a grown man, his work was done, and he now sleeps peacefully in Arcatia’s cemetery. He’s no slave.”

A bearfolk man pulled the children away from Shashi as he spoke in a calm tone.

“A necromancer said we have to treat the dead with respect. We’re a city in the middle of a labyrinth. We might one day die and leave our children behind, but even then, thanks to the necromancers, we can look after our children even in death.”

Another woman spoke, wearing a proud expression as she looked at Shashi.

“You should know that yourself, being a necromancer here in Arcatia.”

An alligatorfolk man spoke, wearing a wise expression.

“…You’re wrong.”

Shashi shook his head. He looked exhausted.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’ve never heard the voice of the dead, so you can all easily say that,” Shashi spat out, his face filled with anguish.

“The undead, those who have died, they all let out a cry of regret. You’re all being fooled by the Necromancer Guild and

the Great Sorceress.”

“That’s not true!”

“Exactly! He’s lying!”

The people around us began to deny Shashi’s shocking statement.

“Look at this. My mother returned to her grave, but she stays within this protection talisman, and she’s looking over us even now. You can’t fake the warmth I feel from it.”

A gorillafolk man took out a bone talisman he wore around his neck and showed it. I used my “Miasma Vision” skill to look at it—there was a female presence within the talisman.

“If you were a real necromancer, you’d be able to hear her.”

“I can hear her, man. She’s suffering even now.”

He’s wrong.

The spirit of the man’s mother in the talisman was shapeless and completely white. The miasma… Or rather, there were no negative emotions or any stagnant miasma.

“What did you saaaay?”

“Did that upset you? But it’s the truth, man.”

Even though the gorillafolk man had Shashi by the scruff of his collar, Shashi looked up at him with a twisted, submissive smile fueled by sadistic pleasure. It felt less like he was trying to provoke the man than looking down on an ignorant fool.

Wait a minute.

I used my “Miasma Vision” skill to have a closer look at Shashi and noticed in the space between his eyebrows there was a small amount of miasma—it looked as if he’d been marked with a curse.

“Hold on.”

“Keep your nose out of this!”

“I’ll sort this out.”

I pushed aside the gorilla man, who couldn’t bring down his raised fist because Shashi’s mother was in the way, and reached out to Shashi’s face.

“Stop! I swear, he’s a good boy!”

Shashi’s mother pleaded from behind me.

“Is this something every necromancer carves into their forehead?”

“F-forehead? Do I have something there?”

If he didn’t know he had it, did that mean he had been cursed?

I was able to easily dispel the curse—it was a lot easier than removing the curse from Rei back on Paradise Island. The moment I dispelled the curse, the evil spirit of a frog appeared from Shashi's forehead and attacked me, but I was able to get rid of it with just a wave of my hand.

"…Zanzasansa?" Shashi, who saw the evil spirit, muttered. It seemed he recognized the spirit.

"How are you feeling?"

"My head feels a lot lighter. What did you do?"

"You were cursed. Have another look at that man's talisman."

Shashi did as I told him, and he looked directly at the talisman—he looked astonished.

"You're the person from before, right?"

Shashi was having a conversation with the woman residing in the talisman.

"You don't regret anything, right? Are you satisfied?"

I couldn't hear anything, so it seemed they were using a specific ability.

"You really weren't a slave, huh…?"

Tears poured down his face as he hid his face in shame from the onlookers. I was glad everything was resolved. Even then, while I didn't know who put the curse on him, it was a horrific thing for them to do.

"There he is! One of those awful necromancers!"

A man wearing priest clothes made his way through the crowd of people. I remembered him being one of the priests invited to talk with the Great Sorceress.

"That miasma! There's no mistaking it! He's the one controlling the undead within the city! Under the name of Heraluon, I will punish you!"

The priest charged toward Shashi, brandishing a mace.

I should have kept the light from the Holy Stone out for a bit longer.

"Wait, wait a moment!"

"Keep out of it, woman!"

The priest looked at Shashi's mother, who was covering him, with a disdainful look. It looked like he was about to hit her with a mace, so I got between them and stopped him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The priest glared at me as I stood in front of him, blocking him.

“Let’s not be hasty now.”

He tried to swing his mace again, so I stopped it in its tracks and held his arms down.

“How dare you interrupt my righteous justice!”

“I’m just stopping any unnecessary violence.”

“Who do you think you are?! I’m a priest employed by the Great Sorceress herself!”

That, I knew. But according to Ms. Tia, he was here to deal with the high-level undead, the Evil God.

“Did the Great Sorceress ask you to deal with the skeletons going out of control within the city?”

“Sh-she didn’t! I took it upon myself to cleanse the streets of them based on my righteousness and sense of duty.”

The priest mumbled, choosing to be cocky, and relayed his virtuous deeds instead.

“That’s right! I saw it! He turned all of the skeletons into ash using his Holy Magic!”

“Exactly! I got rid of the evil undead with my Holy Magic!”

The priest probably thought he was being praised for his deeds, but the young man who had spoken up was wearing an expression of disgust.

“That’s right. You turned them into ash… I’ll never be able to see my father again.”

“Wh-what?”

“Give me my grandfather back!”

“And my grandmother!”

The children began to throw rocks at the priest. It was probably their ancestors whose skeletons the priest had turned into ash.

“I-it’s my duty as a priest—”

“I know that you’re the ones who brought the undead to Arcatia in the first place!”

The priest’s excuse was interrupted by another beastfolk man.

“What’s that? It’s his fault!”

“N-no, you’re wrong! It’s a misunderstanding!”

The priest began to plead. From the way they anxiously darted their eyes around, it seemed that it was indeed true that they brought the undead to the fortified city.

“Gyaah! Shutupshutupshutup! It was the necromancer’s fault in the first place! That’s right! They’re the ones that turned the

skeletons into brutish monsters!”

The priest was eager to get the heat off him, ignoring the main point at hand. However, that did nothing to quell the anger of those whose families’ remains were turned into dust. Just as people were starting to throw the rocks with more force and quantity, the priest made a run for it.

“Shashi, is it really your fault that the skeletons are attacking?”

“It’s not! It’s not my fault. I was cursed! I’m a victim! I’m—”

“Shashi!”

Shashi’s mother smacked him with her hand right as he started to play the victim again. The dry sound of the slap reverberated around us as Shashi stood speechless, an expression of shock on his face.

“If you truly are a real man, then take responsibility for your own mistakes!”

“M-Mom?”

“I’m sharing half the burden of your crime. That’s why I’m here—I didn’t run. I’m accepting the punishment.”

“Mom—”

Shashi seemed lost for words after being scolded by his mother.

“All right. I’ll take responsibility. Zanzasansa said if I use this, everything will stop. With my life as a sacrifice—”

I quickly snatched whatever Shashi was trying to activate from his hand. Shashi looked determined.

“The hell you doin’?!”

“This is a Magic Item that turns people into demons. If you use this, it’ll fix nothing. If anything, it’ll just make it worse—though I suspect that was the intention.”

“What…?”

Shashi placed both hands on the ground and hung his head in shame. The so-called Zanzasansa had no plans for Shashi other than for him to be a pawn to be used. Considering when the spirit appeared after I cleansed Shashi’s curse, and Shashi then saying his name, there was no doubt in my mind they were one and the same. He seemed like a real piece of work. I checked the map, and I couldn’t see any long horns or short horns. He was probably hiding them in an Item Box or some such place, so I decided to warn the higher-ups of the defense group.

“Do you know what Zanzasansa is aiming for?”

“Here. He wants Arcatia to fall at his hands.”

“Does he want it all to himself?”

“I don’t know, man. Maybe he wants to be king or something.”

So the mastermind’s plan was to have Arcatia fall and for him to take over… He might have had other motives, but we wouldn’t know until confronting him directly.

“What’re you all doing? Go take refuge in the guild now!”

The direct subordinates of the Great Sorceress urged the gathered people. Shashi followed his mother and gave himself up. I had no idea what kind of punishment awaited him, but that was something for the Great Sorceress and the city officials to decide. I went back to the guild with Roro.

◆

“There’s a moat and a wall around the building so we’ll be safe here.”

The rabbitfolk Adventurer Guild staff woman spoke to everyone who had taken refuge in the guild in a cheerful voice. She seemed to be the receptionist. A fluffy one, at that.

“Plus, this is far from where the evil undead attacked, so this is probably the safest place to be.”

The rabbitfolk staff member smiled.

“It seems to have calmed down in the streets, but for your safety, please remain here for a little while longer.”

I checked the map. It seemed the skeletons in the city had calmed down and had all been locked away in a mausoleum beneath the Necromancer Guild.

Hmm?

I noticed that the movements of the undead that the defense group and adventurers were fighting were strange. Some of the undead that had yet to emerge from the jungle were splitting into two groups, moving as if to circumvent Arcatia. The mastermind behind the attack, Zanzasansa, hadn’t made a move. One group was moving clockwise around the city, and the other was moving anticlockwise. However, it seemed as if they had gotten lost as they were moving away from Arcatia.

I guess some people are bad at directions even in death.

“Mr. Satou, shall we go help with food distribution?”

“Yeah, good idea.”

“Roro, I’ll help.”

“Roro, leave it to me.”

“Roro, I’m hungry.”

The hamsterfolk children accompanied Roro and went to help. The three of them all seemed hungry, so I gave them all a branch cucumber.

“Can you peel the vegetables? If you can’t, you can wash them instead.”

An old woman gave the hamsterfolk children some orders, and we all set to work. The hamsterfolk children seemed skilled at cleaning the vegetables. They were drooling as they did it, but as they’d had a branch cucumber earlier, it seemed they were able to resist sneaking a bite of the food. I checked the map as I helped out. I noticed that in order to deal with the undead splitting apart and acting independently, a few silver tiger adventurer parties had been dispatched in our direction. We would be fine in that case.

“You’re good with using your hands. Can you cook, too? Make something with this.”

“Whoa, hold on a sec. You’re gonna have a smooth-skin cook for us?”

An adventurer passing by hurled abuse.

“That’s rich, coming from someone who isn’t helping! It’s even better if a smooth-skin does it! They don’t shed fur, so there won’t be any hairs in the food!”

The older woman in charge of the cooking scolded the adventurer, and he literally shuffled off with his tail between his legs.

“Apologies for using the word *smooth-skin*. It’s not like all of us beastfolk dislike your kind, so please, don’t get the wrong idea.”

“No, it’s fine—”

The undead outside had managed to infiltrate the walls.

“What’s wrong?”

“My stomach feels a little off—I think I need a moment. Can I leave the rest to you?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Hurry back, now.”

“Excuse me.”

I ran to the toilet, and as I entered, I used the Space Magic

spell Warp to return to the Hero's Rest, then from there, I hurried along to where the undead had breached the wall. It seemed the undead had found the underground tunnels that the smugglers used. There were tunnels like this in both Seiryuu and Labyrinth City Celivera, but smugglers tended to create the best holes for their own security.

"Damn, my weapon doesn't work!"

"Wrap the talisman around it, the talisman! It's one of the Great Sorceress's special ones, so you'll be able to even cut down a ghost with it!"

Around twenty beastfolk adventurers were fighting with the undead. I wore a cloak to hide my identity.

"These are nothing! We have the lionfolk Mr. Tanpar here, and he's practically golden lion–rank!"

"Pu-ha-ha-ha! You flatter me, you flatter me!"

There was a lionfolk man who seemed to have no trouble fighting the undead. Each time he swung his large bone sword, the undead collapsed and tumbled away. He seemed to be around level 37, and the undead he was fighting were no match for him.

"This one's wearing armor! You think you're a knight or something? Pu-ha-ha-ha!"

The lionfolk man goaded one of the undead knights as it appeared from the underground tunnel.

That's not good.

"Don't underestimate it! Those ones are a lot stronger!"

They were fighting an enemy that was of the same rank as a Taurus champion. It was a little too soon for him to be fighting one. Did he hear my warning? He blocked the cursed knight's one-handed sword, which was aimed at his unprotected torso, with his bone greatsword.

"That all you got?"

"Watch out!"

The cursed knight fired a cursed projectile from his other hand that was holding a shield.

"Jeeeeeeeet!"

The lionfolk man yelled out something I didn't quite understand as he successfully dodged the projectile. He was doing well facing an opponent that was five levels higher than he was for the first time.

However, that was about as much as he could do.

“Abbbeehhhhhhh!”

The lionfolk man yelled as the cursed knight kicked him, sending him in an arc over the other adventurers’ heads. I guess shouting weird stuff was a habit of his.

“M-Mr. Tanpar!”

“I’ll avenge yoooou!”

He’s not dead. He just took a hit and got cursed in the process. The lionfolk’s party tried to attack the cursed knight, but the other undead blocked their path. Pretty efficient—even though they were the enemy. I took advantage of the opening to close the distance with Warp and swiftly sliced through the opponent’s shield and armor with my magically enhanced Holy Sword. Then I leaped into the corridor and took care of the remaining nine cursed knights as well.

There were some small fry undead remaining, but the adventurers would be able to handle them, so I used my Return spell and returned to the Adventurers Guild. Of course, I unlocked the toilet door with Magic Hand, so don’t panic.

“Section Chief! Mr. Tanpar and the others have defeated the skeletons that infiltrated the city.”

“Oh, Tanpar, huh? He might have to get ready to take his promotion exam for the golden lion rank soon.”

As I was handing out the prepared food, I heard the rabbitfolk staff member inform the section chief about Tanpar. It seemed like they had safely returned from the front lines. Beastfolk were tough, after all.

“Section Chief!”

Another member of the guild staff ran to the section chief and whispered something in his ear.

“The Great Sorceress’s familiar is here. It seems the undead have finally breached the towers on the outer wall.”

“Damn, that good news was short-lived. Does it look bad?”

“The units there are holding out for now, but it’s hard to tell how many undead there are hiding in the forest, which is a cause for concern.”

“So what do they want from us?”

“They’re requesting additional shelter for the citizens who have evacuated to that guild branch, and they want you to check for any other possible entry routes aside from the one blocked by Mr. Tanpar and the others earlier.”

“Understood, I’ll do it. Let them know.”

The section chief and receptionist began to discuss food stockpiles and staff numbers. I continued passing around food while using the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to keep an eye on the front line.

◆

“Shield bearers, stop the undead, even if it means you get hit! Don’t try and defeat the undead, just knock them down!”

The old commander shouted at the top of his lungs, his voice almost becoming hoarse. The defense team and adventurers dodged the attacks of the undead, who outnumbered them, looking for openings to strike.

“Aah, stay away, stay away!”

A spider-shaped undead was approaching a ratfolk Fire Staff user, causing them to yelp in fear. Paralyzing poison dripped from the spider’s fangs as it leaped for the ratfolk man.

“Aahhh!”

Hearing the screams, the hungry wolf–rank adventurer, Ms. Nona, charged in and knocked the spider off the ratfolk man. Another beetle chittered ominously as it attacked Ms. Nona from behind.

The ratfolk that had tumbled onto the ground fired off a fireball at the beetle.

“Caught you slackin’, smooth-skin!”

“*Tch*, too busy picking up after you, rat.”

Ms. Nona’s thrust knocked the bone sword of the monkey-shaped undead aside, and in the ensuing blade lock, a fireball from the ratfolk man struck the exposed torso of the monkey undead, delivering the final blow. Such gritty battles unfolded all over the front lines, maintaining a precarious balance despite the danger.

“What’s that?”

An adventurer, having just defeated an undead creature, paused as they gazed at the stronghold of the undead, positioned on the edge of the jungle. The undead the adventurer was attacking was finished off by another adventurer.

“Hey! No time for standing around. You wanna die or something?”

“Sorry. But… Look over there.”

“What? What are they doin’ over there?”

About ten undead cursed knights in the stronghold were discarding their armor.

“Have they gone insane with the heat?”

“Maybe they’re exhibitionists.”

The adventurers were bewildered by the cursed knights’ strange behavior as they continued to fight off the undead.

Out of the side of their eyes, they saw the cursed knights who discarded their armor break into a run before jumping off a large ancient land beast.

“Idiots, they’ll never make it here.”

“I wonder if their brains rotted out when they turned undead.”

The adventurers all shared laughs as they continued finishing off the undead before them. Fen was looking over the adventurers. He let out a sigh as he moved away from the wall he was leaning against. Three cursed knights, having reached the highest point of their arc in their jump, began to descend one after another. It looked as if they’d just fall straight to the ground but—

“…Did they just land in midair?”

“Oh man.”

“Ready yourselves!”

A cursed knight that had reaccelerated in midair burst through the barrier protecting the tower. Fen countered the first cursed knight with a flying kick, knocking them down before cutting down the other two cursed knights with the one-handed bone longsword he’d bought at Hero’s Rest. The remaining cursed knight fired a projectile at him. However, Fen blocked it all with his bone sword. The cursed knight then tried to run past Fen, but something caused the cursed knight to fall over. I had a closer look and saw that the bottom half of it was frozen solid. The adventurers were frozen, still unable to process what was happening.

“Don’t just stand there. Fight.”

Urged on by Fen, the adventurers continued to fight the oncoming cursed knights.

“Yeahhhhhhhh!”

“With you here, Mr. Fen, we’ll win no matter how many there are!”

“There’s only seven undead knights left!”

“Everyone, let’s go! Let’s finish this!”

“”””Raaaaah!””””

The adventurers all yelled out with their new rush of morale.

However, it was short-lived. More cursed knights all appeared on the outskirts of the jungle.

“Hey! L-look over there!”

There were around fifty cursed knights, with more and more gathering. The adventurers’ expressions were soon clouded with despair. Even Fen looked nervous yet prepared.

Suddenly, there was a thunderous roar and a blinding flash of light. Although somewhat delayed, it blew throughout the battlefield like a vicious storm. White flames engulfed the jungle and Arcatia, the ground resembling lava.

“It’s the Great Sorceress! She’s blessed us with her magic!”

“…No, it’s not.”

In fact, the Fire Magic came from directly beside the line connecting Arcatia and the undead. I gazed at the forest, ablaze in a horizontal line, but its source remained hidden deep within the thicket.

“Fire Magic? Doesn’t the Great Sorceress use Earth Magic?”

“But there’s no one else who can use magic on this scale other than the Great Sorceress.”

“That’s true, but…”

Another loud rumbling sound, this time followed by a tsunami appearing, splashing water like a massive waterfall.

“Water Magic?”

“Just what is going on—?”

Before those watching from the tower could comment, the leading edge of the tsunami struck the molten ground. In that instant, vaporized water exploded into an overwhelming shock wave that swept across the land, uprooting trees and shaking the earth, making the shelter where I was—far away—shudder like an earthquake. It was just another familiar steam explosion. The once white haze cleared as rippling waves of air rolled back and forth, revealing the devastated landscape beneath. It not only tore through the jungle’s trees but also stripped away the ground itself, drastically altering the terrain. Almost all of the nearly ten thousand undead on the surface were scattered to pieces, leaving only a handful that had managed to take cover in the shadows. The trees and stones had

all hit the dome that protected Arcatia, leaving it battered and beaten. The remnants of the barrier were also not unscathed, clearly illustrating the power of the steam explosion. The tower, which had been at the front lines just moments ago, was in ruins, but fortunately, there were no fatalities. While many had burst eardrums from the shock wave and deafening roar, it seemed that no one was gravely injured or on the brink of death. The Great Sorceress may have put a barrier up again before they could be.

"Ouch… What…happened…?"

"…This isn't the work of the Great Sorceress, is it?"

I could hear the survivors from the tower groaning as they looked around in shock, disoriented. I used Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to find the source of the magic—what awaited me was the color silver.

"Yeaaah! Bull's-eye!"

Arisa flung her arms up above her head.

"Let's go, guys!"

""""Yeah!""""

"Sir!"

My friends all wore silver armor as they used Arisa's Space Magic to head to the battlefield.

I expected nothing less from Arisa. I decided I'd take her somewhere nice to eat as a reward for this.

◆

"All right, the cavalry has arrived!" Arisa declared the moment she arrived on the battlefield, feeling confident. This wasn't a Western play, so I didn't think anyone would understand what she meant by *cavalry*.

"All that's left are some skeleton knights—or rather, just cursed knights. Hey, everyone! There's gonna be curses and poison coming your way, so make sure to not get hit!"

Arisa shared the information she had gathered with the "Status Check" skill and broadcast it to her party. Mia and Arisa had already taken out a good chunk of the undead, using a forbidden curse. All that was left were the cursed knights, of which there were around thirty, hiding in the shadows, and the Grudge Turtle that was around the size of a house. Though, all

of them were injured. The cursed knights were pouring steam and had around only half of their health, whereas the Grudge Turtle was on its back, unable to move.

—CZRRRRZ.

One of the cursed knights spotted Arisa and ran toward her, followed by other cursed knights.

“Aim…and fire!”

Lulu took out around five of them as she fired her gun repeatedly.

“That rusty armor won’t protect you, I warn!”

Nana shouted using her “Taunt” skill, attracting the attention of the cursed knights.

“Hnng—‘Shield Bash,’ I declare!”

Nana stopped the charging cursed knight with her shield using “Shield Bash,” smashing through the cursed knight and stabbing him in the neck with a Magic Blade.

—CZRRRRZ.

Nana dealt with the cursed dark projectile using a “Magical Slash” skill she’d learned from the Sword Saint. Nana also deflected a stone that was thrown alongside the dark projectile.

“Projectiles don’t work against me, I declare.”

Nana spoke from the shadow of her shield as the cursed knights proceeded to jump forward and crush her. However, it was useless against Nana.

“Activating ‘Fortress,’ I declare.”

With Nana’s shout, multiple layers of defensive barriers—the “Fortress”—sprang up and sent the cursed knights flying.

A single shadow crept along the ground, closing in on the three cursed knights keeping their distance.

“Hi-ya, sir!”

Pochi dashed between the three cursed knights, suddenly stopping to sheathe the Magic Sword, and finished with a punch to the knights. The cursed knights crumbled apart and rolled to the ground as if responding to that cue.

“Pochi’s quick-draw slash will vanquish the enemy in a flash, sir!”

Although I couldn’t see clearly, due to the bulk of the cursed knights, it seemed a deadly technique following Pochi unsheathing her weapon.

“Nin-nin!”

The cat ninja in a pink cape darted through the gaps between

the cursed knights, narrowly dodging their attacks without drawing a sword, unlike Pochi.

“‘Shadow Binding Technique’?”

As she struck a cute pose to activate her technique, shadows extended from beneath the cursed knights, wrapping around their legs and binding them tightly. It seemed she had set up her ninjutsu while running past them at close range.

A single shadow, trailing red light, approached the now immobilized cursed knights. “‘Instant Movement, Spiral Lance Strike—Overlap’!”

Liza used her ultimate technique to take down the seven cursed knights one after another.

CZRRRRZ.

The remaining cursed knights, having learned from this, unleashed cursed dark projectiles while splitting into three groups. The main force held the front line, while five knights each attacked the three rear guards from the left and right.

“Genomos!”

As Mia gave the command, the ground surged upward, moving the rear guard to a safe area. The three cursed knights who had climbed the rising wall leaped into the air, looking down at the rear guard with smirks on their faces.

“You are already dead.”

Arisa returned the smirk, quoting a famous line from her time. Arisa used her spell Dimension Slasher, decapitating the cursed knights. However, since they were undead, it did little to stop them. The cursed knights then acted like dullahans, continuing to attack the back line even though they were missing their heads.

“…Aw man, really?”

“Not good enough.”

As Mia spoke, stone spikes blasted out of the ground, attacking the cursed knights. The stone spikes were unable to pierce through the cursed knights’ armor. However, the force and movement of the spikes sent them flying through the air.

CZRRRRZ.

However, they were high-level monsters. It would take a lot more to beat them. The cursed knights caught their balance in midair and attempted to attack again.

“Aim…and fire!”

Lulu’s Fireburst Gun—which boasted around the same

power as a turret—fired continuous shots at the cursed knights, finding a gap in their armor and piercing them right in the chest. Seeing the counterattack, the remaining seven cursed knights gave up on attacking the back line and ran in the direction of Arcatia. Lulu's shots and Arisa's Fire Magic made quick work of most of them. However, two of the cursed knights used their comrades as shields as they managed to slip past the attacks and get closer to Arcatia.

"Leave some for us!"

Two parties—featuring golden lion–rank adventurers—jumped down from the balcony that was set up for defense and later destroyed, and slid down the wall. They seemed ready to take on the cursed knights.

"Whoa, what gives? These guys are super strong."

"They're no stronger than a champion."

The heavy and sharp attacks of the cursed knights scattered the adventurers, while their thick armor easily shrugged off the adventurers' strikes.

"Strength in numbers!"

"Don't let your opponent use any big moves!"

The beastfolk adventurers moved around freely, attacking the cursed knights before retreating in countless waves.

"Now—'Blade Cyclone'!"

A bearfolk adventurer took advantage of a large opening and charged at a cursed knight with his special attack. It was a brilliant skill—the tip of the bearfolk's longsword blade seemed to blur as it cut through the air at a terrifying speed.

"'Helix Strike.'"

A leopardfolk adventurer lunged at a cursed knight from behind, using Liza's unorthodox spear skill. The spear spun in a circle, drawing a red magic circle in the air before tearing a large opening in the back of the cursed knight. It looked flashy, but it used a lot of mana and therefore couldn't be used in quick succession. I wondered if they were aiming to increase its power or increase its penetration ability.

CZRRRRZ.

The cursed knight kicked away the bearfolk adventurer as he spun around and sent the leopardfolk adventurer away with a horizontal slash of his blade. The leopardfolk adventurer threw away his spear, narrowly avoiding death. However, he had suffered a grievous wound—deep enough that his innards

seemed as if they would spill out.

“Get them! Leopan!”

“Uooooooooohhhhh!”

A lionfolk adventurer, running from the back with a burst of momentum, kicked off the ground, radiating red magical energy all over their body.

“‘Leo Buster’!”

He swung his sword in an arc as he jumped, firing off his special skill. His bone longsword expanded and split into four red Magic Swords clawing their way into the cursed knight’s back like a set of lion’s claws. He struck with enough force that he even made a hole in the ground. Figuring he had beat the cursed knight, the lionfolk adventurer grinned. However, that was careless of him. Any other normal living being—or better yet, a normal undead—would have fallen from such a blow, but that was not the case for the cursed knight.

CZRRRRZ.

The cursed knight swung his blade. It was seconds away from hitting the lionfolk adventurer’s exposed neck as he attacked with his special move.

“…Too late.”

An invisible shield blocked the cursed knight’s sword right as the lionfolk adventurer finished his move. It was Arisa’s Deracinator.

“Uoooooh! ‘Raging Thrust’!”

The lionfolk man’s special attack pierced the cursed knight’s chest, dealing the final blow. It seemed he went in fully prepared that he would be unable to defeat the cursed knight. I felt bad for doubting him.

“There’s still one more—!”

Fen finished the final one off.

“I feel stupid feeling jealous when there’s such a gap in skill.”

“Not at all. I feel like we could say the same to the girls fighting over there.”

The adventurers spoke among themselves as they watched Arisa and the other girls fighting with the cursed knights.

“Huh, who are those? Weren’t they the smooth-skins that ranked up to silver tiger even though they came here around half a month ago?”

“I feel like we can’t pick on smooth-skins anymore.”

“Right?”

“You over there! Rather than chatting among yourselves, spare some thoughts for me!”

The leopardfolk adventurer—whose guts were close to spilling out—called over. His party members ran over to heal him, pouring a waterfall of expensive healing potions in his mouth.

“You’re looking better.”

“And strong. Those cursed knights were way stronger than the champions, right?”

“Besides all that unnecessary toughness, that final move they hit was way too scary. You dodged it well.”

“Nah, someone was protecting me with magic. If it wasn’t for that, me and the knight would’ve both knocked each other out.”

The lionfolk man looked over at Arisa and the others. Noticing their gaze, Arisa shot back a peace sign from the slightly raised ground. Fen ignored the adventurers’ conversation and headed over to where the girls were.

“Genomos, return.”

The raised stone spikes returned to the ground as the group reconvened.

Oh, thanks to that first spell they cast, Arisa leveled up. The others are all the same level, though.

“Looks like everything is resolved over there, too.”

Arisa spoke casually to Fen, who had walked over to them. However, he walked straight past them and headed over to the Grudge Turtle. Using the back of the large bone sword, he struck the Grudge Turtle from below, and as it began to move, he pinned down its head and ripped off its shell with a tearing sound. He then discarded the shell behind him—

“Whoawhoawhoawhoa, that’s dangerous!”

Arisa bumped into him, shouting at him to stop. Fen paid her no mind as he jumped on the back of the Grudge Turtle, whose feet were still frozen, and stabbed his large bone sword into it, forcibly tearing it into pieces.

“What is he doing? Ugh…”

I wondered if Arisa used Space Magic like me and saw the same thing I did. It was pretty gruesome, so I didn’t want to go into detail, but there were two necromancers hiding within the rotten insides of the turtle, controlling it by using its greasy entrails. Fen grabbed the two of them and pulled them out. Due to the Anti-Curse spell, both of them were unconscious.

“…Man, that stinks.”

“Hmm. ■…”

Mia cast Bubble Wash and cleaned the rotten flesh off the necromancers. Fen remained silent as he watched, probably taken aback by the smell. After all, wolves had a keener sense of smell compared to humans.

“So…”

“Hmm, ■■ *Shoushourai* Little Shock.”

Arisa shot Mia a glance, signaling for her to send off a quick, small lightning bolt using Spirit Magic. It hit both of the necromancers.

“Uughh…”

The middle-aged necromancer had a blank expression in his eyes as he gazed into nothingness. However, the spark of life returned to the older man’s eyes.

“Are you the guys behind this?”

“Arcatia was so close to falling by my hand…”

The older necromancer, Zanzasansa, looked so defeated, he was close to the point of bitter tears as Fen spoke to him.

“Is this one of your soldiers? Wait, no—it’s a cursed item.”

Fen swung his sword as fast as a ray of light as he cut off the middle-aged necromancer’s head. Then the Grudge Turtle stopped moving. It seemed the middle-aged necromancer was strengthening the undead. Fen then pointed his sword toward the elderly necromancer.

“W-wait! If you kill me, then the city will fall!”

“Don’t joke—”

“…Nana!”

Nana moved in an instant, coming between Fen’s large bone sword and the necromancer.

“Move out of the way.”

“Haste makes waste, I declare. Arisa, ask for an explanation.”

Nana spoke, her face expressionless, asking Arisa to speak in her place.

“So, sir, in what way will Arcatia be destroyed?”

“Judging from the amount of mana spilling out of you, you’re the grand mage who was controlling that Fire Magic earlier. I had no idea such a fine specimen as yourself was here in Arcatia.”

“Hee-hee, you’re gonna make me blush.”

“No, Arisa. Please ask him about the main topic at hand, I

advise.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.”

Arisa turned to the elderly necromancer and asked again.

“Some of my followers have been dispatched to the Castle. If I die, they will probably invade here from the Castle.”

Oh.

So that lost group was actually a group attacking the Castle. Since there were no other settlements nearby except Arcatia, they didn’t chase after us once we had gotten far enough away, right?

“What for—? Wait, really?”

“Exactly, the subordinates will likely be defeated by the power of the Tauruses. However, the Tauruses, whose territory has been ravaged, will march forward in anger—toward Arcatia.”

“Master! Do you have an idea of the situation there?”

Arisa ignored the elderly necromancer’s smug expression and sent me a message.

“I know what’s going on. The other unit is right inside the inner wall of the Castle. Tiga and the others are fighting them, but I’m not sure they can stop them.”

“That’s no good.”

“Leave it to me. After all, that guy’s still got something up his sleeve.”

The elderly necromancer didn’t seem to think he was going to meet his fate. He seemed confident.

“I know. I’ll make sure to tell the others to not drop their guard,” Arisa responded.

I suddenly remembered something, so I warned her about that, too.

“The young necromancer the older man used as a pawn had a short horn on him. There’s a high chance he’s hiding something, too, so be careful.”

The elderly necromancer didn’t have an Item Box, but there were other ways of hiding things.

“All right, I’ll share that with the others. Don’t worry, we won’t drop our guard!”

Arisa responded confidently. Seeing how they were, I didn’t have to worry about them. I then made my way to the Castle before Tiga and his men had any casualties.

◆

When I came back to myself, Roro was peering into my face.

“Mr. Satou, it’s been quiet ever since that explosion and shaking earlier. Do you think everything is over now?”

“Who knows? I’ll go ask someone.”

“I’ll come, too—”

I stopped Roro in her tracks.

“You should stay here with the kids.”

The hamsterfolk children had passed out as a result of all the commotion.

“Okay, I’ll stay here—”

Roro nodded before hanging her head down low. It looked like she had something else to say.

“…Mr. Satou. Please don’t get hurt. Come back safe.”

“Of course. Don’t worry about it.”

Roro nodded as she laughed, hiding her worry. It seemed like she had an idea of what I was setting out to do.

“I promise you. I’ll come back safe.”

After all, I was known as Pendragon the Untouchable.

Deadly Battle

Arisa here. Back in my teen years, I thought my parents were annoying when they worried about me, but deep down, I relied on my parents, and before I knew it, I was very dependent on them. That's something you only notice when you lose them.

"Now, remove my binds! Or I'll order the undead to break into the Castle!"

The old guy called Zanzasansa or something yelled out, seemingly smug.

"In that case, we'll just kill you before you can order them."

"W-wait! If you kill me, the forces will break free from my yoke and head straight for the nearby living ones—the Tauruses of the Castle! It will only hasten your destruction!"

As his own life was hanging on the line, he seemed desperate. Though, they were already inside the Castle—so I didn't know what he was babbling about. The wolflike guy, Mr. Fen, probably didn't think it would cause a Taurus stampede. He was still standing above the old necromancer guy with his sword held high.

"Hey, could I have a moment?"

"What is it, girl?"

Mr. Fen had Zanzasansa stuck in place with his magic, so I figured Zanzasansa could drop the act already. Though he was just acting, his voice was shaking.

"So I heard from one of my familiars that the undead are already in the Castle. Mr. Tiga and his party are currently holding them off—they haven't even reached the inner gate."

I relayed the information that Master told me to the old necromancer. The old dude looked a bit shocked.

"Th-that's not possible! I didn't order them to enter it yet!"

He seemed really confused. I wondered if he wasn't expecting that to happen.

"In that case, there's no need to keep him alive."

Mr. Fen spoke, a sense of bloodlust crossing his handsome, wolflike features.

“Wait! That’s not all I can do!”

“I told you, stop with the jokes—”

“I mean it! I can show you!”

The sword, swung down to decapitate, stopped at Zanzasansa’s neck. I thought it was 120 percent just a bluff, but considering the slightest possibility, I think they couldn’t go through with it.

“Haah, haah, haah… **Open**.”

Zanzasansa was wet with a cold sweat as he breathlessly said a command word, as if opening an Item Box. But it was a little weird. He didn’t have the ability “Item Box”…or at least, he shouldn’t have. Nothing happened…or maybe it did?

“Come out.”

Zanzasansa ordered someone to do something. Everyone looked around the room.

“I found it?”

At the spot where Tama, who had climbed on top of the turtle that had its shell stripped away, pointed, a black square that resembled an Item Box appeared, and I could see a mummified, dried-up hand reaching in to take out a short horn.

That was the short horn Master was talking about.

“Tama!”

“Yessir?”

Tama snatched the short horn away from the dried-up hand.

“Feed on my desires—”

The short horn in Tama’s hand began to exude miasma.

That’s bad.

“Tama!”

Liza shouted.

“Throw it away! Quick!”

“Roger.”

Tama threw it away without a moment’s hesitation.

“The Power of Tyranny—”

“It was a trap.”

Mr. Fen brought his longsword down on Zanzasansa’s neck. His decapitated head rolled away on the battlefield—it was yucky. The rolling severed head and the short horn that Tama threw away seemed to be drawn to something, as if trying to stick to it. I didn’t really want to use an “Abort Object” on that.

“…Deracinator!”

I created a spatial wall to separate the two.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!”

“Ew, the head is talking.”

Unfortunately, it seemed the necromancer was now undead. Not that we could expect anything less.

“Perish.”

Mr. Fen sliced the necromancer’s head into two clean halves, causing it to freeze solid and shatter into shards. He was thorough, to say the least.

“Gah-ha-ha, the old man’s dead!”

“Nya-ha-ha, he’s going straight to hell!”

“Nye-hee-hee, the old man gave us so many lives!”

Discordant voices rang out through the battlefield. They gave me the creeps.

“…Demons.”

There were three—no, even more—low-rank demons behind the turtle. Their appearance is bizarre, as if their bark-like skin has parts of a face, such as lips and ears, with limbs attached.

“Where did you come from…?”

“How I wish you’d used the Summoning Egg sooner.”

Damn. The short horn earlier was just a decoy to distract us.

“We’re filled with death.”

“The stage is set.”

“Time for our Master’s entrance.”

“Prepare to feel despair, humans!”

The demons danced around. Nana and Lulu both attacked, Nana with her javelin and Lulu with her Fireburst Gun, but the demons, even after having parts of their bodies blown away, continued to dance wildly without a care. To make matters worse, the shattered fragments turned into smaller demons, making it unclear whether the attacks were even effective.

“Mew!”

Tama yelped out in fear around the same time a seed burst out from beneath the turtle, growing into a giant tree before taking the twisted form of a human.

A high-ranking demon.

I didn’t even have to use “Status Check.” I could tell from its overwhelming presence. It didn’t match up to the high-ranking demon we saw in the museum in Shiga Kingdom, but it was on the level of the demon lord we saw in Parion Province. Bazan

the Discordant One was amazing, but the one in front of us at the moment was a lot more terrifying.

Of course, I knew why. Master wasn't here. I realized how much I relied on him then.

"Finally found you!"

Mr. Fen came running up, though he turned more and more wolflike, eventually turning into the giant Divine Beast Fenrir. The Divine Beast closed in on the high-ranking demon immediately. The high-ranking demon who created a shield of magic barriers disappeared beyond the sea of trees. Massive trees flew through the air one after another, while chunks of earth and vegetation erupted with clouds of dust.

"Arisa, should we follow after them?"

I gave Liza's question some thought. I heard something from an adventurer when we first saw the Divine Beast. The Divine Beast was supposed to be an even match against the treelike monster, the high-ranking bark demon.

"…No, we should stay here and defeat the low-rank demons."

"Watch out!"

Tama's hairs were standing on edge as she grabbed Nana's arm and pointed in the direction of where the high-ranking demon was.

"…Fortress."

The simplified version of the Fortress system installed in Nana's silver armor was deployed in an emergency. In the next moment, an enormous beam of light swept through the forest, cutting down the trees, and collided with the Fortress barrier, unleashing flashes of light and a deafening roar.

"It is close to its limit, I declare."

Oh no.

The outside layer of the fortress crumbled, causing the inner layers to crack.

"Deracinator!"

My Deracinator spell deployed outside the barrier was obliterated in an instant. With a sharp cracking sound, Nana's feet, which were supposed to be anchored by dimensional stakes, slid backward. The force was so overwhelming that the dimensional stakes couldn't hold. Nana, having lost her anchors, was pushed back along with the Fortress barrier. It seemed that even the barrier, which was supposed to be fixed in place, could no longer withstand the force.

“Liza!”

“““Phalanx”””

“Sir!”

The disposable defensive shields, Phalanx, installed in Nana’s armor, deployed three layers of barriers inside the Fortress she was holding up. I also reinforced the Fortress from within using Deracinator.

“Hitting its limit, I declare—‘Flexible Shield’!”

The Fortress finally broke, the three layers of the Phalanx broke down, and Nana used all her magic, her greatshield, and her skills to deflect the destructive beam upward.

—Gah.

Nana’s feet were torn from the ground, and we were all blown backward. In my spinning, swirling vision, I caught a glimpse of the eggshell-like outer wall, newly split open.

“We somehow managed to stop it.”

“It was hard, I declare.”

I noticed Nana was frowning slightly. Usually, she was expressionless. It seemed the attack just now wounded her ego.

“No surprise there. That attack was on the level of a demon lord’s, after all.”

“If they keep throwing hits like that, won’t even the Divine Beast struggle with it?”

I think they’re evenly matched for now, since I can see trees flying through the air and dust clouds rising in the distance.

“No need to worry about that, human girl.”

I heard a voice come from the sky. I looked up and saw a sorceress with a heavily decorated staff floating down. She was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a luxurious black robe, with slender legs peeking out from the hem, seemingly clad in flying boots.

“Ah, are we finally seeing the Great Sorceress? Or should I refer to you as the Great Sorceress’s pupil?” I called out to the Great Sorceress Arcatia, who was hiding her face behind her wide hat.

“This is why I don’t like reincarnated folks or heroes. Concealing myself, disguises, and everything else doesn’t work on you.”

Judging from her tone of voice, she had moved from Great Sorceress mode back into pupil mode as she shrugged her shoulders.

“Found an opening!”

“Time to get rid of the small fry!”

A lower-class demon, which had possessed a small insect to sneak closer, launched a surprise attack.

“What opening?”

“Agh, if you’re gonna do a surprise attack, try to remove your miasma before doing it.”

My Deracinator blocked the charge of the lower-class demon, and Tia’s Earth Magic, Toss Beryl, pierced through the demon, turning it into a black mist.

“Yes, sir. He didn’t hide his miasma, sir.”

“Oui, ouuui.”

Pochi’s and Tama’s Magic Swords vanquished the lower-class demon, along with the insect it had possessed.

“““Attack together!”””

Realizing their ambush had failed, the lower-class demons dispelled their possessions and attacked all at once.

“…■ *Kyuubouchou* Balloon.”

“Unleash chaos, fire!”

Mia’s Water Magic sent the lower-ranking demons up into the sky, with Lulu’s continuous fire hitting them in their weak points.

“Skywalking—‘Helix Spear Attack’!”

“‘Dimension Slasher’!”

The two tenacious ones that survived were finished off by Liza’s special move, which she unleashed while soaring through the sky, and with help from my Space Magic.

“I wonder if that’s it?”

The Great Sorceress looked around as she spoke.

“Not yet.”

Tama responded.

“Hmm, miasma.”

Mia spoke, pointing in the direction of the torn-off turtle shell. With a clattering sound, scattering debris around, a sludge-like shadow rose from the ground.

“Gooooooootttt yoooooou.”

The face of the old necromancer appeared on the sludge-like torso. There was also the face of a middle-aged necromancer with hollow eyes, who seemed to be a companion. The place where a face should normally be was a featureless, smooth surface, with long horns growing where the forehead would be.

It was around level 50 and seemed to be both undead and demon-like.

“…Zanzasansa, what the hell are you doing?”

“Uaaghhhhh, Tiiiaaaaa.”

He called out the Great Sorceress’s name. It seemed like he knew her.

“Shall I leave the rest to you?”

“Sorry about this. I might be completely tied up for a bit, so can I leave the support for the Divine Beast to you?”

“It’s fine. You’ll just owe me one.”

“Got it. I’ll pay you back.”

The Great Sorceress pulled down her wide-brimmed hat with a sharp motion and held her long staff like a spear.

“I’ll be off, Zanzasansa. Don’t wait too long for a hug!”

“Uaaaghhhhh, Tiiiiiaaaaa.”

Countless green pillars emerged from beneath the mid-level demon, mercilessly piercing its body. There was no sign of chanting, so I figured that staff must be some kind of artifact.

“Protect the Great Sorceress!”

“Show them the real strength of a golden lion rank!”

The adventurers became a shield to protect the Great Sorceress. The sorceress who controls the spring can use abundant magic power, and with the adventurers providing protection, I figured they’d be fine.

“All right, everyone, let’s go!”

We headed toward the first Teleportation point.

◆

“…Ugh, Mr. Fen is covered in wounds.”

After changing into our golden gear, we observed the fierce battle between the Divine Beast and the high-level demon from atop a nearby great tree.

“Look. The demon has an amazing self-heal ability.”

From the wound of the high-level demon, torn by the Divine Beast’s claws, new sprouts began to grow, quickly sealing the wound and restoring its bark-like exterior to its original state.

“Magic disable?”

“Yes, Mia. The lower-level spell for restraint has been nullified, I determine.”

It seemed that the Divine Beast was also using a lower-level spell with weak convergence, intending it as a blindfold, assuming it would be nullified as well.

“Something’s on its back?”

“That’s Mr. Large Gun, sir! Pochi knows this for sure, sir!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I saw it, too. I think they were holding that under their arm just before the previous beam attack.”

Even Lulu had seen it.

“In that case, we should aim to destroy that.”

“If we can’t stop the artillery fire, we should respond to it by stacking Fortress and Phalanx like we did earlier.”

“No, Arisa. I will definitely stop it next time, I declare.”

“No.”

Mia spoke, trying to restrain Nana, who was fired up.

“That’s right. While I feel like Nana wearing golden armor may be able to stop it, we don’t need to get ourselves into situations like that. Master will be so sad if we get injured.”

“He did order us to stay safe, I declare.”

Nana nodded, after seemingly being lost in thought.

“…Ah, the Divine Beast!”

The sacred beast came rolling forward, shattering trees in its path.

Uh-oh. Maybe our briefing went on a little too long.

“Time for round two!”

I declared as I fired off the spell Tactical Talk.

“”””Yes.”””

“Sir!”

Nana and the beastfolk girls ran across the broken ground left by the Divine Beast and headed toward the high-ranking demon. Lulu shot cover fire using her Fireburst Gun. Mia began chanting a Spirit spell—I figured it was to summon Behemoth. I played the role of support for the front line. I had already cast Buff spells on them, so I figured it would be better to buy time using Deracinator and Labyrinth.

“Amaaaazing.”

“Mr. Big Gun is on standby, sir!”

Ominous particles gathered with a buzzing hum around the cannon that the demon had braced at their hip. It wasn’t aimed at us. It looked more as if he was planning a follow-up strike on Fen.

“I’ll use Phalanx. Nana, use Fortress!”

“Yes, Liza—”

Nana stopped in her tracks as the floating shield of the golden armor moved forward.

“…Fortress, I declare.”

As the word was chanted, parts of the golden armor transformed, deploying magic barriers one after another to construct a fortress. The Fortress armor looked a lot sturdier than her silver armor. I wondered if it was like a Fortress times two effect?

“They’re coming.”

Following Tama’s signal, the beastfolk girls deployed Phalanx. Since Phalanx was only effective for a short amount of time, timing it together was crucial. With a blinding flash that stung the eyes, a massive beam of light shattered the Triple Phalanx deployed outside the fortress, crashing into the layered barriers of the fortress. My eyes and ears hurt as a result of the light and the loud roaring sound. It felt like we’d end up blind or deaf if we didn’t have the golden armor’s shielding system.

“Hnnngg!”

The fortress was pushed back, and even Nana’s large shield that was supporting us was being forced backward.

“Deracinator!”

I also used Space Magic to support the fortress from behind. I did have the advanced skill “Devine Deracinator,” but it wasn’t suited for small, subtle maneuvers like this. It was an underutilized spell, as its pure defensive power was slightly inferior to that of Fortress, so there hadn’t been many opportunities to use it so far.

Crack.

While I wondered about such things, Deracinator looked close to breaking.

“Powerfuuuuul, sir!”

“More power?”

Tama and Pochi pushed on Nana’s shield from behind.

“Arisa, use Deracinator behind me as well, I request.”

“Okey-dokey!”

While I didn’t quite understand what she was asking, I set up my Deracinator behind Nana.

“‘Emergency Jet Expulsion,’ I declare!”

The center of Nana’s golden armor changed shape as a

nozzle-shaped spout appeared.

The jet flames bursting from the nozzle hit the Deracinator, obscuring it from view, but it seemed that it managed to push back the Fortress, which was on the verge of being overwhelmed.

"*Tch*, Master, you modified it way too much."

Amid the roaring sounds, as I muttered my complaints, the endurance battle ended in victory for Nana and us.

"Changing to cooling mode. Due to overload, I will need around ninety seconds of cooldown, I declare."

"All right. Let's go, Pochi, Tama. We can't let our opponent get the chance to fire that huge weapon."

"Yep."

"Yes, sir."

The beast girls dashed toward the high-ranking demon with instantaneous movement.

"...■■ *Majuu Ou Souzou* Create Behemoth."

Mia finished channeling her spell, and a behemoth appeared from a huge magic circle.

"Go."

The behemoth let out a roar as it headed toward the battle. The behemoth overtook the beast girls almost immediately, crashing into the high-level demon unleashing a flurry of lightning strikes.

"Temporary repairs complete. Arisa, please move me closer to the high-ranking demon, I request."

"Got it. Push yourself if you have to, but don't do anything reckless—Portal Door."

Two doors appeared before—one in front of us, and the other closer to the battlefield.

"Thank you, I declare."

Nana spoke as she went through the door in front of us and appeared at the other door near the battlefield.

"O bark demon! You should make like a tree and leave, I declare!"

I heard Nana's voice as she fired off a "Provoke" attack using her skill, followed by a talk about tactics.

"Lulu, when I provoke him again, you can use your Acceleration Gun—Lulu?"

Lulu was next to the Divine Beast—who had lost its power and had gone from the size of a mountain to around sixteen

feet tall.

“Please drink this. It’ll make you feel better.”

It looked like Lulu was helping the Divine Beast.

“…You saved me again, Roro.”

“I’m not Ms. Roro, I’m Lulu.”

“Back then, I was as weak as a cub. But not now. Witness me, Roro.”

The Divine Beast shook as it stood up.

“Wait, already! If you’re so beat-up you can’t tell the difference between Roro and Lulu, you’re in no fit state to do anything. Please rest a little.”

“Our opponent is a high-ranking demon. You are powerless against it.”

“I wonder if we are?”

Using my Clairvoyance Mirror spell, I reflected the current state of the battlefield onto it and showed the Divine Beast. Ms. Liza was stabbing the demon with her lance, Tama used her ninjutsu to toy with the demon as Pochi stumbled, narrowly avoiding the demon’s attack, while Nana deflected the demon’s kick with her large shield.

“The only one landing any attacks is the scaled one. I need to help—”

“Lulu, it’s time.”

I shrugged my shoulders as I called out to Lulu.

“Understood.”

Lulu pulled out a long Cannon of Acceleration stored in her Space Storage found within her golden armor.

“The high-ranking demon is pretty fast. Think you can hit it?”

“It’ll be fine. I studied its movement patterns—aim, ready. Lock on.”

Lulu, aiming the Cannon of Acceleration, issued a command to the support AI.

“Yes, my lady. ‘Dimension Pile.’ Stand by.”

The Acceleration Support AI voice responded. The Divine Beast looked shocked, asking if someone else was with us. The invisible dimensional stakes fixed the heavy, long Cannon of Acceleration weapon in midair. The demon wasn’t in front of the cannon, but Lulu’s aim never failed.

“‘Virtual Barrel Deployment.’”

“Okay, ‘Virtual Barrel,’ spread.”

A pseudo-material barrel of about sixty-five feet, created by

Arcane Magic, extended in all directions from the Cannon of Acceleration.

Man, that transformation gets me fired up when I see it!

“Acceleration magic circle, restrictions lifted.”

“Aye-aye ma’am, battery, full charge.”

Mana from the power cylinder attached to the Cannon of Acceleration was channeled to generate a magic circle. Every bit of mana battery, including the spares, was completely drained.

“Acceleration, overdrive.”

Along the virtual barrel, red-glowing magic circles unfurled. With a hundred layers of magic circles stacked together, it formed the shape of a barrel. It was impressive as always.

“Now.”

As Mia murmured, a high-ranking demon smashing through the jungle trees came into view. It seemed like it finally noticed us.

“Outta the way!”

I stopped its rampage with a Deracinator barrage. The high-ranking demon warped the surface of its body, forming something like a hollow space, which it then filled with particles of light. It was probably planning to attack with that—but it was already too late.

“Fire!”

“Ignition!”

Lulu’s slim finger pulled on the trigger, firing out a Holy Shell. With a thunderous boom that resonated deep in my stomach, a blue streak shot out from Lulu’s Cannon of Acceleration. The blue light shot like a laser into the high-ranking demon’s torso, and it sliced the massive bark-covered body in two from top to bottom, blowing it away.

“Huh?! Where did the high-ranking demon go?”

The Holy Rounds fired from Lulu’s Cannon of Acceleration were custom-made by Master and packed with an absurd amount of mana. As an anti-demon attack, they had power rivaling the forbidden spells Mia and I could cast.



—Oops, can't let our guard down just yet.

"It's not over yet! 'Divine Deracinator.'"

The high-ranking demon, split in half, prepared to fire a small Beam Cannon. Multiple beams surged toward the Divine Deracinator, exploding into flashes of light and fireworks. While not as powerful as the main cannon, their numbers combined to create quite a significant impact.

"'Achilles Hunter,' sir!"

Pochi, approaching rapidly from behind the high-ranking demon, sliced through its ankle along with the barrier, leaving several blue streaks in her wake. It seemed she'd used the ability "Vanquish Slicer."

"'Boulder Fling'?"

Tama, emerging from the shadows of the high-ranking demon, unleashed a finishing move on the opposite leg that Pochi had struck. A series of swift attacks with her twin swords was launched, but their power was a bit lacking. Though the barrier was shattered, each wound was shallow, allowing the demon to heal from the damage as quickly as it was dealt.

"Instant Movement—'Helix Spear Attack'!"

Ms. Liza used her special attack on the high-ranking demon, launching the attack at the back of its head. True to its name, the dragon spear pierced through both the barrier and the tough armor without any resistance.

"Good wo—! Ms. Liza!"

"…Phalanx!"

The high-ranking demon's head transformed to create a hollow space, firing a dispersive beam toward Liza. We managed to protect Liza immediately with Phalanx. However, she was forced to retreat after the high-ranking demon followed up with a backhand attack.

"No looking away, I declare."

Nana caught up with us before hitting the demon with a "Shield Bash."

Oh?

Something sparkly on the demon's back spread everywhere. Upon instantly appraising it with my "Appraise" skill, I realized that it was part of the high-ranking demon's barrier. It seems that Nana executed her signature barrier-breaking finishing move, "Blast Armor," using her large shield instead of a sword.

"'Vorpal Shadow Bite'?"

At the spot where Nana shattered the barrier, Tama unleashed her finishing move enhanced with ninjutsu. This time, it seemed to penetrate quite effectively.

“‘Vanquish Strike,’ sir!”

Before Pochi could charge in, the high-ranking demon regenerated its barrier, but Pochi relentlessly pierced through it with her finishing move, thrusting her enlarged sword toward its heart. The high-ranking demon, surprisingly nimble for its massive size, attempted to evade Pochi’s attack, but that wasn’t going to happen. My Deracinator and Tama’s Shadow Binding prevented the demon from dodging.

Ugh.

The high-ranking demon burst through its bark from the inside and unleashed a beam of light.

“‘Fallink’—”

Pochi quickly activated Phalanx, but a few of the beams had already gotten through ahead of time.

“…Sir!”

Pochi tilted her body to dodge, but it grazed her shoulder piece slightly, sending her spiraling backward.

“Pochi!”

Tama caught Pochi with an instantaneous movement, skillfully dodging the high-ranking demon’s follow-up beams with agile footwork. In frustration, it finally fired a dispersive beam, which was blocked by Nana’s large shield and floating shield. I used the Space Magic spell Object Pull to draw Pochi and Tama back to me.

“Are you injured?”

“Woowheewha, shir!”

“She seems fine, just dizzy.”

“That’s a relief.”

Upon hearing that Pochi was safe, Tama let out a sigh of relief and dashed over to Liza and the others.

“Funyukurikurari, sir.”

Pochi’s body swayed from side to side as the White Dragon Egg popped out of her golden armor. Using some kind of power, it floated gently, circling around Pochi.

“…Ah. Mr. Egg cheered me up!”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, sir. Pochi doesn’t give up that easily!”

When Pochi said that with a determined look, the White

Dragon Egg landed in her hands and stopped moving. Pochi returned the egg to the Storage in her golden armor, then instantly teleported back into the battlefield. There was no conversation between the two, but somehow, a sense of bonding could be felt.

“Arisa, here comes another!”

At some point, the high-ranking demon had distanced itself from Liza and the others, preparing to fire a beam. It was hard to see from a distance, but it looked like vine-like things temporarily impeded everyone’s movements.

“Behemoth—disaster.”

A rain of lightning struck the high-ranking demon, causing the ground to crack open and swallow it. The reflection of red light suggested that the chasm was filled with lava beneath the fractured earth. Mia fell to her knees, depleted of mana.

“Nice, Mia! Lulu, will it take you some time to recharge?”

I handed Mia a high-level Mana Replenishment potion before asking Lulu if she was finished reaching her mana for the accelerated shot.

“Sorry, Arisa. It’s only about one-third recharged.”

“Got it.”

I used a “Visual Short-Range Leap” to move to a position above the high-ranking demon, where I could see it swallowed by the lava.

“Free-falling, huh? Scary!”

I suppressed my fear with that one phrase and unleashed my most powerful advanced magic.

“…Inferno.”

The Inferno, intensified by the heat of the lava, thoroughly roasted the high-ranking demon. I had seen something like this in a manga before, but the power was doubled. A hot wind blew up from below, but my golden armor’s mana barrier protected me, so I took no damage. Before charging into the ultra-high-temperature area, I reactivated my “Short-Range Teleportation” skill and moved next to Mia and the others.

Whoa.

There were multiple beams piercing through the ground where I had just been. That was close. If I had stayed there any longer, I would have ended up full of holes.

“Just how strong is it, if an attack like that doesn’t kill it?”

“Something’s off?” Tama muttered, overlapping my

grumbling.

“Arisa, I think that attack came from a different place.”

Ms. Liza gave a more detailed explanation of the weird off feeling Tama had.

Did that mean…?

“Mia, could you dismiss Behemoth and summon Genomos, and have it check underground?”

“Yes.”

Mia shook her head in the direction of the behemoth—it began to shake the ground in response.

“Wait, can Behemoth do it, too?”

“Yes, possible.”

Mia closed her eyes and began to concentrate.

“It’s coming.”

“‘“Phalanx!”’”

“Sir!”

“‘Fortress,’ I declare.”

As Tama declared it was coming, Liza and the others all joined in a chorus as they unleashed all their defensive skills. Around the same time, the bark demon blew away all the trees and unleashed a giant beam of light.

—Damn it, we’re too late.

“Is everyone all right?!”

“Yes, Arisa. Everyone is fine, I report.”

What a relief. Everyone was fine even without my Deracinator.

“Phalanx is done for after that.”

“Mee tooo?”

“Pochi is still fine, sir!”

“Fortress took a real beating, I declare.”

Man, we’re in a real situation.

“Arisa found it. Underground,” Mia told me—with an unusually long sentence.

Just as I thought, the main body of the high-level demon was underneath us.

“Can you pull it out?”

“Yes. Behemoth, do it.”

The behemoth shoved its nose into the ground—eventually at least half of its body was underground as it grabbed on to something and pulled it out.

Ew.

I guess it was like the part of a sweet potato that’s attached to

the vine turning into the upper body of a high-ranking demon.

"…Inferno."

I faced the high-ranking demon that was in the air and used one of the strongest offensive spells I had at my disposal.

"Acceleration—skip the procedures, emergency bombardment!"

Lulu pulled out a disposable Cannon of Acceleration, used the ground as a stabilizer, and launched the attack.

"…Here!"

The Cannon of Acceleration fired without even using any Space Magic for stabilization and had its center of gravity pulled wildly off-balance. Even so, Lulu pulled the trigger at the perfect moment, piercing the high-ranking demon's core with the accelerated shot. The high-ranking demon took serious damage before falling from the sky—and Ms. Liza would never miss such a perfect opportunity.

"Nana!"

"Yes, Liza."

Urged on by Liza, Nana soared through the air using "Skywalking." The high-ranking demon fired beam shots like a pulse laser, but Nana effortlessly deflected them using her magic-cutting technique and moved into the preparatory stance for her special attack.

"'Blade of Zero: Blast Fort,' I declare."

Nana's special attack destroyed the high-ranking demon's defenses.

"'Blade of One: Shadow Binding'—"

The shadows stretching from the ground bound the high-ranking demon in a web, and Tama, emerging from the shadows, made the Holy Sword in her hands shine blue.

"…'Vorpal Shadow Bite'?"

Tama's finishing move tore the bark of the high-ranking demon to shreds, and the shadow blades that followed widened the wounds. It seemed that, having learned from the last time, the shadows had taken on a wedge-like form to interfere with the demon's regeneration.

"'Blade of Two: One-Stroke Kill—Vanquish Slice,' sir!"

Pochi's enlarged blade further widened the wounds left by Tama on the high-ranking demon.

"'Blade of Three: Draco Buster'!"

Liza dove into the wound created by Pochi and advanced

deep into the core with her finishing move, which transformed her spear into a dragon lance.

“‘Absolute Technique: Mana Blade Buster.’”

At the same time as Liza’s voice, a blue light leaked from within the high-ranking demon, and finally, it exploded from the inside. The fragments vanished into a black mist.

“It looks like we defeated it.”

My friends all waved their hands as they returned. At first, we had the Divine Beast Fenrir to help us, but it was quite a big achievement that we were able to defeat the high-ranking demon all by ourselves.

“Don’t let up! That demon’s stubborn!”

The Divine Beast trembled as he got back on his feet and warned us.

“Mia, is it still here?”

“No… Wait.”

Mia frantically looked around. The behemoth began to look around, too, before suddenly stopping, facing in one direction.

“There.”

A smaller version of the bark demon came charging toward us. It didn’t have a big cannon this time.

In that case, Nana can—

The behemoth looked the other way.

“Over there.”

I could see a light in the forest. The behemoth began charging in that direction, shielding Mia with its body against the extremely thick beam of light unleashed from the forest of trees.

“Thank you.”

Mia offered her thanks to the behemoth as it scattered into spirit power.

“Falanx, sir!”

“Sillyyyy.”

Pochi defended against the dispersive beam, Tama dodged the high-ranking demon’s attack as Nana deflected regular attacks with her large shield, and Liza whittled down its stamina with her dragon lance.

It was no good. We were losing time focusing on one of them. The other was charging up to attack us. It was impossible for us to one-shot it with our abilities…unless!

“Move away on my signal.”

I used “Short-Range Teleportation” to move closer to Liza and the others.

“Now! …Disintegrate!”

“‘Shadow Binding’?”

Tama’s ninjutsu constricted the high-ranking demon, rendering it immobile, while I unleashed Space Magic toward its core. With a sound like a deep suction, the high-ranking demon was gouged out, exposing its crimson-black core.

“Hi-ya, sir!”

“‘Draco Buster’!”

Pochi’s attack was blocked by the high-ranking demon’s arm, but in the moment it was distracted by Pochi, Liza’s finishing move was unleashed, piercing through the magic core and shattering it. The high-ranking demon’s body dissipated into a black mist. I figured it was a lot weaker, as we had destroyed the main body.

“It’s here.”

Tama warned us around the same time as I teleported beside everyone. The Divine Beast was weaving through the forest, closing in on the high-ranking demon, but I didn’t think it would make it in time for the other attack.

Teleport.

Huh, it failed? Damn, I’m out of mana.

“Phalanx!”

“Faranx, sir!”

Lulu cast Phalanx, but Pochi was also out of mana, and her Phalanx didn’t go off—one Phalanx would do nothing, though.

“Leave it to me, I declare.”

Nana stood in front of everyone.

“Don’t push yourself—”

“I’m not pushing myself, I emphasize.”

Nana looked at me and smiled.

No, Nana. Don’t sacrifice yourself—

“…Castle, I declare.”

With Nana’s command word, her golden armor began to change shape. Crimson and red lights flashed like a burst.

Huh?

A series of flapping sounds created a barrier, forming a dome-shaped layered shield that was distinct from a fortress but even more resilient. There was a burst of beams of light. Phalanx disappeared in an instant, but the Castle defensive

layers withheld the blast, without so much as a small shiver.

"…Amazing. You should have used something like that earlier."

"Master had yet to try it in battle, so he ordered me not to use it yet, I confess."

I see. That's why she didn't use it until now.

The high-ranking demon that had fired the shot was taken down by the Divine Beast in a surprise attack. As I thought, it was weak without the main host.

"But I feel like I've seen that somewhere before."

"Isn't it similar to Lalakie's Heavenslight Protection?"

"Ah, you're right, it is similar."

The crimson and red lights from before looked similar to the Holy Lights of the gods, but I wondered if there was any connection?

"Mew! Mew, mew!"

"Oh wowowow, Mr. Egg is flying around again, sir."

Tama panicked as Pochi watched the egg flying around her frantically.

"Looks like it's not over just yet."

"One, two, three—looks like there's thirteen all together."

Liza spoke in a serious tone, as Lulu counted the number of remaining high-level demons that had appeared in the forest. Well, it made sense. Final bosses were known for being tough to beat—so I guessed that was what was happening here.

◆

"Really? Thirteen of them…"

…Keeping the best till last, I guess. Mia and I didn't have enough mana to fight. Lulu had also used Phalanx, so she didn't have enough mana to cast Acceleration. Nana, who had just used a new spell, naturally had no mana, nor did Ms. Liza. The Divine Beast who defeated the main host was also completely out of strength.

"Light."

Ugh.

Following Mia's pointed finger, an eerie light illuminated the upper body of the high-ranking demon from below, visible through the trees. It was surely the preparatory glow for the

demon's next bombardment.

"If all of them launch an attack, there is no guarantee we can defend against it, I declare."

"I know!"

We were in so much of a pinch, I kind of responded in a mean tone. Just using Teleportation to retreat took a full sixty seconds to recover my magic power. I wanted to send a help call to my master, but the distance was too great, and I was too shaken to get the signal through properly. Everyone looked at me with serious expressions. Wait—Tama? Only Tama was staring at nothing, like a house cat following something invisible in the air.

"What should we do, sir?"

"No need to worry?"

"I want Tama to take this seriously, sir! Pochi is in a very prickly, prickly situation, sir!"

"Don't worry, be happy?"

With a relaxed expression, Tama plopped down and sat.

I wonder if she's given up? No, that can't be it.

"Look?"

Tama pointed to the sky.

"Ah! Sir!"

Pochi looked up at the sky, too, and smiled. I eventually looked up, too.

It's a meteor shower.

No, it wasn't. It was Master's magic. Countless lights, like a sky full of stars, rained down, obliterating the thirteen high-ranking demons in an instant—along with the vast area of the forest. There was only one person capable of something like that.

"Hello. Looks like I made it just in time."

"Master!"

"Master, sir!"

We all welcomed and embraced our Master as he descended from the heavens.



Epilogue

Satou here. When busy, and small tasks begin to accumulate, I often forget them and end up in a rush. Nowadays, I have something that reminds me what to do, so that rarely happens anymore.

“Sorry I’m late.”

I apologized to my friends as they all hugged me in greeting. When I checked on how they were doing, I noticed there were more and more high-ranking demons popping up, and I was in a panic. In the rush to unleash the barrage of reflective lasers, part of the forest caught in the cross fire with the high-ranking demons was reduced to scorched earth.

“Is everything fine on your end?”

“Eh, I guess.”

The adventurers who had been fighting the undead earlier took quite a bit of time to retreat, delaying me.

“The Tauruses didn’t stampede, so everything is fine with that, at least.”

“Did you take all of them out?”

“Nah, I didn’t want to get in the way of everyone leveling up so I blocked the gate using Wall and made it so they couldn’t get out.”

I made sure the Tauruses couldn’t get out so easily by blocking the gate with a thick sixty-five-foot wall, then used Hard Clay to strengthen it even more. If they still made it out after that, then we’d just have to take down their leaders, the general and the lords. We could buy some time until the next leader appeared, and a Taurus without a leader made for a good hunt target.

“It looks like you guys had a hard time here.”

I listened to them tell me about their battle with the high-ranking demon as I transferred mana to them using Mana Transfer. Arisa and Mia had increased their MP lately, so halfway through, I had to recharge my own mana with a

battery.

“That reminds me! Master, could you look for Fenrir? I doubt you caught him in the cross fire.”

“It’s fine. I sent a golem out.”

It was a lightweight golem made from a theory of Goddess Karion. It wouldn’t bring the Divine Beast here, but it would deliver some healing potions to him.

“Master, the fortress function took a beating, I declare.”

Ugh, really?

“Are you hurt?”

“No, Master. Shall I take off my armor so you can inspect it? I ask.”

“N-no, Nana!”

“Shameless.”

Perhaps because I hurriedly touched Nana’s body over her armor, the two members of the Iron Wall reacted with extraordinary reflexes. I could see from the AR display that Nana wasn’t injured, so she was probably fine.

“It must have been difficult not having Fortress, right?”

“No, Master. We were able to recover with Castle.”

I’m glad but I think the reason the Fortress function ended up banged up was because the Castle function was incorporated. Although I’ve conducted several operational tests pushing it to its limits, that’s no excuse. We need to improve the safety circuits even more.

“Master, is the battle at the fortress city over?”

“It looks like it. Oh, look, Ms. Tia is here.”

I checked my map as Arisa spoke, and sure enough, there was a marker with the name *Ms. Tia* making her way toward us. I changed my appearance to the hero Nanashi as I waited for her to arrive.

“Master, she’s in Great Sorceress mode.”

She was wearing a decorated robe and holding a staff, and her hat was so big, it covered her eyes and hid her face.

“Was it your magic that defeated the high-ranking demon?”

“Yes, Great Sorceress Arcatia.”

Tia made an attempt to lower the pitch of her voice, so I followed suit.

“True hero, I thank you for your assistance. We will hold a feast to celebrate.”

“Thank you. But there’s somewhere I need to be. Please hold

the feast for the other adventurers, though."

"I see. In that case, I will not stop you. But please, take this."

Ms. Tia handed me an amulet. It had a variety of runes carved into it, and it sparkled gold.

"What is this?"

"It's a healing talisman. Those who yield great magic should value it."

"Are you sure I can have this?"

"Please. Such an item is useless to me, who is in harmony with the source."

"In that case, I thank you."

I accepted the amulet and showed it to my friends using Magic Hand, as I also lifted myself up into the air, too.

"Well, I'll be off."

I waved at Ms. Tia, and I used Return and left the area.

◆

"Mr. Satou!"

I finished changing and brought the whimpering Fen, who was now as small as a puppy, back to Arcatia. Roro and the hamsterfolk children enthusiastically greeted me when I got back.

"I'm back, Roro."

"I'm glad Lulu and the others are all safe!"

My friends also greeted Roro and the hamsterfolk children when they got back.

"Oh? And who is this?"

"He's in our care, I declare."

Nana spoke as Roro snuck a peek at the small wolf pup in Nana's arms.

"We found him in the forest. We decided we'd look after him until he's well again."

"In that case, I will, too!" Roro declared eagerly, almost cutting in.

"That's fine, but do you even like wolves or dogs?"

"Not really, but… When I was a child, I helped a similar kid in the forest. Since I was just a kid back then, I ended up leaving them in Ms. Tia's care partway through," Roro said, softly stroking Fen's head.

The hamsterfolk children were either jealous or wanting attention, too, as they all gathered around Roro's legs and pushed the tips of their noses up against her.

But, hmm. The wolf cub she helped back then was probably Fen. That explains his actions and him mentioning he owed her.

"Oh, he's gotten so cute—"

Ms. Tia, who was now back in pupil mode, suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She snuck a look at Fen and mumbled to herself.

"…Ms. Tia?!"

"Hey, Roro. I'm relieved you and the little ones are fine."

Ms. Tia spoke to Roro, then shot us all a look.

"Tonight, we're having a celebration party for those who defended the city, so you should come along. I'm sure all of you should be able to make it…right?"

As I thought, she found out who we really were. Well, it was fine. We figured out her true identity, too, so I doubt she'd go spreading the news about us.

"I would love to join with Roro and the others."

"Good. I'll prepare a table for you near the main area."

Ms. Tia responded with a nod.

"Toooo-ho-ho-ho!"

There it was again—that villainess laugh. It was Lady Keri and her assistant, Tomali Toloole.

"You're safe, Roro."

"Keri! Were you worried about me?"

"N-not at all! I was just—! Yes! I just happened to see you, so I thought I'd grace you with my presence!"

Seeing Lady Keri panic, both Arisa and Mia exchanged looks, mumbling to themselves, "She's in her *tsundere* arc" and "So cliché."

"While there was some trouble, the competition still stands! The participant who gathered the two materials first is the winner!"

Lady Keri was trying hard to hide her embarrassment as she shouted and pointed at Roro.

"…Competition?"

"Yes, the competition we held to see who could gather the materials requested by the Great Sorceress first."

Ms. Tia tilted her head in confusion, so Roro explained.

"Weren't there three items?"

“We already had the parasite mushrooms, so we held a competition to get the remaining two items. I already got my hands on the underground lily, and all that was left was the masher frog tongue—”

I looked at Arisa. She wore a huge grin as she pulled the tongues out of the Item Box.

“Yeah, we have them.”

“WHAT? No way, that’s simply an illusion!”

Well, the undead stuff was literally yesterday, so it would be surprising to see we’d gotten the items despite all that.

“Huh? It’s the real thing. Do you really have the parasite mushrooms, too?”

“Yeah, here.”

Arisa pulled out the parasite mushrooms from her Storage.

“Whoa, they really do. Thank you! I can make a very important item with these.”

Ms. Tia jumped for joy, holding the three items in her arms.

“All right, I’ll take these. I’ll deliver your reward to the store later.”

Ms. Tia spoke before she skipped with joy out of the store, along with the people who came with her.

“That means the Hero’s Rest won the competition!”

“…Auu, auuuh, auuh…”

“Madam, let’s acknowledge this loss and use it to fuel our revenge next time.”

Tomali Toloole escorted a very pale and burned-out Lady Keri home.

“All right, we’d best be off, too.”

I spoke as we headed back to the Hero’s Rest.

“Roro! You’re safe?!”

“Hey, Roro. Glad to see you’re uninjured.”

“Glad to see you’re fine.”

There was a group of regulars waiting in front of the Hero’s Rest, who had come to see how Roro was doing. *She’s so loved.*

“Ms. Nona, and everyone else! Are all of you uninjured?”

“Oh, I’m always getting hurt, but the medicine from the Hero’s Rest saves me every time.”

“Same here. If I didn’t have that medicine, I’d end up like the others, unable to even leave my bed.”

“I’m glad it helps you all.”

We opened the doors to the Hero’s Rest to the regulars

outside who wanted to replenish their stocks—we were busy well up until the evening. Obviously, we didn't make my friends work—not after the battles they'd had to endure, so I forced them to rest.

"All right, Roro. I'll see you later at the celebration feast."

"See you then, Ms. Nona. Thank you for helping."

Ms. Nona saw how busy Roro was and offered to help out.

"Once we close the store, let's start preparations for the feast."

"Preparations? Oh, okay. We need to treat the adventurers who did their best to protect Arcatia to something."

Roro rolled up her sleeves—which was cute. But she was a little off.

"No, not that. I mean, we need to get dressed up."

Arisa poked her head out of a door and looked into the store.

"B-but, I don't have anything nice to wear."

"That's fine, Roro. I'll lend you some of my clothes."

"…Ms. Lulu?"

Lulu looked like she was having fun as she grabbed Roro by the shoulders and led her deeper into the store.

"It's time for the larvae to get dressed up, too, I declare."

Nana picked up the hamsterfolk children that were rolling around and took them with her. I was a little worried for them, but Mia was with them, so I figured it'd be all right.

"Were you able to rest?"

"Yeah, I drank a nutrition drink and slept, so I'm all right now."

I told Arisa and the others to get ready for the celebratory feast as I busied myself with closing the shop.

"Master, something's wrong, sir!"

Pochi rushed out from the inside of the store in a panic.

"Not good, not gooood."

Tama was with her.

"What's wrong?"

"Mr. Egg isn't doing well, sir!"

She was referring to the White Dragon Egg that was currently bouncing around on Pochi's stomach. Pochi caught the egg, which had burst out of the egg sac, with great force, using both hands and chest, just like in dodgeball.

"It just suddenly started acting like this, sir. It's fine, sir. There's nothing scary around, sir."

Pochi started talking to the egg.

“There’s a crack?”

“Oh no, sir! It’ll break open like this, sir!”

Both Pochi and Tama were in a panic.

…Wait a minute.

“Isn’t it hatching?”

“Hatting?”

“What’s hatting, sir?”

“It’s when the egg breaks and a baby comes out of it.”

My words seemed to shock Pochi and Tama—both of their ears and tails went straight with shock.

“A baby comes out, sir?”

“Oh, great?”

The cracks got bigger. Eventually, one part of the egg cracked open, and we could see a beak-like snout.

“Almost there, sir! Keep it up, sir! Hee-hee-foo, sir!”

“Keep it up.”

Tama and Pochi cheered the egg on. Even with the dragon fang that pierces everything, it probably can’t be used effectively from this angle.

LYURYU.

“It made a noise! It’s going ‘lyuryu’!”

“Cuuute.”

For just a small second, I saw a red light within the egg.

That’s not good.

I took Pochi, Tama, and the egg, and Teleported us outside of Arcatia.

“Mew?”

“Hot, sir.”

I took the egg from Pochi’s hands, as it seemed hot enough to cause burns, and floated it in the air using Psychic Hand. Even after being hit by Dragon Breath, the egg showed no signs of burning. The baby dragon gave up on breaking the egg with its breath, and instead opted to break the eggshell with its nose. I figured that maybe the parent dragon would help them break through the egg, so I tried to help break it open.

Man, it’s hard.

Using just my strength wasn’t very effective, so I broke it open with a dragon’s-claw short sword. Worried the dragon would imprint on me, like a baby bird, I hid myself with an Invisibility Cloak.

LYURYU.

“Mr. Egg is here!”

It was a complete White Dragon.

“Congratulashons?”

“Happy birthday to you, sir!”

LYURYU.

The baby dragon flapped its wings as it made noises, facing Pochi. It looked like it couldn’t fly yet.

“Pochi, why don’t you give it a name?”

“Yes, sir. It will be called—”

LYURYU.

“…Lyuryu, sir!”

At the same time Pochi gave it a name, both Pochi and the baby dragon were engulfed in a white light. There was a chance that some form of magical bond may have been formed.

LYURYURYUUU.

In the clear sky, the cry of the baby dragon and the cheers of Pochi and the others echoed far and wide.

EX: Flying Magic

Soaring through the sky was always a dream of mine ever since I was a child. It was a dream that felt unreal, like aspiring to be a hero, but now it's almost within reach. To repay those who lent me a hand, I'm determined to make it a reality.

—Zena Marientelle

"Kyaaaaaah!"

A woman's scream echoed across the wilderness adjacent to Labyrinth City Celivera.

"Zena!"

Lilio, a soldier from Seiryuu County, looked up at the sky and called out her colleague's name. In her line of sight was Zena, the magic soldier, spiraling downward after losing control of her magic.

"Haah, ■■..."

In Zena's panicked vision, the ground was rushing up to meet her. A white figure suddenly cut into Zena's field of vision.

"Froggy, 'Expand,' I declare!"

Zena felt a jolt run through her body around the same time as someone's voice sounded. It wasn't the impact she expected from meeting the ground—instead, she was engulfed in a soft embrace, like a bed of flowers, before bouncing back into the sky again. After bouncing a few times with a gentle *boing*, *boing*, Zena felt her momentum finally slow, and Iona and Lou from Zena's squad rushed over to catch her. As Zena's vision leveled out, she saw the image of a Labyrinth Frog with its belly puffed up. Beyond it stood Huit, the youngest of the Nana sisters. It seemed that Huit's summoned beast, the Labyrinth Frog, had been the one to catch Zena as she fell.

"Are you okay, Zena?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Lilio checked Zena over.

"I'm relieved you're fine, I declare."

“I have you both to thank, Huit and Froggy.”

“Don’t mention it, I declare.”

Zena seemed relieved to see them.

“Zena, didn’t you promise not to go too high until you got used to it?”

“That’s right, Zena. You had us in a panic because you went so high.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t control it.”

Zena shrank away after being scolded by Iona and Lou.

“Thankfully, Huit summoned Froggy.”

“I welcome your praise, I declare. Compliments help Huit grow, I inform!”

Lou patted Huit on the head as she responded joyfully, although she wore a blank expression.

“When you’re unable to control it, it’s best to switch to a different kind of magic.”

“Like Resist Fall or Air Cushion.”

Zena agreed with Iona’s advice. Normally, if she fell from a height, she would slow her descent with Resist Fall and soften the landing impact with Air Cushion. But she was so focused on regaining control of Fly that she missed the opportunity to use them.

“Or she should practice flying over safe areas like water or sand where falling wouldn’t be a problem.”

While there were areas in the current wilderness where sand from the Great Desert had accumulated, it lacked enough cushioning to soften a fall. At best, it could only reduce injuries from a rough landing.

“You’re right, I’ll give it some thought on how best to practice.”

Zena spoke, once again holding her head down in shame in front of the more experienced people with her.

◆

“Looks like I’ll have to venture to the Great Desert anyway…”

Zena sat in the plaza in front of the guild, resting her chin on her hand and sighing dejectedly.

“Ms. Zena, did something happen?”

“…Mr. Satou?”

Zena turned around with a beaming smile, but instead of her crush, she found herself face-to-face with Akindoh, the merchant affiliated with the Pendragon family. His face bore no resemblance to Satou's face at all.

Why did I think it was Satou? He doesn't even look like him.

Zena was internally confused.

"Does my voice resemble the viscount's that much?"

Akindoh held back a smile as she spoke. He was, in fact, Viscount Satou Pendragon.

"I-I'm sorry, Mr. Akindoh."

"It's fine, no need to apologize," Akindoh responded, smiling.

"You don't seem to be in your usual high spirits. Is something the matter?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

"I find people often feel a lot better if they share their worries with others. I don't mind if you just need to complain. So what's wrong?"

"Well…"

After some hesitation, Zena finally opened up about how Flying Magic hadn't been going so well for her.

"Flying Magic is advanced magic. I had no idea you were that advanced with magic that you could use Flying Magic."

"Oh, no. I still have a ways to go."

"Ah, no need to be so modest. You ought to be proud. You must have had an excellent tutor."

"Yeah, my tutor was strict, but they were one of the best."

Akindoh noticed Zena was referring to her tutor in the past tense, but he decided not to ask about it.

"Did you receive a Flying Magic scroll from your tutor?"

"No, I got it from Hikaru—I got it from an acquaintance."

"Oh, that's nice of them."

"Yeah. It's thanks to them I was able to learn how to use advanced magic."

Zena grew a bit wistful as she recalled the grueling days of boot camp.

"In that case, can't you ask them to teach you Flying Magic?"

"They were unable to use Air Magic…"

Zena frowned as she responded.

"Then it's probably best you learn from someone who is good at flying."

"Someone who is good at it? I don't think it's that easy to find

someone who's good at flying."

"I think it is. If it's simply to learn about flying, birdfolk and batfolk would know a lot."

At Akindoh's words, Zena looked as if a veil had been lifted from her eyes. Then, based on Akindoh's recommendation, they went to meet with some birdfolk who had assembled at a messenger post.

"You wanna know how to fly?"

The birdfolk, who spoke in high-pitched voices, were much more fluent in their speech than the beastfolk were.

"You just flap your wings, catch the wind, and *whoosh*, off you go!"

"Exactly! Once you float up, you can glide smoothly like *swoosh-swoosh*!"

But their explanations, filled with sound effects and gestures, weren't particularly helpful. "Isn't there a bit more practical advice you could give?" Zena asked.

"Well, that's easier said than done…"

"I've been able to fly since I can remember," one birdfolk said, shrugging. Seeing Zena's frustration, Akindoh stepped in, but the birdfolk still seemed oblivious to why their explanations were unhelpful.

"Oh, how about Kairos, the Fallen Bird?" one suggested.

"Kairos?" Zena asked.

"Yeah, he only learned to fly around adulthood. Unlike us, he might actually be able to explain it to you humans."

"True, he's a bit of a logical thinker," another added.

"All right, let's go meet Kairos," Akindoh said, striding off purposefully.

"Um, Mr. Akindoh," Zena called after him.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Do you actually know where Kairos is?

Akindoh paused briefly at her question.

"Yes, I've seen him there before. I'm sure he'll be in the same place today."

In truth, he'd looked it up on a map earlier, but, using his "Deception" skill, he'd crafted this plausible excuse.

"There he is," Akindoh said, his gaze directed at a slender, winged youth sitting atop a broken tower. Unlike the birdfolk's inverted-triangle build, he appeared delicate and slight.

"A human? No, he has wings," Zena noted.

“Looks like he’s one of the winged folk. I’ve never seen one before, but I’ve heard they live on a peninsula to the south,” Akindoh replied.

“The peninsula past the trade city Tartumina?” Zena asked, confirming her hazy knowledge. Akindoh nodded.

“Hello! Are you Kairos?” Zena called up to him.

“What do you need?” he asked.

“We’ve come to ask for your help on a job.”

“Sure, what and where am I delivering? I’ll warn you now—I’m slower than the others, but if that’s fine, I’ll take the job.”

He accepted without even checking who they were, perhaps due to a lack of work offers.

“The job I’d like to offer is to teach her how to fly.”

“Teach a human?” Kairos asked, eyes widening in surprise.

“You want to fly even though you don’t have wings?”

“She’s a magic user.”

“You want to fly with magic? Like a wooden horse?”

“No, no. She wants to fly like you do.”

“Oh, in that case, I can probably teach her.”

Kairos agreed to teach Zena in exchange for a silver coin. They relocated to a natural park near the Ivy Manor in Labyrinth City Celivera.

“We’re practicing here?” Zena asked.

“Yes. Grass is softer to fall on, and if you fall from a height, the branches will cushion you a bit and make serious injuries less likely,” Kairos explained, sharing why he had chosen the location.

Then, with a hint of self-deprecation, he added, “When it comes to falling, I’m a bit of an expert.”

“How high can you fly? Are you able to fly at all?”

“I’ve flown before, but I lost control in midair and fell…”

“Try and fly a little bit now. Feel free to go straight back to the ground after.”

“All right. ■■…■ *Hikou* Fly!”

When Zena activated the Wind Magic spell Fly, a powerful gust swirled around her. The overgrown grass rippled in waves, and loose blades of grass and insects were blown outward in all directions. After scattering a tempest at ground level for a while, Zena suddenly shot into the sky, as if vanishing from sight. In no time, she had soared over thirty-two feet up, but then lost her balance and began plummeting.

“Ah!” she squeaked, letting out a short cry as her own spell took control of her. Unlike before, when her colleagues or Huit had helped, this time, as soon as she realized she’d lost control, she canceled her Flying Magic and began casting Air Cushion.

“…■ *Kikabe* Air Cushion,” she chanted, but it was a bit too late, and she couldn’t decelerate enough to avoid the ground entirely.

It looked as if she was about to crash hard, but miraculously, she landed on her feet without a scratch. Unbeknownst to Kairos, just before she hit the ground, a Physical Defense Enhancement spell had been cast on Zena, and Magic Hand had absorbed some of the impact. Naturally, it was Akindoh, standing beside him, who had intervened.

“That was pretty rough,” Kairos remarked.

“Sorry, I’m not very good at flying yet,” Zena said, bowing her head apologetically at his harsh critique.

“So, what should I work on?” Zena asked.

“I could tell you’re using wind pressure to fly,” Kairos replied, “but it’s hard to pinpoint what’s wrong without being able to see wings…”

As he mulled over the question, Akindoh pulled a small pouch of white powder from his pocket. With a quick sprinkle, the powder drifted with the air currents, making them visible.

“If Ms. Zena wears a pouch filled with this powder on her back, it should continuously slow the flow of air. Your clothes will get covered in powder, but just think of it as part of the training expenses.”

“Thank you, Mr. Akindoh,” Zena said, fastening a small backpack with a drawstring to release the powder as needed.

“You… How on earth did you have something like that on hand?” Kairos asked, dumbfounded.

“Just had a feeling it might come in handy,” Akindoh replied with a composed expression. Zena, used to Satou’s inventive solutions, seemed unfazed.

“All right, here I go. ■■…■ *Hikou* Fly!”

Zena activated the Flying Magic once more.

“You can’t fly by just moving your wings up and down. When you bring your wings back up, make sure they don’t catch the air,” Kairos instructed.

“Don’t catch the air?” Zena tilted her head, puzzled.

“Like this,” Kairos demonstrated with his own wings,

showing her the correct motion.

“Like…this? Oh! I’m doing it!”

“Exactly! You’re doing great!”

As Zena floated up gently from the ground, Kairos was overjoyed, as if he were the one flying.

“Keep your balance! The air density and wind aren’t constant. Be aware of how much air your wings are catching.”

“Yes! Ah—whoa!”

“Don’t rush! It’s fine to make mistakes; just pay attention to the relationship between your movements and the way you actually fly!”

With Kairos’s guidance, Zena’s flying gradually improved. She crashed a few times, but thanks to Akindoh’s subtle support, she avoided any serious injuries and was able to continue her training.

“I did it! This time, I actually flew!”

“That’s it! Keep it up. Now, land carefully—kill your speed… yes, just like that!”

Zena floated gently to the ground, landing with a soft thud.

“Well done. Remember how that felt. If you do, you’ll be able to fly whenever you want.”

“Thank you so much, teacher!”

“Teacher? Me?” Kairos said, taken aback.

“Yes! Thanks to you, I can finally fly.”

“Me…?” Kairos murmured in disbelief, a stunned look on his face.

“…Anyway! Practice again before you forget that feeling!” he stammered, trying to regain his composure.

“Yes, teacher,” Zena replied, casting her Flying spell and rising gracefully into the air. Watching her from below, Kairos murmured.

“Teacher, huh?”

“Yes, you’re an excellent teacher,” Akindoh remarked.

“Nah, it doesn’t suit me. I’m just Kairos, the Fallen Bird, who couldn’t fly for ages.”

“No, you’re a remarkable teacher. It’s because you struggled to fly that you’re able to teach others.”

“Is that so…?” Kairos muttered, his head lowered as his fists trembled, not out of anger, but with emotion. He was deeply moved, feeling that he had finally done something he could be proud of.



“Teacher! Mr. Akindoh!” Zena called, waving from the air.

Akindoh, not wanting to intrude on Kairos’s moment of fulfillment, looked away and waved back at Zena. The next time, he would stand before her as Satou, he thought, and that would be the day he’d take her for a stroll in the sky. Holding on to that hope, Akindoh continued to watch over her flight practice.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Hiro Ainana. Thank you for picking up the twenty-third volume of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*! Following up on the last volume with its limited pages, let's briefly highlight the key points of this new release. Unlike the previous book, where the characters toured the western regions, this time the story unfolds deep in the Jungle Labyrinth, set in the land of Arcatia. We've incorporated plenty from the popular Arcatia arc in the web version, but this time with even more character depth, new characters, and an expanded plot. Even readers who are already familiar with the web version will find fresh enjoyment here. There's also a lot more screen time for the team left behind in Shiga Kingdom and for Aaze, so please look forward to it! Since I have a bit more space, I'd like to continue my tradition of giving thanks! My heartfelt appreciation to Editor I, Assistant A, shri, and everyone involved in the publication, distribution, sales, promotion, and multimedia adaptations of this book. And, of course, to you, the readers. Thank you for reading this work through to the end! See you in the next volume for the continuation of the Arcatia arc!

Hiro Ainana

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 23
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